

TWO  
RADICAL PERSPECTIVES  
ON  
CHICANO  
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Today, American politics is based on pluralist, democratic theory. In this theory, certain assumptions are taken for granted. These assumptions, stated briefly, can be summed up as follows: 1) interest groups make up the society, 2) all groups have equal access to the political arena, 3) all have a method of being heard, 4) no group can hinder the access of another, 5) the state is neutral, and 7) the state cannot hinder access to the political arena. These assumptions, however, hold true only for some groups in this country. For the majority of Chicanos, they really don't.

My own personal criticisms of the pluralist political system in America are as follows. First of all, the formation of interest groups in our society requires some knowledge of the political arena and some knowledge of organization. Many working class Chicanos are for the most part, unaware of interest group politics; few working class organizations exist whose goals are to serve the interests of the Chicano. Secondly, it has been documented by Alan Wolfe and William Gamson, two social scientists, that not all interest groups in our country have equal access to the political arena. For example, it takes lots of money to even join the arena in the first place, and even more to be effective on a state or national level. Not all groups, especially lower income groups, have any way of articulating what their interests are, primarily because education about politics in our school systems is very poor and also because ideologically, the hegemonic practices of the ruling class have clouded the consciousness of the working class by making the American culture apolitical. Also, in the past, the Chicano working class has been hindered from organizing. For example, Mario Barrera points out that in the early twentieth century, working class Chicano miners were were beaten, coerced, and fired from their jobs because they sought

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higher wages and better working conditions. The picture today has changed very little. The state has historically, and still does rule in the interest of the ruling class, while at the same time repressing the interests of the workers of this country. William Domhoff's book, The Powers That Be, and C. Wright Mills' work, The Power Elite provide excellent documentation for this statement.

In the Tucson Chicano community, at least two groups of politically active people disagree with the above pluralist assumptions. In this project, I interviewed representatives from two radical political groups. They were: Lorenzo Torrez, member of the U.S. Communist Party, (also known as the People Before Profits Party), and Pernela Egan, member of Teatro Libertad, a theatre group, composed of mostly Chicano workers. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of radical ideology, as these people see it. Because both persons are Chicano, I think their ideas are relevant for gaining an understanding of how some Chicanos view politics in this country today.

In my interview with Torrez and Egan, among the questions I sought answers to were the following:

- 1) What is your ideology or framework concerning the position of the working class Chicano in this country today?
- 2) What, in your opinion, is needed to improve the status of the working class Chicano?
- 3) What steps do you think can be taken to overcome factional differences among the leadership of the Tucson Chicano political community?
- 4) How can our leaders get more people involved in politics, and how will this be done?
- 5) Is it in the interests of the Chicano to become involved in local, state, or national politics, or is the whole system a waste of time?
- 6) What are your views on Marxist, Power Elite, and Pluralist theory, and

how, in your opinion, do these theories relate to the political participation of the working class?

7) What organizations currently exist for the average Chicano to become involved in here in Tucson?

8) What suggestions can you make to motivate the community into participating in the political arena?

9) What is your view of the role of the Catholic Church in Chicano politics?

The above are a few of the questions I asked Torrez and Egan. Instead of providing a transcript of the interviews, I shall attempt to provide a written text of what these people had to say. Most quotes have been paraphrased and included in the body of the paper.

For Torrez, the Chicano working class is but one part of the larger working class in this country. Accordingly, he says that Chicanos must see themselves within this larger context. However, Chicanos need to form caucuses, pushing their specific interests as Chicanos. For example, he cited the need for Chicano representation in the executive branches of the nation's labor unions.. Currently, there is no Chicano representation at the national level. ( According to Torrez, this is because of white racism and chauvinism on the part of the current leaders of labor.) In terms of culture, Torrez feels that there is plenty of room for cultural and national pride, but that it can become reactionary if it hinders advancement of the working class as a whole.. We need cultural pride as Chicanos, he says, to unite and overcome the problems that we face, but that we must be wary of nationalism and separatism, because these ideas keep us from attaining our goals. According to Torrez, much improvement is needed in Tucson, in terms of raising people's consciousness and political activity. One of the reasons, he says, that there is little Chicano labor activity is that in the state AFL, the ruling body consists of four Anglos, who consciously work to make the workers under their

representation conservative. They also actively fight to prevent any Chicano with radical or progressive views to advance within the union body of leadership. Historically, Torrez pointed out that in Tucson, there have existed conservative and liberal Chicanos. He mentioned that during the Mexican Revolution, there existed in Tucson those who agreed with Porfirio Diaz, and those that favored Pancho Villa. These groups, though they may have changed in the course of time, are basically the same as they were then, that is in terms of ideology. In terms of factionalism, Torrez pointed out that the policies of the Reagan administration have made conditions very favorable for Chicanos to transcend their differences and to unite in the fight for peace, the basis for all unity. He favors working within the Democratic Party to an extent. The attitude, he says, should be one of independence. We should work within the Democratic Party, but on an independent basis, working for the promotion of the special needs of Chicanos. These needs, according to Torrez, include the fight for equality, in education, in housing and in employment practices. For him, tactical considerations are needed. In order to defeat Reaganism, work in the Democratic Party is very important. However, this is a tactic only. For Torrez, the Democratic Party is not the answer, it never has been, nor will it ever be. Participation in the Democratic Party, is but a temporary tactic that is needed for pushing for reform. In regards to the role of another institution, the Catholic Church, Torrez states that it has been forced to open up to Chicanos, largely because so many have left. He sees this in a positive way, and he cited organizations such as COPS and UNO, Church affiliated organizations in San Antonio and Los Angeles, which focus on promoting and serving the interests of the Chicano. Torrez feels that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with religion, but that the traditional ideology of suffering and reward in the hereafter that the Church advocated in the past is what is wrong. He said that there are currently many Marxists who work closely with the Catholic Church, espe-

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cially in countries such as France and Italy. Turning to political theory, Torrez agreed with the idea that there does exist a ruling elite in this country today. These elite are *represented* by corporate monopolies, and the people behind them are the very rich, such as the Rockefellers, the DuPont family, and the Buckley family, to name but a few. According to Torrez, these people tell the President what to do, and they control the Cabinet offices in the Capitol. According to Torrez, Congress is also controlled by this elite. As examples, he cited that the election of Cabinet officials should take place, but that Congress ignores this idea because it is one of the main sources of control for the elite. He also stated that political action committees often coerce liberal congress people into keeping a middle stance on most issues, and that very often minority Congressmen become the targets for right wing groups to harrass and push out of office. Turning to local organizations within the Tucson Chicano community, Torrez admitted that very few existed. However, he pointed out that Teatro Libertad, Manzo Area council, and the People Before Profits Party were very active politically in the community. Specifically, Torrez elaborated on his own party, the U.S. Communist Party, of which he is a paid full-time member. According to him, his party reaches 2500 workers a month through mailing literature and newsletters, and it also keeps up with local and state union activities. Interestingly, Torrez points out that harrassment by the government is not as bad as it was in the 1950's, but that occasionally he is the target of red baiting, by local people and by the FBI. For Torrez, several things are needed to advance the position of the working class Chicano. First of all, organizations need to be formed which advocate protest against Reagan and his economic policies. (He also came up with a few possible slogans, such as Raza Si, Reagan No,) Secondly, Torrez suggested that there was a strong need for education in Marxism, done under the auspices of the Communist Party. This is so, he says, because cer-

tain ultra-left political groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, do not understand the Chicano movement, and that they try to exploit people. He explained that ideologically, the SWP, follows the teachings of Trotsky, who had differences with Lenin concerning the Russian revolution. Turning to U.S. policy regarding foreign affairs, Torrez asserted that the domino theory expounded by Alexander Haig and the State Department is a tactic used by them designed to scare people into believing that there is a world wide Communist conspiracy. For Torrez, revolution cannot be transported, it has to occur within each individual country because of the internal conditions of that country. To him, the world is changing, and the domino theory simplifies that change. One government after another will fall through violence, but the people within each individual country are ultimately the ones responsible for the change. According to Torrez, the relationship between the Chicano and the Latin American people is one of marked similarity, because both groups are victims of U.S. imperialism. He stated that in the nineteenth century, Southern slave owners wanted to incorporate all of Latin America into the slave system, but that the industrial interests of the North had different ideas. Industrialization and slavery did not go hand in hand, but were opposed to each other. For this reason, said Torrez, the Civil War in this country took place. Getting back to political involvement by Chicanos, Torrez felt that the important area to emphasize was local grass roots emphasis on national issues. He is against the notion that local politics should only deal with local issues, because he thinks that the grass roots level is the most important. He also feels that isolating politics state by state is a reactionary practice and that right wingers like to do so in order to take the focus away from what is going on in Washington DC. He cited, for example, the meetings of the Tri-Lateral Commission, and the important roles this and other policy making organizations play. He advocated that an interest on the

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grass roots level take place in order to know just what is happening in the nation's capitol. He said that <sup>(political action committees - Policy Committees)</sup> they specifically get together to plan how they will further exploit the working class, to get more money. He noted that these plans are made on a world wide basis. A problem that Torrez sees in regards to Reagan's policies and his political backings is that the people who have Reagan in power are afraid that he may have moved too fast in cutting off various reforms that had taken place in the past. Now, according to Torrez, the working class cannot buy into the economy, because of inflation and unemployment. He cited this as an example of one the inherent contradictions of capitalism. He also noted that the Reagan administration is set upon breaking the unions in this country, in order to lower workers wages. Turning to Torrez's ideas on Marxism and Marxist ideology, he feels that once an individual has a Marxist world view, he will understand that the political and economic state of the world have a very strong impact on the life of that individual. For example, Torrez stated that in the case of the unemployed worker, what often happens is that the individual tends to blame himself for his misfortunes, rather than seeing that the capitalist system is the reason for his unemployment. One has to see oneself within the whole context, says Torrez, and once that occurs, it helps an individual build a strong character. Torrez went on to describe how a socialist state functions, stating primarily that individual freedom becomes practical rather than rhetorical. In a socialist state, education, employment and housing are all guaranteed, and representation occurs on the local level through the unions. These unions then elect delegates to national conventions and congresses. The delegates, according to Torrez, are directly responsible to the people they represent, because they are voted in by them, and because they work side by side in the work place. Torrez went on to give examples of how the Soviet system

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works, noting that he had been there a few years back. For the most part, it was the crux of my interview with Torrez. Now I shall turn to the interview with Egan.

Pernela Egan is a member of Teatro Libertad, which is a theatre group that is based here in Tucson. Its focus, according to Egan, is on the working class in general, but <sup>also</sup> on the Chicano working class in particular. This is so, because, for her, the working class is a very important power base politically. The main function of the teatro is to agitate people, getting them to think about their social and political positions, primarily as workers. For Egan, what is important, and what must occur is that the working class must take political power into their own hands. What workers lack, she said, is power, and that is why the Chicano in particular, is viewed so badly. She noted that economic power comes from having political power, so therefore, money is not necessarily needed, but it does help. What is most important, said Egan, is organization of the workers. The teatro tries to present plays that working people can relate to, she said, and that the goal of the plays is to raise people's consciousness. Writing of the plays takes place collectively. For Egan, becoming involved in organizations that emphasize the Chicano worker is very badly needed here in Tucson. She views the democratic system, as it is in this country today, as very unrepresentative, and unworthy of the word "pluralist." This is so because of the two party system and the majority rule type of government. Turning to the Tucson Chicano political community, Egan thinks that there will always exist ideological differences between the leaders, but that ideally, these differences should somehow be set aside, in order to pursue the common interests of the workers. In citing the arguments that occurred over a year between Solomon Baldenegro and Margo Cowan, Egan noted that Baldenegro attacked Cowan because she was not Chicana, and he used a purely racist argument against her. Egan felt that Baldenegro was wrong be-

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cause racism on anyone's part is a very negative argument to use against someone. In terms of political participation within the system, Egan noted that it still is very important to become involved, but for her personally, a Marxist democratic state would be better. For her, democracy means involvement by the people, and that in this country the majority of the people are not involved and do not care. They are not conscious, <sup>and</sup> they don't think that their participation in the political system makes a difference. Turning to the Teatro as a group, the majority of the members lean towards Marxism, but not all members are Marxists. General themes that the Teatro has covered in the past include a play about the Mexican Revolution, one about the effects of twin city development on the working people, a play about the Freedom Train and the San Patricio Brigade that turned on the U.S. in order to side with the Mexicans in the Mexican Revolution, and a play called "La Jefita," which dealt with the raising of the consciousness of an old woman as she saw her son get hurt by money hungry goons. Another play, "Semilla Sembrada," dealt with racism within a Chicano family and its effects on family members. "Los Pelados," another play, dealt with the housing situation in Tucson, and with sexism in general. The group performs these plays and also other smaller sized skits. Most of their material is original, with the exception of "La Jefita," which was an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's "The Mother." Currently, there are twelve to fourteen members in the group, with a few more men than women. This group is very visible and active within the community. They see themselves as political activists, and for that reason they perform whenever and wherever they are asked.

In conclusion, I found that these two people had very radical ideas concerning politics in general. I really found them to be very interesting and articulate people, and it was a real treat to get to speak <sup>with them</sup> and listen to their ideas.

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