

Foreword

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November 9, 1989, marked the fall of the Berlin Wall, symbolizing the end of the U.S. Cold War against communism. For some it meant the triumph of capitalism, while for others it signaled widespread intellectual chaos. A much-ignored fallout of this event was the death of many U.S. left mass organizations and the impact that had on populations of color.

Many of the left groups that survived went into a deep identity crisis and within a year numerous parties dissolved. Skeptics blamed the failure of the Left on ineptitude and moral bankruptcy. Others blamed the crisis on the demoralization of true believers who had lost faith in the revolutionary potential of communism to transform capitalism.

Whatever the reasons, the demise of left parties such as the Communist Workers Party and the League of Revolutionary Struggle had a devastating impact on communities of color in the United States. In the face of harsher economic conditions and a weakening of trade union power, progressives became preoccupied with political survival rather than fighting back. Labor was unable to pursue a genuine policy of international solidarity. Almost overnight, the middle shifted to the right and the right became the political center. This dealt a deathblow to the building of a critical consciousness within minority communities.

In contrast to the general disorientation of the Left, the organizations with which the authors of *Viva la Raza* are aligned were able to withstand the fragmenting forces of the 1990s. Both the Freedom Socialist Party and its sister organization Radical Woman are socialist feminist, activist organizations dedicated to fighting racism, sexism, homophobia, and labor exploitation. Instead of disbanding during the '90s, they strove for an intellectual coherence absent in the Left as a whole. A sense of powerlessness did not consume and splinter these organizations as it did the Left generally.

The authors flout political trends in a number of ways. The fact that they use the term Chicano tells the reader a lot about the book. It goes against the current of Europeanizing Mexicans by calling them Hispanics and Latinas/os.

The book is also oppositional in its Marxism. It challenges current market-driven concepts such as the unity of “freedom” and capitalism.

At the core of the book is a critique of the National Question and the Race Question vis-à-vis the Chicano in the United States. The authors recognize that the answers to these questions reveal the essence of Chicano identity.

Alaniz and Cornish use language that their constituency, working men and women, will understand in describing conditions under which Chicanos live. They are especially astute in delineating common characteristics within the group and recognizing that these similarities do not necessarily suggest a community of interests. Looking alike does not always indicate group consciousness.

Viva la Raza states that “a true understanding of the source and nature of Chicano oppression” can be arrived at only through the “*historical materialist* approach.” What unfolds is an attempt to determine whether Chicanos are a nation or an oppressed race. While the book goes into detail in laying out the criteria for a nation, it does not mechanically attempt to force Chicanos into a box. Indeed, it makes the case for Chicanos *not* being a separate nation: another conclusion that will ruffle feathers. *Viva la Raza* arrives at the analysis that Chicanos have a distinct culture but are U.S. nationals not Mexicans. The authors make the point that although the Southwest was the ancestral home of Chicanos, they are today territorially dispersed, with regional differences.

The narrative includes a discussion of nationalism and internationalism and does not simplistically label people. It provides a viable method for distinguishing non-national democratic movements and understanding the nature and effects of racism. The history of the labor movement clearly shows that racism often clouds class interests.

The work discusses the radical Left’s history in dealing with people of color and credits Leon Trotsky with calling for a study of the essential character of the African American struggle. However, the U.S. Left gener-

ally underestimated the importance of race. Its approach toward people of color ranged from neglect to pandering. In many ways, the left parties’ approach to Mexicans mirrored that of the trade union movement. It was not until the mid-1910s that the Industrial Workers of the World forced the Western Federation of Miners to organize Mexican miners.

The authors cover a lot of historical ground. They deal with not only gender but also gay rights. Some of the best material is in the Appendix where Alaniz draws on her personal struggles in the Yakima Valley.

Do I agree with everything in the book? Of course not! I am an activist and as such have strong feelings about organizations within the Chicano movement, particularly CASA (Centro de Acción Social Autónomo) and Texas Raza Unida Party. These organizations had flaws, but were no more sexist or sectarian than 99% of the Left at the time. Because of them, we are today able to see and analyze our material conditions more clearly. Their passion and even sectarianism is missed in today’s Charlie Brown world.

Presently, I teach in a Chicana/o Studies Department of 30 tenured professors, offering some 160 sections of Chicana/o Studies per annum. I live in a paradise where middle-class white kids with rich daddies do not challenge me, where Young Republicans dare not tread and David Horowitz fears to speak my name. However, there is something missing. As upset as I used to get at arrogant young radicals trying to tell me about historical materialism and claiming to be vanguards of change, I miss them. They believed in something besides themselves.

Change cannot come about without passionate feelings. *Viva la Raza* critiques the past and does not go along with the road map. It is an honest book that pulls no punches. Its passion is a breath of fresh air.