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"La Primavera del Inmigrante": Media and Voice in the Making of Chicago's Immigrant Rights' Movement, 2005-2006

Set in motion by opportunist politicians for whom anti-immigrant policies were vote-getters, the House of Representatives passed the *Protection, Anti-Terrorism and Illegal Immigration Act (H.R. 4437)* on December 16, 2005. Better known as the Sensenbrenner Bill, this was going to be the "Children of Men" (film) solution to the so-called "immigration problem." If it had gone beyond the House of Representatives and Senate, it would have been the harshest immigration legislation piece in the history of this country because it would have criminalized eleven million people living here without legal documents.

The latest chapter in Chicano and Latino history should begin with the Sensenbrenner Bill for the reason that it served as the catalyst that forced Latinos to close ranks and band together for the first time in U.S. history. They understood that this law was not only a racist attack on the undocumented but also on their community, considering that the undocumented constituted an important component of the makeup of the Latino community. Galvanized to defeat Sensenbrenner, thousands of Latinos marched nationwide in the spring of 2006 and, in doing so, moved the immigration battleground from the halls of power to the streets. More than anything, it was the mass mobilization that defeated the Sensenbrenner Bill.

We don't know exactly how many people participated in the mass mobilizations that took place in March, April, and May of 2006. With activities taking place in 200 locations, millions of people marched in towns, cities, and suburbs during these three months that stunned the country. Around two million people participated in the March 25 and May 1 mobilizations in Los Angeles. Over a million marched in Chicago on March 10 and May 1. With activities taking place in 70 localities on May 1, the Immigrant Civil Rights' movement used the slogans of "A Day without Immigrants" and "The Great American Boycott" to mobilized three to four million people. These actions redeemed May Day, the international working class day that originated in Chicago but had long been denied its political and historical significance in this country.

In this paper I will discuss the relationship between media and Latino voice (agency) as two ingredients shaping Chicago's Immigrant Rights movement. Using photographs, videos, and interviews as recorded components of contemporary history, along with press clippings and my own field notes, I will examine the July 1, 2005 and March 10, 2006 mobilizations. For our discussion on the media and voice, I dedicated more time to the July 1, 2005 mobilization for the reasons that, unlike the March 10 event, it has not received much attention, and it provides us with a beginning point for examining change over a period of time.

In our understanding of the national Immigrant Rights' movement, Chicago is important for two reasons. First, Chicago served as the spark that ignited the mass mobilizations of 2006. Depending on the source, anywhere from a low of 100,000 (mainstream press) to a high of 500,000 people (organizers) participated on the March 10 event. This was the first mass response to the Sensenbrenner Bill and, up to this point, the largest mobilization of Latinos in the history of this country. The event received national media coverage and the visual images emanating from Chicago captured the attention of the entire country, serving as a catalyst that galvanized not only Latino and immigrant communities but also other progressive forces. Soon after this event, the organizers made the call for the May 1 nationwide mobilizations, a strategy that aimed to legitimize the struggles of the immigrant as the continuation of the workers' struggles of the past.

Second, the March 10 protest began largely as a response from the Mexican community to Sensenbrenner but by May 1 the movement had become inclusive with the incorporation of other communities, ethnic groups, and faiths. For the most part this unity was sustained for another year. Around 350,000 marched on May 1, 2007, a figure that was less than the two mega-marches of 2006 but much larger than any other event in the rest of the country.

July 1, 2005: The Dress Rehearsal for the Immigrants' Spring

The Sensenbrenner Bill was the final product of over a decade of anti-immigrant politics that began in 1994 with Proposition 187 in California. During this time right-wing views on immigration, such as those expressed by media pundits like Bill Dobbs, Pat Buchannan, Michael Savage, and Rush Limbaugh, and intellectuals, such as Samuel Huntington, became mainstream. Meanwhile, hate groups like the Minuteman Project gained "respectability" and politicians won votes by arousing fear of the Mexican immigrant in xenophobic voters (for example, Pete Wilson in California). By the same token, this built-up in anti-immigrant politics, especially after 9/11, generated a growing undercurrent of irritation within the Mexican and Latino community. The feeling in the community was that of "ya basta! ('enough is enough')," that the community had been pushed as far as it could be pushed. Unlike the right-wing proponents of anti-immigrant politics, Immigrant Rights advocates did not have direct access to the mainstream English-language media. Denied of this outlet, their feeling of "ya basta!" was manifested in various forums, from Spanish-language talk radio to music, especially in *norteño* and underground hip hop and *rock-en-español*.

In Chicago this penned up anger of "ya basta!" was channeled into action when 50,000 Latinos, mainly Mexicans, marched on July 1, 2005. Unlike the mass actions of 2006, this mobilization went unnoticed even though it was the largest demonstration of people in Chicago since the 1960s. This event represented a mass response to the post-9/11 intensification in anti-immigrant politics. In the case of Chicago, it was a reaction to a Minuteman Project announcement that they were going to organize chapters in Chicago, beginning in May. Ironically, the main Minuteman spokesperson was a misguided Mexican woman, Rosanna Pulido. Enraged by the publicity that the mainstream media was giving to the Minuteman, Father Marcos Cárdenas of Our Lady of Fatima, a parish in the Brighton Park neighborhood, made calls to Rafael "El Pistolero" Pulido (no relation to Rosanna), a popular radio host for La Q-Buena station, challenging him to use his powers over the radio airwaves to denounce the Minuteman. Emma Lozano, of Centro Sin Fronteras, joined the chorus of those who dared him.

Perhaps because of the radio ratings war between "El Pistolero" and Miguel "El Chokolate" Silva of La Ley station, Pulido opened his morning program to the audience, often broadcasting from different Mexican neighborhoods (Father Marcos and Emma Lozano also made regular appearances). For the month of June "El Pistolero's" program turned into an open forum in which hundreds of people expressed their views on immigration. Sensing a decline in his ratings, "El Chokolate" did the same (he also had Rosanna Pulido on his show). In this competition for ratings, both radio personalities endorsed the July 1 mobilization and actively promoted it in their programs. The July 1 event took place on a Friday and workday. In terms of numbers, it was a success as 50,000 people congregated on Archer and Ashland, a meeting point for Pilsen, McKinley Park and Bridgeport, three neighborhoods that are located in the eastern edge of the growing Mexican metropolis that covers Chicago's Southwest and adjacent western suburbs. They marched to the Mexican barrio of Las Empacadoras (Back of the Yards), the community that Upton Sinclair immortalized in his novel, The Jungle.

Upon arrival at the designated site of the march, it became quite obvious that this event lacked the basics of organization, from logistics and crowd security to press releases. To a large degree this had been due to the fact that only a handful of parishes and organizations, such as Centro Sin Fronteras and Casa Aztlan, endorsed the event. The near absence of organization allowed the participants the complete freedom to articulate their own demands that called for family reunification, citizenship for all, better education, and an end to deportations and the war in Iraq. They brought hundreds of hand-written signs and banners in English and Spanish (often misspelled) such as: "Nosotros los niños tenemos los mismos derechos que el presidente Bush"; "I'm a window cleaner. I'll trade my job for anyone who wants it"; "Bush come de nuestra mano barata"; "Somos ciudadanos americanos y apoyamos a los ilegales"; "Legalización: Todos somos hijos de dios"; "Work without borders"; "El gigante no estaba dormido, estaba trabajando." A few brought megahorns and used them to shout slogans such as "No somos uno, no somos cien, pinche gobierno, cuéntenos bien", "Aquí estamos y no nos vamos, y si nos deportan, nos regresamos," "Si se puede," and "La raza unida jamás será vencida."

The near-absence of organization and the spontaneity of the crowd created an atmosphere that resembled a Mexican carnival. Charros on horseback headed a march that included mariachis, drummers, paleteros (ice-cream vendors), and thousands of people wearing white t-shirts, the symbol of protest. The Mexican flag was everywhere and the rally began with the mass singing of *"México lindo y querido."*

Without a doubt, credit for the success in the turnout should be given to the two Spanish-language radio stations, La Q-Buena and La Ley. Their competition for ratings forced "El Pistolero" and

"El Chokolate" to use their programs as a forum on immigration and to promote the mobilization. In the end, "El Pistolero" won the ratings war and over the next months became the most recognizable and visible Latino celebrity in Chicago. Although activists often discussed whether he should be recognized as a Civil Rights leader (he perhaps harbored that illusion), "El Pistolero" came to command a great influence over a growing audience that numbered in the thousands. However, as the signs, banners and slogans indicated, the participants did not come to march in a state of absent-mindedness, following the Pipe Piper, "El Pistolero." In this case, business and politics came together. For "El Pistolero" and La Q-Buena station, it made good business sense to open the airwaves to the audience (the ratings), an undertaking of great significance for it provided "voice" to the voiceless.

Although the mobilization was, in terms of numbers, a success, it failed in making an important political statement (although apparently Senator Edward Kennedy received word of the event and immediately called to congratulate the organizers). With the exception of a few articles that appeared in the alternative Spanish-language and left-wing press, the mainstream media (print, radio, and television) for all practical purposes ignored the July 1 event. The Chicago Tribune did not report on it while the mainstream Spanish-language press covered it as news briefs. In fact, the Chicago Tribune had an article on the Minuteman on the day of the march. Moreover, it did not have any visual impact. It did not receive much in television coverage nor did it disturb the orderly workings of the city since the march took place in a Mexican neighborhood. Ignored by the mainstream media, the demonstration left few historical references for future scholars (only a handful of news briefs and short articles).

Mexican Chicago

In order to understand why Chicago had three mega marches in 2006 and 2007, it is important to examine the make-up of the Mexican/Latino community. Even though Latinos (mainly Mexicans) have been residing in Chicago since World War I, they are, for the most part, a fairly new community. The Latino population grew from 324,000 to 1,607,000 from 1970 to 2004, contributing to 96 percent of the entire demographic growth of the Chicago metropolitan area during these years. Eighty percent of the Latinos are Mexicans (or around 1,300,000), making Chicago the second largest Mexican urban center in the U.S. after Los Angeles.

The "typical" Latino family (overwhelmingly Mexican) in the Chicago metropolitan area is bi-lingual, bi-cultural, and bi-national: English and Spanish are spoken in 76 percent of the homes; 84 percent of the children under 17 were born in the U.S. compared to 35 percent of the adults; and, over two-thirds of all children have at least one foreign-born parent. Given the family make-up, there are few Latinos who do not have a relative, friend, or neighbor that does not have documents. When the implications of Sensenbrenner sunk in, Latinos came out in defense of family and community. In interviews conducted with children and teenagers who participated in the 2006 marches, they reported that they felt a mixture of fear and anger with regards to Sensenbrenner. Anger because they viewed it as a direct attack on Latinos and fear over the possibilities that parents, siblings, relatives, friends and neighbors could be deported. Skribe from Kinto Sol, a local hip hop group, captured this feeling in noting that "as products of two cultures, we have this immense anger (coraje)."

The participants in the mega marches were conscious of their actions and clear on their demands. They came out because they were somehow living with the dilemmas of immigration and all of its dimensions (from everything that illegality implies to sending money back to their countries to sustain their families). Offended by the label of criminals that Sensenbrenner placed on people without documents, they, along with their supporters, marched during work days and they were willing to face the consequences of their actions: from punitive actions, such as employment dismissals, to loss of wages. They came out because they were offended ("coraje") by the criminal label that Sensenbrenner placed on people without documents.

Sensenbrenner, on the other hand, had the effect of forcing those affected by the Bill to search for their own answers on why it should be defeated. A few examples from interviews provide insights on how they dealt with this problem. Adults (regardless of citizenship status and nationality) pointed out that, instead of criminalizing the undocumented, they had earned the right to legalization. That legalization was the compensation for laboring in low-paying work that no "Americano" was willing to do. In a few words an *indocumentado* pointed out the importance of legalization, "we need documents so that we could all be equal." A self-proclaimed Christian from Oaxaca informed me that his congregation held a serious discussion on whether it was right for a Christian to participate in the May 1 mobilization. This congregation was far removed from politics, but for this occasion it found

"answers" in the bible and accordingly "Jesus was an immigrant and Moses went to rescue the Hebrews in Egypt. They were all immigrants." It was this type of awareness-that immigration bonded an entire community- that united, at least for a while, young and old, citizen and non-citizen, worker and small businessmen, Catholics and Protestants, and crossed Latin American national lines. It brought together soccer clubs, churches, home-town associations, unions, community and student organizations on March 10 and May 1.

March 10, 2006: La Primavera del Inmigrante

Once the Sensenbrenner passed, it took a few weeks for Latino community leaders to digest the full implications of this Bill. A handful of activists met in January to discuss ways of responding to Sensenbrenner. Within the next few weeks the meetings involved dozens of activists who met at Casa Michoacán, the headquarters of the emerging anti-Sensenbrenner movement. The activists, representing various community and political organizations, agreed to call for a mobilization on March 10, hoping for a turnout of a few thousand people. No one expected a turnout of 350,000 people.

Once again "El Pistolero" should be recognized as a major force behind the success of this mobilization. He kept the airwaves opened to the audience and actively promoted the event, as did other Spanish-language radio stations. Most of the people I interviewed in this event informed me that "El Pistolero" had been their main source of information. As a messenger, his radio program reached its highest ratings during these months. Moreover, "El Pistolero" reached the peak of his popularity, one that he enjoyed for only a brief time (his popularity went into decline when he withheld, until the last moment, his endorsement of the May 1 mobilization).

Credit for the massive turnout should also be given to the leadership of the anti-Sensenbrenner movement and the organizations that they represented. In addition to veteran Immigrant Rights' activists, such as Emma Lozano and Carlos Arango, a new group of leaders emerged, mainly immigrants from Mexico, such as Artemio Arreola and Jorge Mujica. Although they came from different political backgrounds and experiences, they came together in concluding that the defeat of the Sensenbrenner was the most urgent task facing the Mexican/Latino community. One of the end-results of the anti-Sensenbrenner movement was the creation of the Movimiento 10 de Marzo (M10M), a coalition of dozens of organizations with a collective leadership.

In terms of organization, the March 10 event was the mirror-opposite of the July 1 demonstration. Besides a united leadership, the event was backed by almost all the Latino organizations in Chicago (from home-town and church associations to community agencies). These organizations provided dozens of volunteers who worked in the different committees dealing with outreach, media, publicity, logistics, and security.

One of the unintended effects that a higher form of organization had on "voice" was that it eroded the "*pueblo's*" initiative for self-expression, an impulse that was clearly manifested during the July 1 march. For example, the organizers urged the participants to bring American flags as the symbol of the peoples' loyalty to this country. Aware of the power of the media as a medium of messages and its history in covering past Immigrant Rights' mobilizations (focusing on the Mexican flags), the organizers intentionally hoped to use the media as a tool to change public opinion by projecting the image of the American flag as the flag of immigrants. With that in mind, some organizations distributed American flags. Compared to the July 1 event where the Mexican flag predominated, the American flag was slightly more visible than the Mexican on March 10 (on the May 1 mobilization, the American flag was more predominant).

One also noticed that there were fewer home-made signs on March 10 than on July 1. In fact, most of the signs on March 1 were distributed to the participants by organizations, unions, and left-wing political parties. Thus, instead of the innocence of the lone sign that read "Legalizacion: todos somos hijos de dios," the most common sign was the mass-produced and politically concrete "Todos somos America." Instead of the slogan "Aqui estamos y no nos vamos, y si nos deportan, nos regresamos," the common slogan for the March 10 event was "Hoy marchamos, mañana votamos."

As the first mega march of 2006 and the pioneer of the "Immigrants' Spring", Chicago's March 10 mobilization energized the Latino community and, because of the 350,000 protestors, it attracted world-wide attention. The unexpected mass turnout forced the English and Spanish-language media to cover the event. Consequently, television, video, and photograph images emanating from Chicago had an electrifying effect on all immigrant communities, encouraging them to do what Chicago did on March 10. In a matter of days the Movimiento 10 de Marzo received hundreds of calls and e-mails throughout the country requesting assistance on "how to do" what Chicago had done. Taking

advantage of the moment, the Movimiento 10 de Marzo made the call for the national May 1 demonstrations.

Conclusion

This found solidarity among different peoples and organizations created a new political awareness in which the powerless could gain power only if they acted in unison and only if they forcefully placed their demands on those who had real power. Recognizing the power of numbers, the Immigrant Rights' movements took the offensive and, in doing so, put the great powers on defensive, such as the Republican Party. Big business became aware of the economic might of the immigrants' power as workers and consumers, and the media had to tone down, at least for the moment, its one-side view of the so-called "immigration crisis," a "crisis" that it largely fabricated.

The mass mobilizations of the spring of 2006 captured the attention of the national and international media like no other "Latino" social movement of the past. The mass mobilizations changed the image of the Latino community and of the eleven million immigrants living here without legal authorization. The media had labeled the Latino community as a "sleeping giant," a community of more than 40 million people that was numerically large but weak in political weight. In the spring of 2006 this alleged "sleeping giant" turned into the "awakening giant," a sudden force with the capacities to change the political direction of this country. The undocumented had been perceived as social outcasts who, because of their legal status, lived in constant fear, did not question their social position in life, and consequently did not participate in the civic life of this country. These apparently passive individuals were suddenly seen in a new light: as a pro-active people who demanded legalization so that they could have the same rights and opportunities as any other citizen. Up until the time of the Sensenbrenner Bill, a sign in one of the demonstrations captured the sense of the past, "el gigante no estaba dormido, estaba trabajando."