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LADO: The Latin American Defense Organization

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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by Clara López

Despite the spirit of celebration that hot summer day, an atmosphere of tension still prevailed. On June 12, 1966, the tension reached its culmination and burst into a riot in the aftermath of the first city-wide Puerto Rican Parade in the Wicker Park community. The racial tension between Puerto Rican residents and the Police force was high (Quiles, 1995). The spark was caused when a police officer shot a young Puerto Rican man named Arcelis Cruz. Patrolman Raymond Howard claimed that he only shot Arcelis when he pulled a gun on him. However, onlookers said that Arcelis was not armed (Burned). This incident unleashed the anger towards the oppression which had accumulated in the Puerto Rican community for several years.

According to my father, Obed Lopez, that spark burned rapidly and soon “...hundreds and hundreds of young people were fighting against the abuses of the police, the abuses of the Welfare Department, [and] the abuses of the older ethnic communities that wouldn’t let people live in peace.”

Co-founded by my father, LADO (Latin American Defense Organization), was one of the first organizations formed after this riot. Its intention was to improve the social condition of the Latin American community. However, LADO’s philosophy and actions threatened the comfort of the Democratic party. In fact, most, if not all of the opposition LADO faced was either directly or indirectly influenced by the Daley political machine.

The Wicker Park community in which LADO flourished was centered between Ashland and Western and Division and North Ave. on the near northwest side of Chicago. LADO’s founding committee was made up of eight people including my father, Obed Lopez. At the time my father was a 27 year old man who had lived in Chicago since December of 1956. He did not live in the Wicker Park area; however, the day the riot began, he happened to be taking a friend home after attending a musical recital. Since that day, my father became involved in the Puerto Rican community after investigating the reasons behind the riot.

From my father I learned that LADO’s primary purpose was to represent the persons of the Wicker Park community (who were predominantly Puerto Rican) in their struggle to exercise their rights as American citizens and to educate them so that they, too, could lead those whose struggle would beam in the near future. They established what they called the four principles of action. They were as follows: We believe: 1) in the unity of all the Latin American people, 2) in the unity with all those groups that face the same problems that we do (i.e. black community, Appalachian whites), 3) in the need to develop our own institutions, 4) in the absence of any mechanism to resolve our legitimate grievances, we believe in the right to direct action.

Between 1966 and 1973, the period of LADO’s existence as a social organization, LADO established several programs that provided valuable services to the Puerto Rican community. Through the Latin American Development Services, Inc., LADO developed “La Escuelita” Sunday School, a tutoring program that pro-
vided children with English classes, arts and crafts activities and music (Carol Lee López), and subsequently the Ruiz Belvis Center still in existence at 1735 N. Milwaukee. Another major accomplishment was the establishment of the Pedro Albizu Campos Center for the People's Health, a free health clinic located at 2359 W. North Avenue. Medical students from Northwestern and from Cook County Hospital, doctors from Children's Memorial Hospital, as well as faculty members from Northwestern University Medical School volunteered their time and services to this clinic (Obed López).

The largest of these programs was the LADO Welfare Union. According to my father and others involved in the organization, LADO was concerned with the unjust treatment the Puerto Rican families received when they sought public aid. They saw how it was difficult for families that needed the help of Public Aid to receive what they were entitled to without humiliation or abuse (What Is LADO? 2). LADO took the individual’s case, studied the benefits the family was entitled to receive and if they were not receiving them, they would go to the welfare office to investigate, insist, and protest. It was difficult for individuals to make appointments with case workers at the Welfare Department because they were made daily on a first come-first serve basis. This meant that if a family had not received a check or if their heat had been cut off without warning, the mother would have to bring her children with her to sit in an overcrowded office to wait until their number was called. Another problem people faced at the welfare office was that there were few Spanish speaking case workers that could take their cases. As a result, many people would often be there all day only to go home without being taken care of (Carol Lee López).

Besides the inconvenience and discomfort of having to wait their turn all day, it was difficult for those families to have a meal during their long wait because if they left the office for any reason, and their number was called while they were gone, they would lose their place in line and their wait would begin all over again. LADO was able to help these families not only by being interpreters and spokespersons, but also by alleviating their long waits. The “armed forces of LADO” did this by arriving at the Wicker Park Public Aid Office armed not with the “instruments of death”, but carrying the “instruments for life” (LADO Serves, 7). LADO took pots of arroz con gandules (Puerto Rican rice and beans), bread and salad that women of LADO prepared. They also provided milk for the children and coffee for the adults free of charge (Carol Lee López). They set up a buffet style table inside of the Welfare Office and everyone ate, sometimes even the case workers. One day, when LADO arrived with food, the police were at the door ready to prohibit LADO from entering the office (Obed López). However, they did not let this confrontation keep them from serving their people. They just set up “shop” from the back of a truck and distributed food in front of the Welfare Office (Carlos Castro). This is only one of the many ways LADO made a difference in peoples’ lives.

According to a LADO publication, LADO was well aware that they faced opposition, although they were not completely aware of the source of opposition. Whenever they had a demonstration, a march, or when they just wanted to feed the community, the police were there to make things difficult for them. They could not ignore the excessive force police used when they met confrontation. In one edition of the LADO paper, a member writes that “The Chicago Police no longer speaks to anyone. Instead they do everything by using their night sticks, shoving and kicking” (Rosario 2). My father knew this very well. José “Cha Cha” Jiménez, the president of the Young Lords Organization told me that “he [Obed] got his head busted, [and] got arrested...several times.” However it was not always clear to “Cha Cha” why the police should oppose them. “All we knew was that we were doing something [useful and beneficial] for the community and that we were getting arrested for it” (José “Cha Cha” Jiménez).

...the Police say, “What, you’re gonna go get educated by these niggers? Get back! Turn back!”

– Carlos Castro
Carlos Castro, a youth gang worker at the YMCA, recalled one time that the police department used its power to prevent people from organizing or participating in community oriented programs.

We used to get stopped on the expressway [on the way to Operation Bread Basket meetings] and they would turn us back, the 13th district at that time. They'd say, "What, you're gonna go get educated by these niggers? Get back! Turn back!" They would literally turn us back (Carlos Castro). The Chicago Police Department, in a sense took orders straight from the mayor's office. Even though the Police have their commander, Daley had control of all the city jobs (Goodman). Therefore, the police were not acting on their own initiative when breaking up demonstrations or prohibiting LADO to enter the Welfare Office with food; they were simply following orders.

Obed recalled the first time he was publicly described as a communist. On August of 1966, the disturbances in Wicker Park recurred. That day my father was arrested for the first time in the vicinity of Division and Western. He was taken to jail along with several other young men. After the police booked him, he was taken to a room where he was to be photographed. At that time some policemen brought in a couple of Molotov cocktails and placed them on a table in front of my father. He found this very strange and realized that, in his words, "Something fishy, fishy, fishy was going on." The next day, August 2, 1966, the Tribune printed a story about the arrests made during the disturbance. It printed that [Obed] Zacarias López was arrested in his car with several other men. It also said that police had found some Molotov cocktails in the car. My father explained to me that this information was fabricated by the police department and given to the Tribune. They also accused my father of being communist and wrote of his involvement with the Fair Play For Cuba Committee, an organization opposed to the US military involvement in Cuba. My father affirms that he was the vice chairman for this committee in 1960 and that he had participated in demonstrations against the Bay of Pigs invasion. However, he maintains that he never acted outside of the law. In fact, when he served in the United States Army in 1962, he was under investigation for sixteen months. The investigation revealed no evidence of illegal or criminal activity on his part and at the end of his two years of service, he was given an Honorable Discharge. The week following the August 1st disturbance, a community paper El Puertorriqueño reprinted the Tribune's story, spreading this communist/subversive image to the Spanish speaking community he was involved with. A couple of months later, when his case was brought back to court all the charges were dropped. However, his name and reputation were never cleared.

When my father and subsequently LADO, were labeled "communist", people of the community began to fear any association with them. Many Puerto Rican families who were most in need of LADO's services were reluctant to seek LADO's help because it was dangerous to associate with communist organizations, especially at that time when this country was just getting over the "red scare". They ran the risk of being called communist themselves, being black-listed, or loosing their jobs.

Similarly, Daley also used his influence over the youth gang outreach workers and the "gang intelligence" to give gang members a negative image of LADO. Carlos Castro said, "Here...gang intelligence was showing papers of him [Obed], not to the leadership, but where he could get hurt—on the street." On one occasion, gang members of the Warlords went to Obed's house, threatening him, Carol Lee, and Elba Vázquez, another active member of LADO, with a hand gun. My mother explains that they told Obed that he had no business organizing there and that he'd better stop.

By labeling LADO a "communist organization, the political machine created a valid reason to dismantle LADO. There were laws that allowed the government, through the FBI, to infiltrate "communist" organizations if they had "reason to believe a crime had been or [was] going to be committed" (Greenburg 12). In the New York Times, William Safire wrote of the FBI's Counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO), "...a plan to use communist techniques against communists in the US." He explains how FBI agents join the communist organization in order to cause trouble. They did this by encouraging factionalism (Safire A3) and recommending actions that would discredit community leaders and even lead them to illegal actions (McNulty 12). This line of action did, indeed, lead to the destruction of many organizations.

From the very beginning, my father and the other leaders of LADO knew that they might be infiltrated by the Chicago Police Department, known as the "Red
Squad”. Almost immediately, they noticed individuals that didn’t seem to fit in. The first infiltrate they noticed was Tom Braham, a Spanish speaking Irish police officer who claimed to be unhappy with the way the Police Department treated Latinos. They also suspected of Alfredo Perales and Martin Frankel. My father suspected of these individuals because, first of all, they were not from the neighborhood as were most LADO members. Secondly, they did not come to LADO with a need or problem. Most importantly, they were suspected if they tried to cause confusion within LADO or if they encouraged activities that could get LADO and its members into trouble. Alfredo Perales was involved in trying to organize members of LADO to get them to not recognize my father as the leader of LADO. Martin Frankel, who claimed to be a merchant marine, used very “radical rhetoric” and insisted that LADO help organize and work together with the Latin Kings (Obed Lopez). It became evident to my mother Carol Lee, that Frankel was an infiltrate because of his persistent questioning about my father. He asked her questions as if he were trying to get her to say that my father was in fact a member of the Communist Party. My mother explains that the suspicions that the members of LADO had were later confirmed when the likes of Frankel and others either began testifying in court against community organizations or when they were identified as Red Squad infiltrates in the newspapers.

Despite the Red Squad’s foiled attempts to destroy LADO through infiltrations, there were many other organizations that were unjustly dismantled. SACC (Spanish Action Committee of Chicago) was an organization that had similar goals and purposes as those of LADO. SACC is a perfect example of an organization that was destroyed as a result of illegal infiltration. The infiltrates used similar techniques that the infiltrates of LADO used; causing confusion and disunity among the members of SACC, and by suggesting “radical” tactics, etc. The Intelligence Division of the FBI kept a file on all the information it gathered about SACC. This file contains conversations between the infiltrate and members of SACC and comments of the infiltrate on the conduct of individuals in SACC and of those who came into contact with SACC. The mission of the intelligence Division was to “provide the Chicago Police Department with information necessary to carry out its duties and inherent responsibilities of the preservation of life and property, maintain public order and to insure the orderly functioning of city Government and to enable the Department to accurately forecast events and plan accordingly” (SACC exhibit 12a).

Since SACC’s great influence on the community threatened the political machine, the under cover agent concluded that their investigation revealed a “great deal of communist subversive activities” (SACC exhibit 3 F. 104.5A). This gave them sufficient reason, according to their rules, to “destroy the SUBJECT [SACC], its leaders and community influence” (SACC exhibit 3 f 04.5A).

Between the late 60s and early 70s, SACC, along with several other community organizations filed a class action suit against the Chicago Police Department for illegally infiltrating and destroying those organizations. The Federal Court found that these charges were true. What reason might Daley have had for opposing LADO and other similar organizations? Daley was more interested in the immediate profit to the central business area than with the interest of the majority of Chicago’s citizens. Mike Royko, a syndicated columnist of Chicago, said that Daley “…isn’t that enthusiastic about small things, such as people. Daley does not like civil rights demonstrators, rebellious community organizations, critics of the mediocre school system, critics of any kind or people who argue with him” (Rakove 78). Daley himself said in his first inaugural speech that “No individual or group political party or political faction—should have the right to block that which is good for all the city—or to attempt to pass
ordinances contrary to the interest of all Chicago" (Furer 129). The problem was that the civil rights activists and community organizations considered the best interest of all Chicago to be different than what the mayor had in mind.

The second reason according to Alderman Leon Despres, a long-time opponent of the mayor, was that the segregation, and oppression to Chicago’s blacks [and Latinos for that matter] in housing, jobs, schooling, and the quality of community life are crucial deterrents to general community improvement of any kind in Chicago.

Self-organization of the ghetto; self-determination, and self-expression would soon end ghetto support of any political machine which tolerates such conditions. Under the Daley system of tight control, therefore, the party has to try to overrun, dominate, or starve every significant citizens’ committee and community organization, especially in the ghetto. (Rakove 78-79)

LADO, along with SACC, raised the consciousness of the Puerto Rican community that had been enduring the abuses of the Welfare and Police Department quietly up to that point. Once they were aware of their right to a better living environment, the citizens, along with LADO and other similar organizations demanded changes. LADO stood in the way of Daley’s plans and ideals, and as Jacob M. Arvey, Alderman and Democratic Cook County Chairman from 1946-1950, said, "...you have to be unmindful of everything except the ultimate goal. This is what we must attain. If anybody stands in the way, out with them!" (Rakove 15).

The third reason, and probably the only one he had no control over, was that Daley was not ready for the social changes that needed to be made (Varela). All his life, Daley lived in the same town. Throughout his years as mayor, things had been run in the same way. When the African American community, and then that the Puerto Rican community wanted and needed change, Daley did not know how to accommodate for those changes (Goodman).

Tim Gallwey’s philosophy, although it was originally developed for his work with professional tennis players, can be applied even to politics. He says, "Trying fails: awareness cures". The political situation has changed greatly since the time Richard J. Daley was mayor. However, politicians still have a lot of power and control and corruption still exists in politics. It is not enough to simply try to improve our social conditions. It is necessary that young people concerned for the well being of their community be aware of the role that politicians play in them. If we are more aware of the political structure, of the rights and responsibilities of our leaders, and our rights and responsibilities as members of our community, we will be able to serve our people with greater strength and power.

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