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## CHICANOS IN AMERICA AFTER THE MEXICAN WAR

**Abstract:** In this paper a brief summary is provided of the situation of Mexican-Americans in the period from the mid-19th century to the end of the 20th century. Examples are taken mostly from works of literature and some from movies, in order to illustrate how Chicano intellectuals wish to uphold their cultural heritage in an Anglo society that was unfriendly towards them for a long time.

**Key words:** Mexican-Americans, Hispanics, assimilation, Chicano

### Introduction

Today, forty million people in the United States speak Spanish as their native tongue, and their contribution to the culture of the United States is now powerfully present and accepted. This was not always the case. For a long time, from the Mexican War to the end of the 20th century, Mexicans were looked upon with suspicion and a sense of Anglo superiority that resulted in negative, and often grotesquely exaggerated stereotypes about lazy, unreliable and cowardly Mexicans in literature, country and western songs, and even in TV commercials.

In our days, departments of English at colleges and universities pay an increasing attention to the Hispanic heritage and dimension of the United States, or Mexican lecturers are invited, and Mexican studies are now integral parts of North American Studies. Still, a lot of students who come to the institutions to learn American studies, are surprised that the adventure of the Europeans in what is today the United States did not start at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607.

## Greasers and Gringos

*Once I was in this behavior modification programme. (...)  
But you were not allowed to speak Spanish.  
(...) All Hispanics up against the wall! I didn't move. (...)  
I said all Hispanics up against the wall!  
"I'm not Hispanic." He said, "But you speak Spanish!"  
"I also speak English, but I'm not British!  
I'm American! I'm Black! I'm (...) Indian..."  
(Estevez 2005)*

In the nineteenth century, the expanding American empire soon came into contact with Mexico, a country that only recently won its independence of Spain. The U. S. government was ready to buy new territories from Mexico. The scheme that worked with Napoleon, and later with the Russian Tzar, however, did not work with young Mexico.

In the rivalry, the two nations needed some ideology to justify their aspiration for the lands. For the Mexicans, the ideology included the myth of Aztlán, the mysterious cradle of the Aztec civilization somewhere in the north, and their rich cultural heritage rooted in two continents.

The etymology of *Aztlán* is sometimes explained as the 'land of egrets', but linguists now argue that is not fully correct, and the words means something like the 'land of whiteness' or perhaps 'white sands'. The name *Aztec* means 'people of Aztlán' (AztecaNet 2015). Jacqueline M. Hildago in her *Revelation in Aztlán* (2016) discusses at length the importance of the mysterious homeland of the Aztecs.

What is a source of pride for the Mexicans, that is, their dual cultural heritage, Aztec and European, is a source of contempt for the Anglos, who regarded them as "mongrels."

Mexican Americans are essentially Indians and therefore Orientals [...]. Throughout history [...] the Orientals have shown less regard for human life than have the Europeans. Further, Mexican Americans had inherited their 'naturally violent' tendencies from the 'bloodthirsty Aztecs' of Mexico who were said to have practiced human sacrifice centuries ago (Fellner 2002).

This passage is quoted from an official named Ayres, who worked at the sheriff's department in California during the Zoot Suit riots. At one point in his report, he even compared the Anglo to a domesticated house cat and the Mexican to a 'wild cat', suggesting that the Mexican would forever retain his wild and violent tendencies no matter how much education or training he might receive.

The prominent Chicano author, Rudolfo Anaya writes, "whenever cultural groups as different as the Anglo-American, [and] Chicano [...] exist side by side, cultural sharing takes place; but also each group will develop a set of biases or stereotypes about the other groups" (Anaya 1995: 295).

Anaya (1995) assumes that stereotypes are always and necessarily negative; that is what he experienced living as a member of an ethnic minority. In the second half of the 19th century, stereotypes and biases were powerful, and cultural sharing, although also powerful, was going on in the background, as an undercurrent, as an almost unconscious process.

This is not a one-way street. In a lot of things, from cooking through fashion to music, the Mexicans also influenced the Anglos, and they still do. Fast food chains offering Mexican food are now franchise all over the U. S., and also abroad. One of the stereotypical WASP heroes, Clint Eastwood, wears a *poncho* in a lot of his western movies. The land itself, owned by the Mexicans in California was like a paradise:

Between the veranda and the river meadows [...] all was garden, orange grove, and almond orchard; the orange grove always green, never without snowy bloom or golden fruit; the garden never without flowers, summer or winter; and the almond orchard, in early spring, a fluttering canopy of pink and white petals, which [...] looked as rosy sunrise clouds had fallen, and become tangled in the tree-tops. On either hand stretched away other orchards, peach, apricot, pear, apple, pomegranate; and beyond these, vineyards. Nothing was to be seen but verdure or bloom or fruit, at whatever time of the year (Jackson 1970: 19).

George Emery in 1869 also describes California as an earthly paradise, but the inhabitants are unworthy of that land:

one of our prospective neighbors, [...] whose general appearance was that of a parsnip gone to seed; a wiry, straggly, shiftless old fellow, who might have been the Darwinian link between a mummy and an oyster. The "water witch," the person blessed with magic skills in finding water in the semi-desert soil, looks even more miserable: A ragged, dirty Mexican, whose matted hair was a model of cactus-fence, whose tattered blanket served to make more evident his nakedness, an unmistakable, unredeemed "greaser" (Emery 1971: 35).

The message is clear: a modern, enlightened republic, such as the U. S., may not leave such a beautiful land in the hands of miserable greasers. For the Anglo-Americans, the ideology for the conquest was the "Manifest Destiny", that is, God's obvious desire that the Anglo-Saxons spread culture and civilization in the world.

Literature well reflected the general disdain of the Anglo society towards the inhabitants of the newly conquered land. In Stephen Crane's *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky* the Mexicans are only feeble ghosts in the world of the busy yankees. They are no longer involved in the affairs of this land. They immediately disappear when something disturbing happens: "The two Mexicans at once sat down their glasses and faded out of the rear entrance of the saloon" (Crane 1971: 749). There is nothing dignified in their departure; they just vanish. This is a change of lifestyle; a rural, agricultural way of life is being replaced with a more modern, business-oriented urban lifestyle.

It is not surprising that the new Anglo-American masters and governors of the newly conquered areas did not regard very highly the traditional values, occupations and culture. In fact, the Mexican-Americans were treated as *foreigners*. In California, they levied the same taxes on them as foreign citizens were supposed to pay, although they did not cross the border-the border crossed them, as we can hear in one of Rodriguez's movies. The Anglo-Americans did not for a very long time honor the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which stipulates the following:

In the said territories, property of every kind, now belonging to Mexicans not established there, shall be inviolably respected. The present owners, the heirs of these, and all Mexicans who may hereafter acquire said property by contract, shall enjoy with respect to it guarantees equally ample as if the same belonged to citizens of the United States (Article VII of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hildago 1848).

In fairness, it must be pointed out that the Government of the United States did not openly or intentionally breach the contract, as there is no evidence suggesting that the Government supported or encouraged the unfair treatment in any way. Law and order in the new territories in the second half of the 19th century did not offer much guarantee of property or rights to anyone, regardless of their nationality.

In the newly acquired territories of the United States, most people suffered, almost equally. Southerners suffered from the aftermath of the Civil War and the reconstruction, and gold fields in California suffered from an extremely high crime rate. Indians suffered from the land hunger of the homesteaders, and new white settlers suffered from the harsh conditions. There were times, when the Hispanic population was even pleased by the arrival of the U. S. cavalry, as they saw in them the guarantors of peace and tranquility:

[the Hispanics] no longer fully shared their proud forefathers' [...] complete pastoral isolation with all its primitive lack of comforts. They were also tired of wild Indian depredations, and welcomed the new well-armed dragoons of the United States as a much-needed shield (Chávez 2012: 251).

It was, however, the U. S. that promulgated the arrival of so high numbers of immigrants to the new areas that maintaining law and order became extremely difficult. The reason of the troubles of the Hispanics was that often not even the "well-armed dragoons" were able to protect the rights and property of local people from "the ever-increasing number of eastern Americans of every description and profession, all wise in the tricks of finance especially, which kept on coming every year," as Fra Angelico continues. It was those people "wise in the tricks of finance" that deprived local people of property and rights, rather

than the U.S. Government that had little means of directly influencing the situation in California, Utah or New Mexico.

When new mines were opened all over California, and railroad construction, based on steel production and coal mining, was the most important industry, the traditional rural-agricultural way of life at feudal-type family mansions with Indian *peons* and house servants, and the old structure of Mexican society with missions and churches as centres of social life, fitted ill with the turbulent new world of the American industrial revolution. As Albert Camarillo puts it, "The traditional Mexican pastoral economy was being replaced by Anglo-American capitalism" (Camarillo 1979: 14). The "old-fashioned", agricultural lifestyle, the missions and churches, the entire structure of Mexican society triggered the contempt of the industrializing, enterprising Anglos. It did not only last until the end of the 19th century, as some sources suggest. Its aftermath was still felt until the end of the 20th century, reflected in movies, in which Mexicans are depicted as cowardly and lazy people, and even in advertisements. A Mexican *bandido*, with ammunition belts across his chest, huge patches of sweat under his armpits, sprays himself with deo, and the narrator says: "If it works for him, it will work for you!" (Rendon 1971: 8).

Still, though assimilation is only one of the reasons why press, sociology and historiography paid less attention to the Chicanos in the period between the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the 1960s, the emergence of the Chicano Movement, it affected the Chicanos where they were the most sensitive.

The wealthy Hispanics first tried to assimilate into mainstream American society, and attempted to imitate Anglo middle-class lifestyle. As a consequence, the Hispanics lost a lot of their potential leaders when they needed them most. What media attention the Hispanics received was largely negative, e. g. at the time of the "Zoot Suit Riots" in wartime California.

In 1943, American servicemen in California were suspicious of Japanese-Americans, and every other ethnic minority. The "Zoot suit", the colourful, loose fitting suit, worn by the *pachucos* – Hispanic youngsters – was in itself a provocation for American soldiers and sailors. The mutual distrust culminated in riots and violence. Luis Valdez, the first prominent playwright of the Chicano Movement wrote a series of plays about the pachucos. *Zoot Suit* has been made into a major musical.

The "Pachuco Cross", a cross with the rays of the rising sun behind it, is a popular graffiti and tattoo subject in the *barrios*. The *barrio* replaced the pastoral, rural lifestyle for Hispanics as a new habitat. The *barrio* – the Spanish for district – is the place where predominantly Spanish-speaking people live. But poverty is, as Luis Rodriguez (1993: 40-41) describes, just as important a determining factor in the *barrio* as nationality:

large numbers of Asians from Japan, Korea and Taiwan also moved into the area. Sections of Monterey Park and even San Gabriel became known as Little Japans or Chinatowns. [...] The barrios which were not incorporated [...] became self-contained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion.

“Incorporated” means that a town has its own public services and utilities and normal housing conditions; middle-class, as opposed to the slums of the immigrants. In terms of economic competitiveness, Hispanic people were at a distinct disadvantage. Another area where they were at a disadvantage was education. The (Anglo-) American educational system did not recognize the needs of Hispanic pupils and students, and English was, naturally, the language of instruction, regardless how well they spoke that language, or they spoke that at all. This can be illustrated with another quote from Rodríguez’s largely autobiographical novel:

Those of us still in school were expelled. This was fine with me. I hated school. And I loved fighting.

I worked as a bus boy in a Mexican restaurant in San Gabriel when I was 15 years old. [...] It was kicking, hard work. [...] We carried thick plastic trays heaped with dirty dishes, cleaned up tables, poured water into glasses, provided extra coffee—and took abuse from the well-to-do people who came there (Rodríguez 1993: 102).

At that time Rodríguez did not realize the interrelation between the lack of education and low-paid, humiliating work:

Segregation has been, and continues to be, a reality for a substantial number of Chicano children and youths in elementary and secondary public schools. In that segregation practices and conditions are not conducive for optimal learning, it is not surprising that school segregation is inextricably linked to Chicano school failure. (...)

The forced separation of Chicano children and youths from their White peers in public schools has its roots in the post-1848 decades following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Subsequently, racial/ethnic isolation of schoolchildren became a normative practice in the Southwest – despite states having no legal statutes to segregate Chicano students from White students (Valencia 2005: 81).

Linda Chávez<sup>1</sup>, prominent politician of the new right, also condemns Spanish-language education:

Hispanic leaders have been among the most demanding, insisting that Hispanic children be taught in Spanish; that Hispanic adults be allowed to cast ballots in their native language and that they have the right to vote in districts in which Hispanics make up the majority of voters; that their ethnicity entitles them to a certain percentage of jobs and college admissions (Chávez 1991: 162).

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with César Chávez’s daughter, whose name is the same.

Educating kids in the language of the majority is the key to success in society; as simple as that; an argument often heard from those who find it uncomfortable to meet the needs of ethnic minorities and would very much like to assimilate them.

Valencia discusses the segregation of Chicano students at length, pointing out that Hispanic students are more segregated than Blacks, although it is not the least surprising, since Blacks do not have a language of their own. Segregation may also mean that Hispanic students are educated in their own cultural heritage and in their own language. Valencia, however, assumes that Hispanic schools automatically provide "inferior" education.

Piri Thomas (1997: 66-69), a Hispanic but not Mexican-Puerto Rican author, in his *Down these Mean Streets*, describes a series of apparently absurd events, as part of which *all* participants—the schoolmaster, the teacher, the colored Mrs. Washington—act on distorted, false, erroneous assumptions about the other parties involved. They *all* give the wrong reaction to the events, and not one single one of them does anything that would contribute to a reasonable solution to the problem. When the schoolmaster is finally forced to retreat, and the woman and Piri believe that they were triumphant over the white man, they failed to recognize that actually *they* were the ones who were beaten. They were defeated by a near-hopelessly distorted system, the elements and participants of which all work in a way that is entirely detached and alienated from the very people whose needs and objectives they were supposed to serve.

The time is the mid-20th century, and the scene, from page 66 to 69 of the novel, is an excellent illustration of the harmful effects of the mutual prejudice and negative stereotypes and the inadequate school system the only idea of which regarding minorities is unconditional and automatic assimilation.

### **The Greaser Stands Up**

It was only in the 1960s that the Chicano awakening began, largely to the efforts of César Chávez, who launched his farmworkers' movement that later became known as the Chicano Movement. The movement started as an agricultural one, as the organizers worried that it might be considered by the authorities as a rebellious social movement, and they wanted to emphasize their peaceful intentions. Their emblem is an eagle spreading its wings, a symbol not alien to Anglo-Americans.

The movement paid attention to emphasizing their cultural roots and their unwillingness to assimilate the way Linda Chávez and others believe. The theatre of the movement is called El Teatro Campesino, that is, the peasant theatre. The word "peasant" is not often used in American English; farmworker

or farmhand is more common, but for the Chicanos it is accepted term. The mission of the movement is best summed up by leaders on their own website:

From the migrant labor fields to Broadway, Luis Valdez remains true to his original vision... performance that addresses the Chicano experience in America in a context meaningful to all Americans. Valdez's credits include, founder & artistic director of the internationally renowned El Teatro Campesino, council member of the National Endowment of the Arts, and founding member of the California Arts Council (El Teatro Campesino 2015).

Novelists like Anaya, Rodriguez and playwrights like Valdez did a lot to draw the attention of mainstream society, including educational decision makers, to the situation of the Hispanics. An equally important factor in that process has been the sheer size of Mexican (Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican etc.) workforce in the United States economy.

### **Conclusions: In the 21st Century**

It was a difficult and long process to overcome the mutual prejudice, distrust and stereotypes that lingered on for a long time. In Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* ([1951] 2013), Ysidro, a real *pachuco*, of the back streets of San Antonio, has great ambitions: making love with "plat'num blonde" girls. His *machismo* is no longer satisfied by Chicanas – he wants girls with Anglo-Saxon names, "Protestant girls." Ironically, all the names Ysidro enumerates are not really Anglo-Saxon, but rather Irish: Alice Stewart, Peggy Reilly, and Mary Hennessey – these girls may easily be just as Catholic as Ysidro himself (Mailer [1951] 2013: 139).

Even in 1983, Chuck Norris as "Lone Wolf" McQuade, the gringo Texas ranger, single-handedly defeats a whole gang of Mexican smugglers. In the meanwhile the *Hispanic* ranger, defeated earlier by the *bandidos*, is looking on admiringly – an example of Mexican cowardice and ineptness (Carver 1983).

After a long time, while Anglo-Americans dreamed about the exotic, sensuous, raven-black-haired señoritas, the stereotypes made a full circle. In Robert Rodriguez's movie *Machéte*, the protagonist (Danny Trejo), the rugged Mexican, makes love to two "plat'num blonde" women at a time, mother and daughter, wife and daughter of the evil gringo senator.

Hispanic-American literature today appears to be entirely different from what it used to be in the 1960s. The sequels to the great novels of the period were not received as favourably as the original, first work. Anaya's novels following the classic *Bless me*, *Última* did not prove to be successful and, out of the well-known early works of Hispanic-American prose. Luis Rodriguez was one of the few whose sequel to his first work is regarded as good or close to as good as the first novel was. Movie makers also tend to reach back to works that are now

regarded as classic: Valdez's *Zoot Suit* was made into a major musical film in 1981. Anaya's *Bless me Última* was converted into a movie in 2013.

The systematic and powerful organization of the Mexican work force, the efforts that bore fruit by the end of the 20th century, had also commenced as early as the 1960s, when the Chicano Movement emerged. Gómez-Quíñones quotes an event, when in 1966, Senator Joseph Montoya (D-NM) told a group of Mexican Americans that if they would organize, work together, and, above all, register and vote, they could become one of the most politically potent groups in the United States" (Gómez-Quíñones 1992: 102). Powell quotes the *Daily Pacific News*, which wrote "The Mexican is, so far as the development of the resources of the country is concerned, the most useful inhabitant of California" (Powell 2000: 64).

The Hispanic people did not want to assimilate the way Linda Chávez would like them to do. They are, however, ready to integrate into American society, accepting what a highly developed industrial society is able to offer, and preserving their own cultural heritage and ethnic background.

Luis Rodríguez's efforts to catch up with the mainstream of American society seem to refute what Octavio Paz says about the *pachuco* not wanting to become a part of American life. Rodríguez makes it clear when he says, "It's about time we become part of America" (Rodríguez 1993: 212). He does not say that we need to become *Americans*. Geographically speaking, Hispanics have been Americans longer than the Anglos, anyway. *Integration* does not necessarily mean *assimilation*.

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