2008

"La Primavera del Inmigrante": The Immigrant Rights' Movement in Chicago, 2005-2008

Juan Mora-Torres
DePaul University

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo
Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol11/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.
"La Primavera del Inmigrante": The Immigrant Rights' Movement in Chicago, 2005-2008

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/vol11/iss1/5
A strong case could be made in arguing that the latest chapter in Chicano and Latino history began on December 16, 2005 when the House of Representatives passed the Protection, Anti-Terrorism and Illegal Immigration Act (H.R. 4437) by a vote of 239 to 182. Better known as the Sensenbrenner Bill, this legislation was the total sum of ten years of anti-immigrant discourses, actions, and policies that began in California with Proposition 187 in 1994 and spread to the rest of the country, especially after 9/11.

Put forward by opportunist politicians for whom anti-immigrant policies were vote-getters, the Sensenbrenner Bill was going to be the “final solution” to the “illegal alien problem,” which, as we know, is the code for “the Mexican/Latino problem.” If it had become the law of the land, it would have been the harshest immigration legislation in U.S. history, mainly because it criminalized the undocumented and those who aided them.

What was intended to be the last nail on the “illegal alien” coffin instead generated a political blowback—it set in motion mass protests on a scale which had no parallel in American history. For those who protested, they imagined a dangerous future that involved mass incarcerations and forced removals of millions of people, a living nightmare reminiscent of the movie Children of Men.

What began in Chicago on March 10, 2006 became contagious, spreading to the rest of the country at a speed that caught all by surprise. The battle to defend the undocumented had moved from the halls of power into the streets where millions of people marched in towns, cities, and suburbs during “La Primavera del Inmigrante,” the three months that shook the country. With activities taking place in 70 locations, May 1 came to be known as “A Day without Immigrants” “A Day without Latinos” and “The Great American Boycott.” Along with their supporters, immigrants rescued May Day (the international working class day) from historical amnesia and redeemed the
political significance of this day by declaring that their demands belonged to the overall demands of the working class.

THE POST-SENSENBRENNER’S NATIVISTS RESPONSE

As we know, the Sensenbrenner Bill did not go beyond the House of Representatives—it was beaten in the streets. Given the nature of this defeat, nativists licked their wounds, regrouped, and waged a new assault on the undocumented workers. The titles of some of their best-selling books tell us much about their thinking: State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America (Pat Buchanan), In Mortal Danger: The Battle for America’s Security (Tom Tancredo), The Immigrant Threat, Immigration’s Unarmed Invasions, Alien Nation, and their best seller, Who are We? (Samuel Huntington).

The common thread that ties nativist intellectuals, politicians, and base is that they see themselves as patriots who are at war to rescue the nation from a massive immigrant invasion. Nativists, like all other right-wing extremists, get their hate from rejection. And they hate and reject the “Mexican” (this national label includes all Latinos given that nativists do not bother to make any distinctions)” more than any other “foreigner.” For them, the “Mexican” is the domestic enemy and drastic measures are needed, such as the Sensenbrenner Bill, to deal with this problem.

In their war against the “brown peril,” nativists have waged an assault on two fronts. First, and without much effort, they have imposed their anti-immigrant agenda on all the Republican Party presidential candidates. Huckabee, Romney, Giuliani, and McCain made the “illegal alien problem” their number one domestic issue during the Republican primaries. Once regarded as “moderates” on immigration, they did their utmost to out-do each other on who was toughest on "illegal aliens" by presenting proposals that largely resembled the Sensenbrenner Bill. On the other hand, the leading Democratic Party contenders, Obama and Clinton, have no history of being friends of the immigrant or advocates of their rights. Second, with the failure of the Sensenbrenner Bill in becoming the law of the land, nativists have tirelessly worked in proposing hundreds of anti-immigrant laws and ordinances at the municipal, county, and state levels, especially in areas where immigrants are organizationally weak and have few friends.

The nativists’ assault on immigrants is just one side of the coin. The other is that the Bush administration is using the powers of the state to create an atmosphere of fear within the immigrant community: from ICE (Immigration, Custom and Enforcement) much publicized and selective raids and No Match Letters (from the Social Security Administration) to greater mobilization of manpower and resources to the border. Coupled with the divisions that have emerged within the pro-immigrant leadership over the different post-Sensenbrenner legislative proposals, the state’s repressive measures and the nativists’ assault have succeeded in demobilizing the immigrant rights’ movement.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHICAGO TO THE NATIONAL IMMIGRANT RIGHTS’ MOVEMENT

In view of the demobilization and political disillusion, Chicago offers two important lessons in our understanding of the path that the immigrant rights’ movement has taken and to highlight the strategies that have worked. First, it has the longest history of mass mobilization than any part of the country, beginning with the July 1, 2005 event that brought out 50,000 people, followed by 350,000 who marched on March 10, 2006 which represented the first mass response opposing the Sensenbrenner Bill. The numbers of people that came out surprised all, including the organizers who were expecting 10,000 people at most. Up to this point, this was the largest mobilization of Latinos in U.S. history. The visual images emanating from Chicago captured the attention of the entire country, serving as a catalyst that incited not only Latinos and immigrant communities into action but other progressive forces as well.

Soon after, Chicago made the call for the May 1 nationwide mobilization, consciously seeking to connect the Immigrant Rights’ Movement of the present to the workers’ movement of the past. By marching on May Day from Haymarket (Union Park) to the Loop, the immigrant rights’ leadership consciously sought to establish continuity with the past as a means of legitimizing their actions. On that day
750,000 participated. Around 300,000 marched in last years May Day and 50,000 this year. Although less people participated in the last two May Day mobilizations than the two mega-marches of 2006, they were much larger than any mobilization that took place in the rest of the country.

Second, it began as a Mexicano/Latino movement but it succeeded in becoming by May 1, 2006 a unified and inclusive movement across communities, ethnic groups, faiths, and classes. In one of those rare moments in U.S. history, people who had been divided by class, race, gender, faith, and age have came together on May 1 not only in Chicago but in the rest of the country. It reveals to all, including those in power, that immigrants and allies constituted a force that had never been used in past. Besides showing a strength that is real, it also demonstrated that it has the possibilities for a new brand of politics capable of changing the direction of this country.

It has created the possibilities to re-vitalize a declining labor movement, establishing a new working relationship with the African American community along a broader civil rights movement, and of building transnational ties with progressive forces in other countries, especially from those countries where immigrants have strong ties. All of these possibilities, and others, have come out of movement that seeks to defend the weakest sector of American society: the 12 million people living here without “papers.”

Even though it has been an inclusive movement, it is important to highlight that the base of immigrant rights' movement is the Mexicano/Latino community. Although Latinos have been residing in Chicago since World War I, they are, essentially, a fairly new community. In 1960 Chicago contained 100,000 Latinos, almost evenly distributed between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. From 1970 to 2004, the Latino population of the Chicago's metropolitan area grew from 324,000 to 1,607,000. Growing by an average of 50,000 a year since 1990, Latinos are on the verge of reaching the 2 million population mark. Close to eighty percent of the Latinos in Chicago are Mexicans.

Therefore, the “typical” Mexicano/Latino family in Chicago metropolitan area is bi-cultural and bi-national. Bi-cultural because 84% of the children under 17 were born in the U.S. compared to 35% of the adults. Bi-national because more than two-thirds of all Latino children have foreign-born parents. Rare is the Latino citizen or permanent resident who does not have relatives, friends, and neighbors that do not have documents. Given the bi-cultural and bi-national character of the Mexicano/Latino community, it is the youth who have been most visible at the mobilizations.

In terms of numbers, the mobilization of people reached its peak in 2006. The number of participants has dramatically dropped since then. With this in mind, political disillusion reigns in the ranks of the movement. Political disenchantment is a feature shared by almost all mass movements, especially when they underestimate the strength of those who oppose them. The opponents of the immigrant are well-organized and financed. In their war against the “immigrant invasion,” they have direct access to politicians and the mass media, the shaper of public opinion. They are not going to go away and disappear.

Georges Sorel, the French syndicalist wrote, “Catholics have never been discouraged even in the hardest trials, because they have always pictured the history of the Church as a series of battles between Satan and the hierarchy supported by Christ; every new difficulty which arises is only an episode in a war which must finally end in the victory of Catholism.” We can substitute immigrants for Catholic and nativist for Satan if it makes it easier to our understanding that the struggle is going to be very long.

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’l norte (I'm Going North)”: The First Great Mexican Migration, 1900-1930. To contact: jmorator@depaul.edu