Latinos in the Midwest: Advancing in el Mero Medio

Félix Masud-Piloto

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Latinos in the Midwest: Advancing in el Mero Medio

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."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol9/iss1/1
Latinos have been living, working, and creating in the Midwest since the 1910s, and currently more than four million call the region home. Yet most histories of Latinos in the U.S. ignore these communities and their contributions its members have made and continue making to the region and the nation. This despite the fact that internationally recognized Latino writers, scholars, and artists like Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Julian Samora, Marcos Rayya, and Edgardo González are among the many who for decades have documented Latino life in the Midwest for the nation and the world. Similarly, Latin American and Latino Studies programs have emerged in major Midwestern universities. Scholars at the Universities of Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan State, Notre Dame, and DePaul have built strong studies programs and are producing important scholarly studies about Latino life in the region.

The composition of Latino communities in the Midwest is unique, for unlike the larger Latino enclaves in the Southwestern and Northeastern regions of the U.S., where the Latino populations are mostly from Mexico and Puerto Rico respectively, the Latino communities in the Midwest are characterized by their diversity: Chicago offers an excellent example of that diversity. According to census figures, 1.1 million Latinos live in metropolitan Chicago. This population includes 550,000 Mexicans, 120,000 Puerto Ricans, and several hundred thousand from another twelve Latin American countries. Unlike other large Latino enclaves in other parts of the nation (e.g.: Los Angeles, Miami, New York City), Midwest Latinos, the majority of who are recent immigrants, struggle to preserve their culture, in a less supportive environment, at the same time that they adapt to a new language and cope with much harsher weather. Despite the difficulties or perhaps because of them, these communities are advancing by making common cause and coalescing with other immigrant groups.

Regardless of where they live, what is clear is that Latinos are in the U.S. to stay. Latinos are currently the largest ethnic minority in the country, with a population of 41.3 million and 14% of the total U.S. population. If current trends continue, the Latino population in the U.S. will exceed 100 million by the year 2050, when one in every four American will be Latino or of Latino descent. Along with the growing numbers, Latino political participation and representation have also increased significantly. More than 7.6 million Latinos voted in the 2004 presidential election and there are currently more than 6,000 Latino elected officials in virtually all states of the union. Political participation and representation are still disproportionate, but Latinos are making important gains in major cities and states. A good example of those gains was the election of Antonio Villaraigosa as mayor of Los Angeles in May 2005, making him that city’s first Latino mayor in more than 130 years. However, even more important than the increase in elected officials are the numerous, strong coalitions Latino political and community leaders are building with minority and mainstream groups to improve their condition and rights in the areas of education, employment, housing, neighborhood safety, immigration, labor, and civil rights.

Equally impressive is the growing Latino economic power and entrepreneurship. Latino consumers spend more than $600 billion a year, and there are more than 1.6 million Latino-owned businesses in the U.S. that range from Fortune 500 companies to “mom & pop” stores, that together generate more than $250 billion to the U.S. economy. In addition, U.S. Latinos send back billions of dollars in remittances to their families in the home countries, a record $30 billion in 2004. The governments of Mexico, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Ecuador have acknowledged that remittances are vital, if not essential, to their economies. U.S. Latinos’ influences go beyond monetary remittances. Some émigré communities have acquired the power to influence politics in some of their home countries, as well as U.S. foreign policy. An amendment to Mexico’s constitution will now allow Mexicans living in the U.S. to vote in that country’s presidential elections. As many as 10 million Mexican émigrés are expected to vote in 2006, a number that could possibly determine the election’s outcome. Domestically, the Cuban community in the U.S. has been able to keep a strangle hold on U.S. policy toward Cuba by supporting a U.S. economic blockade of Cuba for more than 40 years. Although the U.S. is internationally isolated on this issue, the past ten American presidents have, for domestic political reasons, pandered to this small, but economically powerful community.

We hope that by focusing on Latinos in the Midwest, this issue of Diálogo will contribute to a better understanding of the vibrant, dynamic communities that are blossoming in the center of the country. More importantly, we hope to serve as a catalyst for more research, studies, and organizing that will help Latinos continue claiming and gaining their rightful place in the U.S.