Pilsen: A Mexican Global City in the Midwest

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Pilsen: A Mexican Global City in the Midwest

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Working their way into Chicago and points beyond, *betabelero* (sugar beet) migrant workers and *traqueros* (railroad) settled in the city in the aftermath of World War I. Far from Mexico and Texas, and unemployed during the winter months, these nomadic workers came to Chicago in search of work. This was the case of Pedro Zuñiga, Marcos Raya’s grandfather, who left Guanajuato in the early 1900s, worked in the railroads throughout the Midwest, including Chicago, before settling in St. Louis. Many settled in the near westside and this neighborhood became the most important Mexican pocket in Chicago and the main port of entry for new arrivals from 1919 to 1960.

As of the present, the pulling power of Chicago has penetrated the imagination of Mexicans in Mexico and the Southwest, especially in the Bajío and Texas. Higher wages and employment have served as the main incentives for Mexican migration to the city, and until recently, Chicago offered migrants the highest wages that they could possibly earn in either Mexico or the United States. Mexicans have come not only to labor but, also, for “la aventura” to see and experience Chicago. The “city of broad shoulders” has and continues to be on the vanguard of urban modernity, and its main contribution to this phenomenon has been to outdo other cities in their urban projects: larger industrial complexes, skyscrapers (Sears Tower), department stores (Marshall Fields), an extensive mass transportation system (including O’Hare Airport), and the best park system in the country. These images of Chicago as a place of work and experience first penetrated Mexico by way of letters, word of mouth, photographs, and “glowing” accounts from returnees, and, with the passage of time, home videos, television, and telephones. In early times returnees brought with them sewing machines, typewriters, radios, and, in later times, SUVs and trucks. These “made in the U.S.A” products served as physical evidence of their success in *el norte*. Marcos recalled that as a child in Irapuato, he somehow “knew I would always live in Chicago” and in 1964, at the age of fifteen, he joined thousands of *paisanos* on their trek to *el norte*.

Chicago had a transformative effect on all arrivals and this was manifested in two ways. First and just like other immigrants, Mexicans went through a culture shock, one that was of a greater magnitude than what their *paisanos* had ever experienced in the Southwestern cities. As workers in large multi-ethnic cities, Mexicans in Chicago have had greater direct contact with many more ethnic groups, cultures, and ways of life that were most different from their own. There was, far more of a difference between Irapuato, Guanajuato, a medium-sized city and the birthplace of Marcos, and Chicago, the workshop of the world, than between Irapuato and San Antonio where Mexican culture was deeply rooted. An Irapuatense could feel at home in San Antonio because Spanish was spoken, Mexican food was available, and he came across many Mexicans. The same could not be said about Chicago, at least not until the 1960s.

Most Mexicans who settled in Chicago have come from small *pueblos* and, although the majority was unskilled when they arrived in Chicago, others were butchers, bakers, boiler-makers, mechanics, molders, miners and musicians. In spite of the diversity of occupations, they were employed in Chicago mostly as common industrial laborers and Mexicans became associated with cheap labor, only good for “pico y pala” work. Because occupation, education, and the color of one’s skin determined wages, Mexicans remained at the lowest end of the occupational ladder.

The making of the Mexican into common laborers was the second major transformation they faced. They recognized that while they were better off economically than their *paisanos* in the Southwest, they were amongst the worst off in Chicago, and they have remained at the bottom as of the present. In spite of their poverty vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, Mexicans somehow were able to save money to send some back to their families in Mexico. These monies not only sustained the many that stayed behind but it also served as an incentive for others to leave their *pueblos* and head to Chicago.
**THE NEAR WESTSIDE BARRIO: "LA TAYLOR," 1919-1960**

Unlike Mexicans in Southwestern cities, Mexicans in Chicago had less direct contact with Mexico and even with each other as they were scattered in various small pockets throughout the Chicago area from 1919 to 1960. In all these neighborhoods they constituted a minority within these communities in relation to other ethnic groups. Up to the last forty or so years, Mexicans in Chicago were less segregated than their paisanos in the Southwest, but more isolated, and experienced more conflict with other ethnic groups over competition for employment and neighborhood claims such as housing, recreational space, and social services. Chicago did not have a “Mexican” neighborhood comparable to Belvedere in Los Angeles, “El Segundo Barrio” of El Paso, and San Antonio’s “Westside,” at least not until the 1960s when Pilsen became “the Mexican” neighborhood.

Although Mexicans did not have a “neighborhood” that they could claim as their own, the Near Westside served as the closest to one. This neighborhood had among the lowest rents in the city, it was near the employment agencies on Canal Street, and was close to various types of work in the Loop. They worked in the railroad yards, hotels, restaurants and industry. Facing isolation, discrimination, and rejection from most trade unions, political parties, organizations, and the larger society, Mexicans were left alone to struggle on their own. These conditions forced them to create their own “community.” They turned inwards by forming their own networks of solidarity such as mutual aid and patriotic organizations, sports teams, newspapers, fraternities, and cultural clubs.

With an estimated 8,000 Mexicans residing in this neighborhood by 1930, it served as the port of entry for recent arrivals and as the cultural center of the Mexican community in Chicago. It was the custom of those who were already established to assist the recent arrivals in finding employment and housing. The neighborhood also contained Mexican restaurants, pool halls, grocery stores, barber shops and other small businesses. Mexicans “fraternized,” “inquired about work,” and “secured small loans” from the proprietors in the fourteen pool halls of the neighborhood. They worshipped at St. Francis Church where the “Mexican mass” was attended by 1,000. Moreover, Hull Settlement House helped Mexicans adjust to Chicago by opening its doors for English classes, recreation, cultural activities, and provided many social services, including use of its facilities. Many of the Mexican organizations were formed at Hull-House and they used the facilities for meeting and artistic performances, from theatre performances and musical recitals to dances. The dances attracted not only many Mexicans from throughout the city but also other ethnic groups. Due to the shortage of Mexican women in Chicago, many of the “solos (single males)” first met their non-Mexican wives at Hull-House dances.

This neighborhood went by various names—Near Westside, Hull-House, Addams, Little Italy, and Taylor Street. Mexicans called it “La Taylor” and this neighborhood was famous for producing quite a few sinners and fewer saints. The most famous sinners included Al “Scarface” Capone, Frank “the Enforcer” Nitti, and Jack Ruby who killed Harvey Lee Oswald who, in turn, had assassinated John F. Kennedy. The saints included Mother Cabrini, the first and only American saint, Jane Addams of the world-renowned Hull Settlement House and Nobel Prize winner, and Florence Scala who organized the neighborhood against the mass displacements of community residents in the 1960s.

The depression of the 1930s thwarted the growth of the vibrant Mexican community in Chicago when thousands were forced to return to Mexico. Close to half of Chicago’s Mexican community joined 500,000 other Mexicans who had just been expelled from the “Promise Land.” This was the largest organized removal of people in the history of the United States. A young eight-year old girl named Ángela Zúñiga, an American citizen and the mother of Marcos, was among those that were “repatriated.” Only 16,000 Mexicans remained in Chicago.

Reduced to half of its size, Mexicans inhabited “La Taylor” with Italians, African-Americans, and, in the 1950s, Puerto Ricans. Although these four ethnic groups occupied the neighborhood, they did not break bread together. Each ethnic group had their own church, stores, pool rooms, and playgrounds. Ethnic identity was important in this neighborhood as expressed by an Italian old lady who told Gerald Suttles, the author of *The Social Order of the Slum* (1968), a highly acclaimed book on this community, “Geraldo, you’re just an American.” This was not meant to be a compliment, but a compassionate statement that he, as an outsider, had no group to shelter or defend him in this neighborhood. Youth gangs such as the Taylor Sharks, the main Mexican gang in the neighborhood protected their ethnic turf. Marcos was loosely affiliated with the Sharks.
Even though no ethnic group constituted a majority of the population, it became known as part of Little Italy, the "Italian neighborhood" and the base of Italian-American political clout in Chicago. Italian-Americans politicians, known as the "Westside block" and, sometimes, as the "Outfit," controlled the politics of the neighborhood, from the alderman to the state representative. Unlike Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Blacks who combined made up the majority of the neighborhood's population, Italians were "connected" and had "influence" as all policemen in the neighborhood were Italians, as well the precinct captains and city workers.

"La Taylor" was a world apart from the rest of the city. It was surrounded by other hostile worlds that made up the Near Westside galaxy-Greek Town, Jew Town (Maxwell Street area), the Village, Lawndale, and a few blocks south, 18th Street. This Tower of Babel was both real and imagined. For Mexicans from "La Taylor," 18th Street was a world apart, a dangerous place where Mexicans gangs, such as the Latin Counts and Ambrose ruled. After a brief period in Chicago, Marcos Raya recalled his first impressions of 18th Street in the mid-1960s, "it looked like Tijuana in the 50s...It was dark, violent, and dangerous, with a lot of vice, gangs, drugs, and poverty...I was scared."

Unwillingly, many Mexicans left the security of "La Taylor" during the 1950s and 1960s. Many moved a few blocks south, settling in 18th Street. They and the other ethnic groups were in the way of "urban renewal," a-la-Chicago, always larger than anything done before,—the Congress, Eisenhower, and Dan Ryan expressway, the expansion of the Medical Center, and the University of Illinois at Chicago destroyed most communities that made up the Near Westside. None of the local politicians complained or defended the neighborhood from the forces of "progressive urban renewal" spearheaded by Mayor Richard Daley I, alongside of developers, and land speculators. Resistance came from Mexican and Italian residents headed by Florence Scala who protested the dislocation of thousands of residents. Marcos first settled on "La Taylor" in the mid-1960s when only a few blocks were spared from destruction and the ruins of the neighborhood still remained. He noted that "it was so ugly here, extremely gray, dirty buildings and streets, industry and factories, big empty lots..." After a brief time discovering "Bohemian" Chicago and pursuing la aventura in New York City and Mexico City, Marcos left for 18th Street.

**Pilsen: The Mexican Barrio of the Midwest**

Pilsen is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Chicago, a neighborhood deeply rooted in history dating back to the 1860s when Irish and Germans first settled there. May Day, the most important day of the international working class, originated from the 1886 strike at the McCormick Reaper plant that was once located on the southwestern edge of Pilsen. By the early 20th Century it had became a Polish and Czech neighborhood and was baptized "Pilsen," after a major city in Bohemia. In fact, Pilsen became the dynamic cultural and political capital of the Bohemian Diaspora in the U.S during the early decades of the 1900s. In the 1950s and 1960s Mexicans moved into Pilsen and the Czechs, Poles, Germans and Lithuanians gradually began to move out. An assortment of Mexicans came to populate Pilsen: Tegans, many of them former farm workers; legal and undocumented Mexicans from different parts of Mexico, but mainly from the Bajío (Guanajuato, Jalisco and Michoacán); and the “DPs (displaced persons as they were sometimes called)” from "La Taylor." Although often in conflict with each other, what glued them together was their common status as poor workers and, with the transition of Pilsen from a white to a brown neighborhood, their cool reception by the new neighborhood.

The Mexican population in Chicago has grown from less than 60,000 in 1960 to over half a million today. During this time Mexicans first concentrated in Pilsen before moving to points south and westward to Little Village ("La 26"), the largest Mexican neighborhood in the Midwest today, and Cicero, the largest Mexican suburb outside of the Southwest. Similar to the earlier role that the Near Westside played, Pilsen became the port of entry for Mexicans; it had among the lowest rents in the city; and it was close to employment. The making of Mexican Pilsen came at a time of tremendous economic and social change in Chicago, one that involved de-industrialization, white flight to the suburbs, and the growth of the African-American and Latino population in the city. Since the 1960s Chicago has lost around 400,000 manufacturing jobs and more are expected in the near future, and today two-thirds of the city’s population is made up of minorities.

Pilsen plays an important symbolic and historical role in the history of Mexicans in the Midwest. Historic and symbolic because, after a fifty year presence in Chicago, they finally had a "Mexican neighborhood," a place that they could claim as their own. However, the browning of Pilsen involved more than just population growth, considering that a minority of the population, the old “ethnics” who remained, claimed seniority over the neighborhood and Italian-American politicians refused to relinquish their political hold over the community. The first Mexicans who settled were not welcomed and this was manifested in the “no-Spanish service” signs at churches, which really meant “No Mexicans Allowed.” Pilsen was directly governed by the “Westside block,” the small clique of Italian-American politicians headed by the legendary “boss,” Vito Marzullo, the dean of City Hall during the 1970s and early 1980s. Marzullo recalled a meeting with "ten Black Panthers, ten Mexicans" and a "Irish white priest." In this meeting they placed a set of demands on him. Marzullo angrily turned to the priest and scolded him,
by the Presbyterian Church. They forcefully took over in 1970 Vásquez, and other activists, occupied the building that was run the Aztecs and the name that Chicano activists used for the American revolutionary themes, such as the Sandinista together, as in the case of the take-over of Howell House. This young generation of activists, some of whom were members of Organization of Latin American Students at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Vietnam veterans, waged struggles for community control. It involved mobilizing and organizing around issues of access to better education, housing, health, work and social services.

The struggles for community control were political and cultural. On the cultural front, young activists-artists, many without any formal training, contributed to the identity of Pilsen. They were proud of their *mexicanidad,* and Mesoamerican imagery and symbolism dominated their artistic production. They painted murals of Mesoamerica, Father Miguel Hidalgo, Benito Juárez, Emiliano Zapata, and César Chávez. Marcos Raya contributed to Pilsen’s artistic renaissance by including Latin American revolutionary themes, such as the Sandinista Revolution, and heroes like Ché Guevara.

On the political front, the Mexican civil rights movement was led by leaders like Juan Velásquez, Ramiro Borja, Danny Soliz, Virginia Martínez, Jane Garza, Linda Coronado, and Rudy Lozano. They founded various organizations that aimed to empower the community: Centro de La Causa, Latino Youth, Mujeres Latinas en Acción, Pilsen Neighbors, El Hogar del Niño, Casa Aztlán, Asociación Pro Derechos Obreros, and more. And they commonly sought to wrest neighborhood control from entrenched groups.

More often than not, the cultural and political fronts came together, as in the case of the take-over of Howell House. This settlement house was founded in 1896 and for many years it served the Czech community of Pilsen. Members of the Brown Berets, headed by Maury Mendoza, José González and Arturo Vásquez, and other activists, occupied the building that was run by the Presbyterian Church. They forcefully took over in 1970 and baptized it Casa Aztlán, in honor of the ancient homeland of the Aztecs and the name that Chicano activists used for the northern lands that once belonged to Mexico. This became an important institution for Pilsen as a center of community activism and provider of a variety of social services. Marcos Raya, the artist-in-residence of Casa Aztlán, as of 1975, did much to give the artistic face-lift to this building.

Using different strategies, and often at odds with each other because of ideology, personality, competition or a mixture of all, these activists formed many organizations, from single-issue Alinsky-type, such as Pilsen Neighbors, to leftist organizations, such as the Centro de Acción Social Autónoma-Hermandad General de Trabajadores (CASA-HGT), led by the most important Latino leader in Chicago, Rudy Lozano, who was assassinated in 1983. He was instrumental in building the Black-Latino coalition that became a leading force behind the election of Harold Washington as mayor of Chicago in 1983. CASA-HGT also picked up on a lost tradition: the Primero de Mayo marches (May Day), an event that contributed to Pilsen’s reputation as the activist neighborhood of Chicago.

While Mexicans made many advances in gaining community control, they made little or no progress in gaining political control of Pilsen and other neighborhoods like Little Village. Politically, Latinos only held two elective positions as of 1980. The decisive battles for neighborhood control came during the 1980s and were the product of community mobilizations and political realignments resulting from the election of Harold Washington. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, who had been excluded from political participation in government, were elected to office, replacing the neighborhood overseers. Most elected officials came from the community struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Today there are over twenty elected Latino officials in Cook County, most of whom are loyal to Mayor Richard Daley II.

**PILSEN AND THE GLOBAL CITY**

Benito Juárez High School, the Rudy Lozano Library, and the Mexican Fine Arts Center-Museum are trophies of some of the many battles that Mexicans fought for control of Pilsen. However, Pilsen currently faces the greatest challenge in a long history that stretches back to the 1860s: "globalization," a process that has produced “winners” and “losers” on local and worldwide levels.

In the U.S. cities like New York and Los Angeles have emerged as centers to manage the financial, political, labor, legal, and information networks created by global transformation. To keep pace with these cities, the city’s political and business leaders have successfully repositioned Chicago as a "global city." During this period of profound transformations at all levels, the Mexican population in Chicago increased by 178,000 during the 1990s, making Chicago the second largest Mexican city in the United States after Los Angeles. Today one of four residents in Chicago is Latino. As the so-called “largest minority” in the country, Latino leaders use the demographic numbers to make the claim that it is the Latinos’ turn to have their place in the sun.

While it is important to recognize the potential electoral power that Latinos could have in the future given the demographics, it is also important to point out that, for the most part, Latinos are amongst the many “losers” that globalization is producing. In the “global city” of Chicago Latinos occupy the lowest positions on all socio-economic indices. Pilsen is a “loser” not only because it is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago, but because its very survival as a community is at stake. In Pilsen low-wage labor, high rates of unemployment and part-time work, higher rents and taxes, and deterioration in the quality of education and health services, alongside of
gentrification, in some sections, are driving residents out. Eugene Debs, the most famous socialist that this country has ever produced, made one of the most insightful observations about Chicago:

Everything that entered into the building of the town and the development of the city was determined purely by profit considerations and without the remotest concern for the health and comfort of human beings who were to live there, especially those who had to do all the labor to produce the wealth.

The making of Chicago into a “global city” has involved the mass removal of poor people, mainly Latinos and African-Americans, from the inner-city (as it happened in the Near Westside during the 1950s and 1960s). At this moment “gentrification,” the polite term for the mass displacement of poor people, is making major inroads into Humboldt Park, Bronzeville, and Pilsen. This new development is leading to urbcide, the destruction of neighborhoods, and with it the elimination of history. The gentrification has led to the physical destruction of many old neighborhoods characteristic of Chicago, such as Maxwell Street (important to Jewish and Black identity and one of the homes of the Chicago blues), Bronzeville (the heart and soul of Chicago’s Black Metropolis) and Pilsen. These neighborhoods are being replaced by new “utopias,” new neighborhoods recreated for a consuming class indifferent to history. Walter Benjamin, the well-known cultural critique and essayist, wrote on “Angelus Novus,” a painting of Paul Klee:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But the storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.

Of all the artists in Chicago, perhaps Marcos Raya has best captured the impact that globalization and technology have had on local communities and the individual. He highlights the double-edged sword of this new phenomenon: the destructive capacities and chaos and anxieties of the new age but also the utopian and liberating elements embodied in it. His depiction of the battles over Pilsen inform us about the broader and ongoing battles over the historic and current meaning of Chicago: the utopian orderly White City of Daniel Burnham versus the working class ghettos depicted by Upton Sinclair in The Jungle, the capitalism of Cyrus McCormick versus the community of Jane Addams; the power of order of Mayor Richard Daley I versus the struggle for freedom for which Lucy González de Parsons fought. Raya’s Cataclysm best represents this ongoing battle for hope and against despair—this comes from the perspective of Pilsen and the “losers” of globalization. As Walter Benjamin wrote about hope, without it, “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy [progress] if it wins.”

Juan Mora-Torres was born in Tlalpujahua, Michoacan (Mexico) and grew up in San Jose, California. A former Teamster, he has worked in the agricultural fields, canneries, and as an adult education instructor. A graduate of the University of Chicago, he taught at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He is a Professor of Latin American history at DePaul University. His research and writings focus on the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, Mexican migration, popular culture, working class formations, and Mexicans in Chicago. The author of The Making of the Mexican Border (University of Texas Press, 2001), he is currently working on “Me voy pa’I norte (I’m Going North): The First Great Mexican Migration, 1900-1930. Contact him at jmorator@depaul.edu.