Citizenship and Belonging:
The Construction of US Latino Identity Today

Introduction

“During times of war, the first casualty is Truth.”

Those are the words written long ago by the famous British war correspondent, Phillip Knightly. Over the past few years, two Mexican American journalists, Patricia Gonzales and Roberto Rodríguez, have continuously exposed the hypocrisy, lies and distortions that have penetrated what we could call the “common sense” knowledge that has thus far organized our everyday life in U.S. society. In their columns, they point out, for example, that in the name of patriotism, our civil liberties have been curtailed; that fear and distrust of fellow citizens have increasingly become the accepted norm. Mass round-ups of different national-origin groups have gone virtually unnoticed by anyone other than the groups directly involved. Racial profiling is now official government policy, and those who practice it are called our nation’s heroes and heroines.

Indeed, the most recent example of these distortions is by Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington, in a new “domestic” version of his “clash of civilizations” argument. His argument in Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity (2004), was visibly discussed in various news outlets, including in The New York Times, which summarized it in the following terms: “In this new era [...] the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America’s traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially Mexico. These new immigrants, [Huntington] argues, are not like earlier immigrants. Many have little interest in assimilating” (Brooks 2004). Indeed, Huntington argues that the presence of Latinos—and of Mexicans in particular—is changing the United States.

At the same time that these kinds of distortions are propagated, dissent, on the other hand, is increasingly considered unpatriotic—to the point that in a speech to the American Legion veterans on August 30, 2006, the US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, suggested that those who disagree with administration policies in the war against Islamist
terrorists are comparable to those who appeased Fascism in the 1930s. These are just some examples that show how dramatically the national climate has changed in the United States since 9/11. As Gonzales and Rodriguez (2002) observe, “During the Clinton administration, the president had vociferous critics, yet no one ever questioned their right to speak. No one told them that their dissent or calls for impeachment constituted treason, and no one suggested that they be permanently exiled”. Under these conditions it is important to ask: What does it mean to say that the 42.9 million Latinos in the United States–59.8% of whom are U.S. citizens (Pew Hispanic Center 2005)–are the ones who have made, or are making, significant changes in this society? What, for example, does it really mean in Latinos’ daily lives today, and under the conditions I outline above, to belong to US society? Indeed, given the spreading fear and distrust, the lies and distortions, is it possible for anyone–Latinos or otherwise–to belong to anything resembling a national community in the United States today? If we define citizenship as the political expression of national belonging, then how do Latinos and other groups construct their identities and articulate their experience as citizens in the United States today?

It is important to acknowledge in no uncertain terms the fact that since the eleventh of September of 2001, the actual practice of racism in daily life has changed in the United States. Racial profiling, for example, has again acquired a new acceptance–even by some sectors within minority groups. In response to the question of “who is actually changing what?”, then, it could be argued that both the types of action that some chose to follow in the aftermath of 9/11, and the implicit reasoning and justification behind them, (Ahmad 2002; Verhovek 2001; Amnesty International USA 2004; Eagan 2001) make visible the ambiguous and ambivalent position of Latinos in relation to issues of identity in the United States. It also sets the broader context for discussing ethnicity, belonging and citizenship in this new unpredictable post-9/11 world in which we live. For this new acceptance of racial profiling is yet another example that the unrelenting force of racism in contemporary society has turned all U.S. citizens–whether White, Black or Latino, whether of Jewish, Arab, Asian or Native American descent, whether consciously “racist” or “anti-racist,” rich or poor, male or female, young or old, wielders of power or not–into willing or unwilling accomplices in its ongoing reproduction and perpetuation. Indeed, racism in the US context cannot be relegated to the distant past when legal segregation, overt bigotry and lynching were common. Instead, today’s racism is fed by fear and the never-ending possibilities created not only by the blatant distortions such as those espoused by Huntington, but also by the “Maybes,” and the “What ifs” inherent in a “national security” doctrine intent on sowing distrust, thereby effectively sabotaging the possibility of creating a community of equals, and its modern synonym, a community of citizens. Seen from this perspective, it is essential that we recognize that, while citizenship may be commonly construed as a legal status, it is, above all, both a political reality and a lived experience.1

Thus, while my aim in this essay is to discuss the impact of Latinos on the changing meanings of citizenship, this essay also serves as a reflection on the issue of “who is

actually changing what?” in U.S. society. I first look at the controversial history and ambiguous “placement” of Latinos as U.S. citizens and residents in the context of racialized labeling and profiling in U.S. society; I then explore the peculiar changes—a kind of facelift—which ethnicity has undergone under the new conditions of a national security ideology with its concomitant undermining of citizenship in the United States. Finally, I discuss some of the ways that, largely as a result of the recognition of their right to have rights, Latinos are contributing, in their own right, to the changing meanings of citizenship and belonging in the U.S. context. Ultimately, I argue, it is through their participation in redefining the very meaning of citizenship in the post 9/11 period that Latinos are themselves (re)constructing and affirming their identity in the United States.

Rethinking Citizenship and Racialization in the 21st century USA

Prior to 9/11, 2001, and indeed even today, many people in mainstream U.S. society insisted that racism was no longer the “real problem”. In that falsely optimistic context, racial profiling stood out as the last remaining bastion of the retrograde forces of unbridled racism. Thus, toward the end of the 1990s, in newspaper articles, academic conferences, television talk shows and radio call-ins, discussions about this most unfair and quintessentially “un-American” act were heard throughout the country.

The popularity of the debates on the issue of racial profiling at the time was matched only by the number of equally-heated discussions concerning the need to resolve the status of undocumented immigrants, and the consequent growing momentum of the national amnesty movement. In fact, just prior to 9/11 there was great expectation in the results of the imminent meeting on immigration policy between President Bush and his Mexican counterpart President Fox.

But the days that followed 9/11, 2001, destroyed all expectations of passing the racial profiling bill in the foreseeable future. Any hope that President Fox might have had at the time to regulate immigration between Mexico and the U.S. also died, as the then significant amnesty movement was abruptly stopped in its tracks. For, while racial profiling of American citizens continues to be viewed in a negative light, societal condemnation of the practice has since been somewhat attenuated by the shift in the constantly changing definition of who could and indeed should be profiled, to the “foreigner” in fact and fiction.²

Indeed, 9/11 both halted the societal movement to end racial profiling and also served to affirm the perverse logic of racism. Today, racial profiling has become a quintessentially patriotic and “pro-American” act, laying bare the extent to which everyone in U.S. society has long been socialized to understand and reproduce, at any moment, and almost on command, the mechanisms of discrimination that confirm the intransigent racial bias

² Latinos in this context are not being spared. A study released during the summer of 2002 documents that “nationwide, Latino teens charged with violent offenses are five times more likely to be incarcerated as white teens similarly charged”. As Fernando Abeyta, 22, a Community Organizer for the Albuquerque-based Southwest Organizing Project noted, “Throughout Albuquerque, police are harassing, detaining and arresting young Latinos with alarming regularity [...]. ‘They are picking people out [...] by the color of their skin and what they wear,’ Abeyta insists.” Cf. Walker/Villaruel (2002).
that has historically been deeply embedded in every aspect of life in the USA. These mechanisms are most clearly manifested in the official practice of ethnic labeling, which has itself undergone changes since its emergence in 1977. I now turn briefly, then, to the development of ethnic labeling in contemporary US society.

Ethnic Labeling in the Post 9/11 period

In 1977, the US government divided the entire US society into five “racial” or “ethnic” categories: White European; Asian or Pacific Islander; Black and African American, American [i.e. U.S.] Indian or Alaskan Native, and Hispanic (Forbes 1992: 59-78). At the time, there was a very specific purpose for these five categories, a purpose which today seems to have been largely forgotten. For, initially, the main purpose of these ethnic categories was quantitative: the intent was to measure how well U.S. society was doing as a nation in fighting against the racism and the social exclusion of racialized minorities that had led to the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s. Yet, as the Clinton administration’s Race Task Force suggested in 1998, despite the original intention, one of the unintended consequences of creating the ethnic categories has been that these labels reinforce the belief in the superiority of whiteness and “white privilege” itself in the U.S. socio-racial hierarchy (Holmes 1998). In fact, contrary to the past propaganda of the melting pot, what we have in the US today is not a community of equal citizens, but rather a well-organized racial hierarchy, a hierarchy which primarily has as its dominant theme what the French sociologist, Etienne Balibar (1991: 21), has called “the insurmountability of cultural differences,” rather than of biological heredity. Moreover, it is a racism which at first sight does not postulate the superiority of specific groups or peoples in relation to others, but only “the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions” (ibid). In short, through the official creation of ethnic categories—and as has historically been the case in Latin America for example—everyone now “knows their place” in U.S. society.

While ethnicity has also made a positive contribution to US society—ethnic membership and cultural allegiances, or cultural citizenship (Flores/Benmayor 1997) in an age where belonging is disappearing as a community experience can be cited here—it is also important today to ask: beyond the cultural dimension of ethnicity, what are the social and political consequences—for the Latino population and for society as a whole—of continuing ethnic labeling? And more specifically, how does ethnic labeling impact on citizenship and identity construction in the post-9/11 context?

Certainly, the position on racial profiling taken by some sectors of US society—non-minority and minority alike—suggests that actions based on “a little racial bias”, so-to-speak, is being justified by some in terms of the need to protect all citizens and residents of US society from the terror of terrorism. Indeed, although the new racial hierarchy of

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3. At the same time, it is important to note that racial profiling in the post 9/11 period undoubtedly resonates in U.S. historical examples. Cf. Volpp (2002: 1575-1600).

4. In 2000, the US census added the category of Latino, which until then was used informally in US society. In this article I use the two terms interchangeably, following the varied regional usages and preferences in US society.
inequalities, and racism itself, is not as crude as in the pre-Civil Rights period, this does not mean that the consequences for ensuring citizenship as constitutive of the self-understanding of a community—a process which is inclusive and ongoing, and one which is neither imposed nor dictated by the state alone—are any less virulent. To the extent that citizenship is a lived experience, grounded in the negotiated participation of all groups, of all sectors and individuals within the community, it is important to consider the mechanisms of discrimination currently in force in U.S. society. Channeled through ethnicity, these mechanisms are affirmed again and again in at least two ways: first, through the officially-sanctioned ethnic labels; and secondly, and equally important, through the appropriation and re-definitions of these labels by the various minority groups and individuals in their struggle for social justice. Indeed, ethnic labeling is today being used to reinforce the reliance on the fear and distrust which redefine all third-world immigrants in the U.S. context as potential “foreign terrorists.” The increasing visibility of Latinos has compelled US society to transcend the black-white binary, superimposing a new native/foreigner binary on the traditional understanding of race. This is most apparent in discussions of Latinos' legal status, and its implications for belonging. Indeed, as the ongoing debates on racial profiling suggest, in a sweeping throwback to an ugly past, the current hegemony in US society is portraying racial divisions if not as “normal,” at least as inevitable. In the process it is unambiguously imposing racial bias as inherent to the organization of the society.

Key to understanding this new racial(ized) divide as it relates specifically to Latinos in the United States is the vagueness of the definition of the label “Hispanic” itself. The term Hispanic has been called a “masterpiece of ambiguity” (Matute-Bianchi 1979: 18), for it includes everyone who was either born in Latin America or Spain, or who is a descendant of anyone born in Latin America or Spain. In the past thirty years, its usage has raised a number of questions about who is a Hispanic or, in the grassroots alternative term, a Latino, and who is not. One of the debates in this respect, for example, revolves around whether Latin American immigrants should be considered to be as “Latino” as U.S. born Latinos, who are US citizens. Regardless of these debates, given the vagueness of the definition of “Hispanic,” it is essential that we acknowledge that it is, first and foremost, a bureaucratic invention by state agencies, for purposes of census data collection and policy management—including Affirmative Action.5

From this perspective, it is important to note that in the US, the significance of ethnicity, and more particularly of ethnic labeling, is directly related to the distribution and withdrawal of resources and opportunities. Labels such as “Hispanic” allow us to track the poverty and illiteracy rates of each group, even while they simultaneously contribute to the perpetuation of discriminatory practices in the socio-economic sphere. Indeed, by homogenizing this population, the term also serves to brand all Latinos, as a group, as culturally and socially inferior, due to their foreign–un-American–origins and language.

5 Indeed, in its origins, the term Hispanic—like the grassroots alternative designation, Latino—is in no way tied to any historical, territorial, cultural background or identity of any one given national-origin population group in the United States. Instead, it encompasses people of all Latin American countries and Spain. A similar homogenization with similar implications occurs in relation to the other official ethnic categories. Cf. Oboler (1995).
From this perspective, the very existence of racial labeling militates against the constitution of an inclusive democratic political life. This is in keeping with the current political climate—such as the retreat of the state in the matter of civil rights enforcement; and the shock, at least for some, that the term of the Voting Rights Act which finally gave African Americans the right to vote in 1965, expired in 2006, and after some struggle by African Americans, was finally extended by the US Congress for another 25 years in 2006.

Indeed, rectification of injustice, whether social or political, is still incumbent upon victimized ethnic groups alone. The state, in this context, merely continues to “manage” the conflict arising from the ever-more skewed distribution of social goods, status, income and position in contemporary U.S. society (Krugman 2002).

In fact, it is now up to “Latinos”, for example, to denounce injustices or the violation of the rights of people of Latin American descent in the United States, regardless of their citizenship status. A few examples can help illustrate this point, such as the deaths of countless Mexican workers as a result of employer negligence, and non-enforcement of worker protection legislation in the rural regions of California. More recently, in April 2006, Anthony Soltero, a 14 year old 8th grader, committed suicide after he was threatened by his principal with three years in jail for participating in the Spring 2006 immigration marches against HR 4437. Originally passed by the House of Representatives on December 16, 2005, this anti-immigration legislation specifically called for the criminalization of all undocumented immigrants and of any institution or person who came to their aid.

Anthony committed suicide because the Assistant Principal of his school threatened to have him jailed for three years for his role in organizing the March 28 Walk-Out of his school.6 His untimely death was widely protested in California, primarily by the Latino community.

These examples of what could be called “segmented citizenship” are not, of course, limited to Latinos (Hwang/Lee 2002; Johnson 2005). Moreover, while the response to each racist attack is assumed to be the responsibility of the specifically-targeted “ethnic group”, it is also important that there are fault-lines among racial minorities too, for rarely do we see cross-cultural mobilizations among these targeted groups. We can therefore affirm with some confidence both that racism in the United States is quite secure for some time to come; and that racial discrimination, by way of ethnicity, continues to ensure—and at this point to exacerbate—the fragmentation of the national community; eroding the effective meaning of citizenship, with its attendant rights and responsibilities in this country.

Not surprisingly, racial minorities in U.S. society are also redefining the political reality of the labels, using ethnicity to build and/or reinforce “imagined communities” within their particular groups. At least partially in response to the fact noted by the Mexican American anthropologist, Leo Chavez that “immigrants, even those who are legal residents and citizens, are being re-imagined, minimally, as less deserving members of the community” (1997: 77), sectors of Latinos are recasting the label “Hispanic” in hemispheric and transnational terms. Moreover, in view of the current backlash against

6 Moreover, according to the Soltero family’s press release announcing Anthony’s death, “The vice principal also forbade Anthony from attending graduation activities and threatened to fine his mother for Anthony’s truancy and participation in the student protests”.

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the gains of the Civil Rights period, the labels are contributing toward the forging of a sense of “cultural citizenship” (Flores/Benmayor 1997). They are both redefining the meaning of belonging and enabling a growing numbers of disenfranchised minorities to engender a collective response to the particular incidents and issues affecting each group. These include, but are not limited to, attacks against racially-marked individuals.

Still, there is no doubt that the presence of the still growing Latino population in the US is in some ways significantly changing the country—albeit not in the ways suggested by Huntington above. Globalization, together with Latin America’s neoliberal policies, and particularly, at least since 1994, the impact of NAFTA, have profoundly affected the Americas, and this is most visible in the sky-high unemployment, growing poverty, and consequent displacement of millions of people throughout the Americas. The result is an upsurge in the transnational migration of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, and the concomitant reorganization of national economies now sustained to a large extent by the remittances of immigrants living in the United States. Hence, without a doubt, the arrival of these immigrants in US society, and the existence today of hundreds of thousands of their US born children, is indeed changing the meaning of belonging as well as of US citizenship as the political expression of national belonging. Indeed, it is in this context that the issue of the impact of Latino immigrants’ integration on the meaning of citizenship in the United States has to be assessed.

Latino Immigrants, Citizenship and Belonging

Citizenship has long been understood as a legal status, a relationship between an individual and the nation-state that defines his or her political membership in society (Barbalet 1988). In the course of the 20th century in the US, the focus has been on the legal guarantee of the political and civil rights of individuals. In the United States, particularly in the post-World War II period, as a result of the various minorities’ struggles for inclusion, such as the Civil Rights movements, for example, there has been an enormous extension of political and particularly social rights to various sectors previously excluded from full citizenship: people of color, women, gays and lesbians and the handicapped, etc. And while the struggles were waged by particular groups, many of the changes, particularly those affecting white women, undoubtedly ended up benefiting the entire society. Together they represent a shift and expansion of the practical experience and meaning of citizenship in the USA and what William Flores calls “an active process of claiming rights rather than the passive acquisition of an arbitrary and limited set of rights” (2003: 295-296).

In the specific case of the Latinos, the 1960s and 70s Civil Rights movements by Chicanos or Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans responded both to a long legacy of political and cultural exclusion, and to their being perceived as “eternal” foreigners in the American civic imaginary (Rocco 2006; Johnson 1998). Although they are less well known, it is important to underscore the fact that these Latino movements, like those of other minority groups during the 1960s and 70s, exposed the racialized limits of the legal definition of citizenship. They also exposed the way that the focus on individuals’ legal status hides the significance of the realities of race, class, social status, gender, and sexual orientation, which are key determinants of how membership in a community is lived

The Civil Rights struggles for inclusion in the post-war period served to extend political, legal and social citizenship to actual US citizens as well as to legal residents, to such an extent that by the 1990s, as Dorothee Schneider has pointed out, “there was little besides the right to vote to distinguish holders of US passports from those who held a green card” (2001: 66-67). On the other hand, this “leveling” does not signify a marked gain in the practical content of citizenship per se.

Nativist backlash orchestrated the State’s response on several levels. While the state has continued to construct the very concept of illegality (De Genova 2006; Ngai 2005), it also has sought, as Schneider points out, to slow the decline in the value of citizenship by using legislation to reconstitute the distinction between citizens and non-citizens. In this respect, Linda Bosniak points to several measures “designed to make national citizenship status either harder to obtain, more socially significant, or both” (2000b: 963). Indeed, since the mid-1990s, efforts to raise the value of the right to be in US society have also meant changes in the immigration laws.

By the mid-1990s, much legislation both at the federal and state levels against immigrants had been passed. Proposition 187 (1994), for example, which eventually was ruled to be unconstitutional by the courts, made it illegal for immigrants to get social and welfare services.7 Two years later, in 1996, the Clinton administration pushed through a number of pieces of anti-immigrant legislation: The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act; the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty act (which criminalized immigrants); and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (which is known as the Welfare Act).

Between them these three acts restricted immigrants from most welfare benefits, elevated enforcement efforts and removal procedures, and increased the responsibility of immigrant sponsors. Thus, for example, the Welfare Act required US citizenship, restricted public benefits for undocumented immigrants, and forced what was then known as the INS to verify the immigrant’s status before he or she could get benefits, which affected both legal and undocumented residents. Indeed, the Act was broad enough to include benefits for many legal residents as well. While some of this curtailment has been overturned by the courts since the passage of the Act, much has remained (Bosniak 2000a).

Thus the real result was that non-citizens were greatly encouraged to naturalize, or risk losing their benefits. In 1997 alone, just one year after the act, there were 1.4 million applications from immigrants wanting to become US citizens (Gilbertson 2006). The other two Acts make more crimes a deportable offence, allowing immigration officials, as The New York Times reported, to “quickly deport illegal immigrants who show up at airports and at the border. Immigration officials, not judges, determine which of them can be deported and, therefore, barred from the United States for at least five years. The decision can be made in a matter of hours and without a lawyer representing the immigrant” (Ojito 1998).

7 While this initiative was eventually declared unconstitutional by the Courts, a more recent version of it, Proposition 200–the Arizona Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act–was successfully passed in Arizona in 2004 and is now facing legal challenges in the courts.
Still, the political realities of the current transnational context within which both documented and undocumented immigrants live their lives in the US continue to nuance these stark legislative attacks on immigrant rights.

Ultimately, as Greta Gilbertson (2006) points out, the Welfare Act highlighted “the strong relationship that exists between citizenship and the claiming of social rights” in the United States today. In effect, the Welfare Act linked citizenship to social benefits and the claiming of rights, making the notion of dual nationality more acceptable, both among immigrant Latinos and to various Latin American governments.

The Immigrants’ Response

Spurred on, not only by the state, but also by official channels in their respective countries of origin, Latino immigrants have been redefining belonging very much in terms of social and cultural rights. And this includes embracing the notion of dual nationality. Without a doubt, Latinos do not feel fully “American” largely because of racialization, the label that separates them from other groups, and, perhaps above all, the permanent perception in US society of their foreignness (Rocco 2006). Dual nationality has become a major issue among immigrants precisely because “you don’t lose your rights” or your identity in either country (Gilbertson 2006). In some cases, such as Colombia and Mexico, immigrants today can actually live in the United States and run for office in their respective homeland’s congress, for example, and even win! (Escobar 2006). In short, as Gilbertson suggests, they can safeguard their rights to their pension and benefits in the United States, but they also get to re-claim their original national identity and social rights in their respective countries of origin. Nevertheless, non-white physical appearance marks Latinos as minority, as foreigners, even if they speak English.

In this context, questions of patriotism, loyalties, and allegiance to a state must be studied seriously. For example, in her research among Salvadorans, Susan Bibler Coutin (2003) found that citizenship entails “territorial presence and social participation”—including “working, paying taxes, obeying the law”. These are the bases for immigrants’ claim of a citizenship which Coutin’s activist informants define as “substantive citizenship”. Moreover, in defining citizenship and belonging, what carries most weight among Latinos is the way they are present—as active, working, tax-paying, law-abiding persons. In other words, it is social participation, rather than the length of time in the host society, that defines the perspective on belonging for many Salvadoran immigrants (154-155, 159). And, as one Salvadoran activist stated when explaining why “he stopped denying that he was in the United States: ‘I realized, your patria [homeland] is that which gives you food, that which gives you work. I realized that we had to stop paying taxes here and living elsewhere emotionally. We had to accept that the United States was our government’” (153).

Many Latino immigrants negotiate their legal status by creating various alternative networks, relationships and practices to survive the denial of formal citizenship—formal acknowledgement of their active participation in the community. These include finding ways of working without papers, transferring funds and goods through unauthorized channels, using false documents and identities, living in various national spaces, smuggling people across the border (Coutin 2003: 161). Still, this is not to say that these alter-
native networks are truly an alternative, as we can see from the fate of undocumented immigrants during the Katrina disaster. Many were stuck in New Orleans, afraid to leave, because they did not want to be stopped by the police, the national guard and other state officials. The same applies to 9/11 widows who are afraid to “claim” their benefits from their husbands’ deaths.

Nevertheless, it is also important to take into account that through these kinds of alternative practices and actions, immigrants are contributing to redefinition and expansion of the very meaning of citizenship, beyond mere legalities and the discussion of rights. Their actions are also contributing to reframing the debate on the meaning and social value of U.S. citizenship today. In the process, Latino identity and belonging is being affirmed.

**Citizenship and Latino identity: The construction of belonging**

There is no doubt that citizenship today is an issue which has serious implications for everyone, irrespective of history or national origin status. Nowhere is this clearer than in the current debate in the United States over the fate of Elvira Arellano, a young Mexican activist who, in August 2006, chose to take sanctuary in a church instead of going to her deportation hearing (Sustar 2006). Elvira is an undocumented worker who was arrested three years ago in an immigration raid for working illegally at Chicago airport. Her seven year old son, Saul, however, was born in the United States and is a US citizen. If Elvira is deported, Saul will in effect also be forced to leave his homeland. There are currently over eleven million undocumented workers and over four hundred thousand families in the United States who are in this situation. At least 3.1 million children are US citizens who, like Saul, have at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant in the United States (Koch 2006). The key question raised by Elvira’s case is: will the laws protecting citizens prevail over the laws against the undocumented? And even more so, how does/can the Elvira case return us to a deeper discussion which does not exclusively concern itself with the letter of the law but reintroduces an element of empathy and compassion which has historically existed in the US?

At the heart of these current debates on the future of US citizenship, which are being forged through the ongoing political mobilization of Latino/as such as Elvira Arellano, Anthony Soltero, and the millions who participated in the massive immigration marches in early 2006, is the ongoing redefinition and simultaneous affirmation of Latino identity and belonging in the United States.

**Bibliography**


Xóchitl Bada*

➲ The Binational Civic and Political Engagement of Mexican Migrant Hometown Associations and Federations in the United States

Introduction

This article focuses on the history and current situation of Mexican hometown associations (HTAs) in the United States with a special emphasis on Chicago-based Mexican hometown associations and federations. It presents empirical evidence of new forms of binational engagement among Mexican migrant communities in the United States leading to the creation of a Mexican migrant civil society.

Mexican hometown associations and federations in the United States have attracted considerable attention in the last decade, mainly for their potential as agents of social change in their communities of origin. However, the phenomenon of hometown associations is not confined to the United States. In fact, both at the historical and contemporary levels, we know that hometown associations and similar types of voluntary migrant associations have existed in all types of receiving societies. The recent work of historian José Moya provides an illuminating account of the many hometown associations that European, African, Middle-Eastern, and Asian immigrants created in South America, the Caribbean, and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Moya 2005: 847-850).

Grassroots organizations of Mexican migrants have proliferated since the early 1980s in the United States, especially in metropolitan Los Angeles and Chicago. Recently, these organizations have also become more visible in less urban areas such as the San Joaquin Valley in California and in smaller communities in the Midwest and the South that have become new destinations of Mexican migration. Although migrants from different regions in Mexico have forged several kinds of organizations—including committees, fronts, and coalitions—by the end of the 1990s hometown associations and home state federations had become the most prevalent grouping of Mexican migrants (Escala Rabadán/Bada/Rivera-Salgado 2007).

In contrast to the relative informality and political isolation that characterized them in the mid-1990s, these associations have consolidated their structures. Their philan-
thropic activities have also changed. Their initial infrastructure projects were infrequent and haphazardly organized; today cross-border fund-raising and investments in home community infrastructure have grown in scale and become much more formalized and systematic. Increased visibility has led to recognition in public and political spheres, encouraging dialogue with federal, state and municipal governments in Mexico.

Between 1998-2006, the total number of HTAs registered nationwide almost doubled, with an increase from 441 to 815 organizations. Although the data is incomplete, there is a clear pattern of growth in the numbers of HTAs and their expanding presence in parts of the United States beyond traditional migrant destinations. This organizational form has expanded to include Mexican migrants from 28 Mexican states with associations established in 35 states in the U.S. (Secretaría de Desarrollo Social 2006). In 2003, 80 percent of these associations were concentrated in California and Illinois, a figure consistent with the current clustering of the Mexican migrant population.

**Mexican Hometown Associations in Historical Perspective**

While it is true that Mexican hometown associations were originally formed in the second half of the twentieth century in the U.S., they arrived to occupy the space left by the Mexican mutual-aid societies of the early twentieth century, which were contemporary to the voluntary associations of European immigrants. For instance, the Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe founded *landmanshaftn* according to their towns of origin, first to provide for synagogues and then for mutual aid and cemetery rights in New York and Chicago (Cohen 1990: 69). By 1920, the Jewish community had consolidated a network of 3,000 associations and almost half a million members (Soyer 1997).

Italian immigrants also organized in urban America. They first created small fraternal societies for mutual help. Between 1910 and 1920, the Italians had 160 benefit groups in Chicago based mostly on village and regional associations (Bodnar 1985: 123). The Italians organized around the spirit of *campanilismo*, or loyalty to their communities of origin. In many cases, European immigrants transplanted organizations from the old world and adapted them to their new lives. This fact should be emphasized because it was not until the 1970s that scholars recognized the pre-migratory organizational traits of immigrants to the U.S. Thanks to the strong admiration of Alexis de Tocqueville for the associational vigor of U.S. society, it was believed for a long time that migrants lacked the necessary attributes that would lead to philanthropic activities and that assimilation to American society planted the seed for the creation of immigrant-led voluntary associations (Moya 2005: 836). The fact that voluntary associations were very common in many sending countries and the evidence of pre-migratory organizational activities of some immigrant groups offers a better perspective from which to understand the origins of migrant-led voluntary associations. However, the persistence or disappearance of these organizations over time might be connected to differences in the context of their reception which could have encouraged or discouraged the vitality and survival of migrant associations over time.

The case of Mexican migrant organizations in the early twentieth century was similar to that of their European counterparts. Mexicans also formed civil associations in different urban cities to preserve their national identity and to offer mutual support in case of sickness, economic crisis, or labor problems. Their mutual-aid, benefit, and fraternal
societies were quite successful in the Midwest, Texas, and California. During the 1930s, for instance, Mexicans in Los Angeles actively participated in protecting the human rights of Mexicans who had been repatriated. To that end, they used the structure of the Confederation of Mexican Societies, a coalition of several associations with diverse binational agendas. Among their most important activities, these organizations dealt with issues regarding the educational improvement of the second generation, the creation of Mexican labor unions affiliated to the American Federation of Labor, and the development of a Mexican lobby group to participate in immigration policy debates between Mexico and the United States.¹

In the state of Texas during the 1930s, there were 22 Mexican Blue Cross brigades led by women, a Mexican Benefit Committee to help the repatriated, and the mutual-aid society Círculo de Conductores y Obreros in El Paso, among other organizations.² In the Midwest, the Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José was one of the pioneer Mexican organizations of the 1920s. This organization had migrants from the states of Jalisco and Guanajuato in East Chicago, Indiana. Later, many other organizations were created, such as the Benito Juárez, Cuauhtémoc, José María Morelos, and Ignacio Zaragoza mutual-aid societies. The membership lists of the Cuauhtémoc Society between 1930 and 1949 reveal the great diversity of the Mexican community. This society kept a membership of 658 regular members from 17 different Mexican states. Not surprisingly, an important share of the membership came from two traditional sending states, Guanajuato and Michoacán. Those two states provided 18 and 17 percent of the total membership respectively. Other highly represented states were Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Nuevo León, Jalisco, and Durango.

This diversity may have prevented the formation of hometown associations because there were not enough people from the same town, municipality or geographical region to support the creation of a hometown association. For instance, the people from the state of Michoacán who registered in the Cuauhtémoc Society came from 50 different cities that were sometimes a hundred kilometers apart within the home state. To add to the diversity of the early Mexican organizations, we know that they also admitted people from different nationalities such as Spanish, Anglo-Saxon Americans, and Polish, among others.³ In 1925, the Confederación de Sociedades Mexicanas de los Estados Unidos de América was founded to protect the legal rights of Mexican citizens in Chicago. This confederation was an umbrella organization of about 35 Mexican mutual-aid societies. All these associations functioned as self-help groups, offering support in times of economic hardship caused by unemployment, illness, injury, or burial expenses. They helped new migrants to adjust to the new environment, combat discrimination, and protect their members from the cultural and economic shock created by their uprooting (García 1996). Beyond health benefits and life insurance, these societies offered companionship through the lodge halls and special occasions such as picnics, dances, and patron-saint festivities. Between 1930 and 1960, the Mexican community in Chicago followed different paths of

¹ Historic Diplomatic Archive. Mexico City, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Consular Department, Protection Section, File IV/523 (73-27)/3.
³ Calumet Regional Archives, Richard Santillán Midwest Latino Collection, CRA 136, Membership Applications, Cuauhtémoc Society, folders 5-9.
organization, creating diverse associations that catered to the needs of the first and second generations of immigrants (Fernández 2005; Innis-Jiménez 2005).

During and after the Depression years, many of these associations disappeared as a consequence of massive deportations of Mexican migrants and other organizational problems. However, formal Mexican hometown associations appeared by the late 1960s, when the contemporary (post-1965) wave of Mexican migrants started to settle in Chicago and the metropolitan area. These new migrant voluntary associations were organized according to their village or town of origin, thus recasting their topophilic identities along with their national allegiance. Some organizations had their origins in successful sports clubs or religious associations (Badillo 2001; Pescador 2004).

Thanks to the amnesty granted by IRCA in 1986, thousands of Mexican migrants living in the Chicago metropolitan area were able to legalize their status and could travel more easily between Mexico and the United States. They returned to their communities of origin more frequently and gradually became aware of the sheer economic disparities that many rural towns were facing due to economic restructuring. Each return trip to the U.S meant facing the shocking reality that many of the comforts of modernity such as running water and electricity that they enjoyed on a daily basis were lacking in many of their communities. Many migrants still had family members living in Mexico and wanted to do something to improve those conditions. This is how many clubs started to gather on a weekly basis, to share a friendly soccer match, some home-made ethnic food, and to chat about their towns’ most pressing needs. Telephone connections were available in many Mexican rural towns by the mid-eighties and information about collective needs spread faster. This and other technological advances, such as cheaper air transportation, fax machines, the internet, and handheld video cameras helped to coordinate infrastructure development plans between physically absent financial sponsors and local collective remittance beneficiaries (Bada 2003).

As other migrant self-help groups have done in the past century, many hometown associations function as social networks, as well as transmitters of culture and values to the American-born generation. At later stages of development, these grassroots organizations created federations to increase their leverage with their home governments and became involved in collective development projects for their communities of origin, as well as in advocacy concerning political and social issues in their U.S. communities. Although Mexican HTAs have the longest history and are the best known, an increasing number of Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Haitian, and Salvadoran hometown associations have appeared since the 1980s and are actively participating in the improvement of their communities of origin and residence (Levitt 2001; Orozco 2000; Pierre-Louis 2006; Portes/Escobar/Radford 2006; Waldinger/Popkin/Aquiles Magana 2006).

The Journey from the National to the Binational Arena: Mexican Hometown Associations in Chicago

In the beginning, Mexican hometown associations had a clear agenda in mind: they wanted to help their communities of origin to obtain basic services such as water, roads, electricity, and school renovations. They also cared about the beautification of their towns as they embarked on the construction and renovation of kiosks, squares, and
churches. Later, they came to demand more and better services from their state governments, such as help with the repatriation of corpses, localization of family relatives in the U.S., and better treatment during holiday visits. After obtaining some positive responses from the state governments, they slowly developed more sophisticated agendas, such as the implementation of state public policies to deter migration and the restitution of their political rights, both at federal and state levels.

With the track record acquired in their negotiations with municipal and state government to obtain funds for community development, the leaders became more and more interested in the issues affecting their municipalities and some even decided to return and run for political positions in mayoral elections. Others decided to stay active in the United States, which led them to participate more in local issues, such as demanding quality education for their kids and neighborhood safety, as well as getting more involved with unions, churches, and other types of migrant-led organizations. The last decade has seen the emergence of hometown association members and leaders who are increasingly embedded in a developing migrant civil society. It is now common to observe that the membership of hometown associations has multiple and simultaneous affiliations: they are members of Mexican political parties, local school boards, and labor unions. These multiple memberships have allowed them to exercise a binational activism, engaging in the protection of human rights in the U.S. combined with a concern about the effects that economic globalization and neo-liberal strategies have on their communities of origin. Therefore, although the stereotype of migrant organizations only being active in Mexico may have been true in the past, it no longer holds today.

Within the last decade, Mexican hometown associations have been very active in California, Illinois, and Texas. It is in those states that HTAs are most heavily concentrated because the largest clusters of Mexican migrants are still in urban cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston. Moreover, the strategic location of international airports, better public transportation, and the existence of community-based organizations and foundations interested in collaborating with migrant-led coalitions have also contributed to the expansion of these organizations. Chicago is a good case study for observing the transformation of Mexican hometown associations. In the next section I will focus on the development of hometown associations in the Chicago metropolitan area at different levels, emphasizing the case of the Federation of Michoacano Clubs in Illinois and the Confederation of Mexican Federations in the Midwest, since these cases are good illustrations of the binational transformation of these migrant-led organizations.

In 1995, the Mexican consulate in Chicago recorded 35 Mexican HTAs in the metropolitan area. By that time, there were already 6,000 Mexican soccer leagues across the United States supported by the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad (Thelen 1999). By June of 2006, the Mexican consulate listed 285 HTAs in its database, representing 16 states of origin and the Federal District. These associations are organized into 17 federations and one Confederation of Mexican Federations. The numbers of Mexican HTAs continue to swell and it is estimated that in 2006 there were 815 Mexican hometown associations registered in 46 Mexican consulates.4 The vast majority of the leaders

and board members of these associations are naturalized citizens or legal permanent residents.

The last decade has witnessed a vigorous development of these migrant-led associations. In contrast, membership in many conventional U.S. voluntary associations has simultaneously declined by roughly 25 to 50 percent since the 1970s (Putnam 2000). In an era where the Elks fraternal organizations, Red Cross, PTAs, Lions, and Kiwanis are facing difficulties keeping their rosters alive, the Mexican HTAs in Chicago are spreading across the Midwest with great vitality and high expectations for civic, political, and binational social action. In a recent survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, 4,000 Mexican migrants visiting several consulates to request a *matrícula consular* card were interviewed and 14% of them declared that they were members of HTAs (Suro 2005).

If we consider the sharp decline in civic participation structured around membership-based organizations, from labor unions to social clubs and political organizations, then the rate of participation of Mexicans in HTAs is an inspiring sign. According to a recent survey of Latinos in the Chicago Metropolitan area, it has been observed that civic engagement in the United States is positively correlated to remittance behavior for both first and second generation Latinos, which is also related to engagement in binational social action (Chun 2005).

Nevertheless, Elizabeth Theiss-Morse and John R. Hibbing have recently argued that civic participation in voluntary associations in the United States should not be directly associated with an increase in political participation because many voluntary groups consider political democracy to be messy, inefficient, and conflict-ridden. Members of these groups are quite homogeneous and tend to display a distaste for formal politics. The authors therefore argue that these associations have not usually been credited as promoters of public policy changes. Voluntary associations confine their concerns to practical fundraising projects that support non-controversial goals. The authors conclude that “voluntary groups perform wonderful services and have undeniable value to society, but their effect on democratic politics is tenuous and possibly negative” (Theiss-Morse/Hibbing 2005: 244).

While this argument could hold for many voluntary associations concerned exclusively with national issues, it does not hold that well for binational organizations. The case of Mexican hometown associations and their successful attempts at creating public policy initiatives to address community development in their communities of origin offers evidence of their potential as agents of social change. Between 2001 and 2002, for instance, several hometown associations demanded an extension of the governmental matching fund program for migrants to the federal level, the so called “Programa 3 x 1 para migrantes”. Thanks to the successful lobbying efforts of several hometown federations, the program was officially federalized in 2002. Before that year, very few state governments had formally agreed to implement state-level programs involving federal, state, municipal, and collective remittance funds to address the development needs of many rural towns in high expulsion regions (Escala Rabadán/Bada/Rivera-Salgado 2007).

In the last decade, the activities of Mexican hometown associations and state federations in the Chicago area have diversified. While they continue to address development in Mexico, they are also increasingly participating in domestic issues. Their leaders have played key roles in local institutions such as labor unions, block clubs, Parent
Teacher Associations (PTAs), and the Illinois Office of New Americans Policy and Advocacy. Probably the most significant factor in this change is a new leadership more attuned to interests in the United States, which has promoted more active binational civic engagement.

Binational Civic and Political Participation of Hometown Associations from the State of Michoacán

Although HTAs from Chicago are a slightly more recent phenomenon—at least in their institutional consolidation—compared to their counterparts in Los Angeles, they have also succeeded in increasing their binational activities and visibility.5 To offer an idea of the road traveled in the last 10 years, I will focus on HTAs from the state of Michoacán, which are among the most successful in the Chicago metropolitan area. The Federation of Michoacano Clubs in Illinois is an example of leadership and civic participation on both sides of the border. These HTAs were established around the late 1960s and the first federation was formed more than three decades later. Throughout these years, the emerging Michoacano organizations were able to fight corruption and disinterested governments as a scattered force in their municipalities, demanding more attention and resources for their communities from local governments.

In the last two decades, Michoacano remittances and civic influence flew back and forth along the channels that run between the two countries. For example, migrants utilized the mass media to criticize their state government, both for its authoritarian politics and for forcing them to become exiles in search of jobs. The improvement in the communication channels between Michoacán and Chicago coincided with the political transition in Mexico, which opened the door to the first opposition government in the state of Michoacán in 2001. After more than two decades of hard work to get recognition, Michoacano migrants have been able to forge a strong network of more than 100 HTAs established mainly in California, Illinois, Nevada, Washington, and Texas (Reynoso Acosta 2005). Since the creation of the first Federation of 14 Michoacano HTAs in the metropolitan area of Chicago in 1997, the number of HTAs affiliated to this federation has doubled and there are now two federations in California and two in Illinois.

In 2004, during the state congressional mid-term elections, several current and former migrant candidates ran for seats in the state legislature. The Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) agreed to include Jesús Martínez Saldaña—a former professor at the California State University at Fresno—and Reveriano Orozco—a migrant representative from Nevada—in its proportional representation list. Mr. Martínez Saldaña won a seat in congress, with Mr. Orozco as his substitute, and now serves on the migrant affairs commission in the legislature. He is not a lonely migrant in the State Congress, however. There are at least seven former migrant legislators among his colleagues, who also obtained seats after returning to Michoacán to run their campaigns for different districts.

Besides supporting the inclusion of migrant candidates in the mid-term state elections, between 2001 and 2004 the government of the state of Michoacán made increasing

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5 For a general profile of Mexican HTAs in Los Angeles, see Escala-Rabadán (2004).