

Chicana/o Sun Rising: El Movimiento

Chicanas/os played an illustrious role in the massive social movements of the 1960s and '70s. They fought for civil rights and educational opportunity and led gigantic mobilizations against the Vietnam War. Their words and actions constituted an intense and compelling outcry for respect. At times the movement took on a nationalistic coloration and vocabulary, but the concrete demands that were raised were for *equality*, not separation or secession from the U.S.

The insurrectionary 1960s burst out of the McCarthy epoch, one of the most reactionary periods of U.S. history. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the monumental Black civil rights movement caught fire in the South. Revolutionary in character and integrationist in intent, it proved powerful enough to break down the Southern police state and the iron barriers of Jim Crow segregation. This riveting movement irrevocably altered the contours of U.S. politics and focused world attention on the evils at the heart of Yankee capitalism. Heroic action by African American women and men showed that successful resistance was possible.

Sparked by the Black upsurge, the spirit of liberation galvanized other people of color, in addition to students, women, lesbians and gays, and transgender people. Chicanas/os were particularly impacted because the conditions of their oppression were so similar to those of Blacks. Inspired and impressed by the freedom struggle, Chicanas/os rapidly developed a perspective of their own. This chapter will examine key sectors of the Chicana/o movement and evaluate the extent to which each strove for racial equality or was allied with cultural nationalism.

The youth movement

Some of La Raza's most crucial battles took place on high school and college campuses where Chicanas/os joined uprisings for civil rights and an end to the war in Vietnam. They brought a special urgency to these demands because the right to education was itself an integral issue.

During this period, Chicanas/os were trapped at the bottom of the educational ladder in a system that ignored, distorted and degraded their culture, heritage, language and history. The 1960 census revealed that in

the Southwest the median educational level attained by whites was 12th grade. People of color (other than Chicanas/os) generally got at least halfway through 10th grade. But the majority of Chicanas/os barely reached eighth grade. In Texas, most did not complete fifth grade!¹⁹³

During this period, Chicana/o children predominantly came from Spanish-speaking homes, but they were systematically denied bilingual education and funneled into nonacademic programs. The result was widespread illiteracy at all grade levels. (It is now an accepted fact that without bilingual education, non-English-speaking children will have great difficulty mastering either their first language or English.)

Students were frequently punished for speaking Spanish on school grounds. Those who started elementary school without knowing English were often flunked or put into special classes for “the retarded.” In California in the early 1970s, 40% of the Chicanas/os in classes for the developmentally disabled were there because they couldn’t speak English.¹⁹⁴

El movimiento gave hope and purpose to young people previously force-fed with despair. No wonder that youth moved rapidly into the forefront of struggle. Their movement had several characteristics that gave it particular strength.

First of all, their protests and demands received wide support from the largely workingclass Chicana/o community, in contrast to white middleclass student activists who were generally isolated from their conservative and disapproving families. In addition, Chicana/o youth drew no firm dividing line between campus, labor and community struggles. They felt a special connection to *la comunidad* (the community) and to their families who had made great sacrifices to enable them to get a higher education. Students were committed to giving back to La Raza. They participated in United Farm Workers support and other urban and rural movements, connected these issues back to the campuses, and also organized around issues specific to education.

Storming the college gate

Until the 1960s, the tiny number of Chicanas/os who against all odds made it into college, did so only at the cost of obliterating their cultural identity. But in 1965, the civil rights upsurge forced President Lyndon B.

Johnson to respond to long-ignored demands. To quell a growing threat of rebellion, the government instituted desperately needed social programs, including the Higher Education Act, which provided substantial grants to low-income students. More people of color were able to go to college than ever before, and the ivied halls soon became the scene of unprecedented uproars.

By the spring of 1967, Chicana/o college students in California had come together in groups such as MASA (Mexican-American Student Association), UMAS (United Mexican-American Students), and MASC (Mexican-American Student Confederation). These organizations quickly spread across the country. Two years later, most united under the name MEChA (El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) when the term Mexican-American was rejected for the proud new self-identification as Chicano.

Raza collegians pushed their schools to apply for Higher Education Act grants and then actively recruited more Chicanas/os. The students established tutoring, counseling and other support services to make affirmative action more than a revolving door. They sat-in and demonstrated for Chicano Studies, Equal Opportunity Programs, bilingual education, more Chicana/o professors, involvement in selection of faculty, and classes in Chicano/Mexicano art, culture, and language. They organized boycott support for the United Farm Workers. They collaborated on certain issues with Black students and with the predominantly white Students for a Democratic Society. They participated in antiwar rallies, often as headline speakers.

Chicana sisters were just as key to campus activities as they were to community efforts. Responding to the virulent sexism that permeated MEChA and other student and New Left organizations of the time, Chicanas also began to examine their particular oppression as women of color. They formed organizations such as Las Chicanas at the University of Washington to demand full participation and leadership in the Chicana/o movement. They called for Chicano Studies classes on Mexicana revolutionaries and Chicana writers and scholars. They also led protests against the forced sterilization of poor women and women of color in the U.S. and colonized countries.

Harassed college administrators — under fire by antiwar protesters,

women, students of color and their communities — had no choice but to meet many of the students' demands. These victories inspired the revolution to spread even further.

The Brown Berets

Many radical young Chicanas/os joined organizations such as the Brown Berets, which formed in Los Angeles in 1967 out of a group called Young Chicanos for Community Action. Within two years, there were Brown Beret chapters in 28 cities, mostly centered around college and university campuses.

The Berets were modeled in many ways after the Black Panthers, with whom they had close contact. They adopted paramilitary attire and strict discipline, and served as a defense guard against police attacks on the community. Each chapter was autonomous. Their concerns spanned the *barrio* and campus. Most branches raised demands for equality in jobs, housing, and employment; for bilingual education, a civilian review board of police, voting rights for Spanish-speaking citizens, and the right to bear and use arms against racist attacks. Some Berets defined themselves as revolutionaries. The Los Angeles branch denounced capitalism and imperialism, and called for an open border between the U.S. and Mexico.¹⁹⁵

Highly visible and dramatically militant, the Berets were met with harassment, spying, attacks, infiltration, and sabotage by panicked police. Nevertheless, during the early 1970s the Brown Berets exerted great influence and set an exciting standard of youth activism on behalf of the community.

Blow-out!

Brown Berets came to the aid of Chicana/o high school students when nearly 10,000 walked out of five overwhelmingly Chicana/o and Mexicana/o schools in East Los Angeles during the first week of March 1968. The “blow-outs” demanded an end to discrimination, more Chicana/o teachers and administrators, bilingual education, and facilities and educational standards equal to predominantly Anglo schools.

The police behaved as though the protests were an armed uprising. They broke up demonstrations and beat and arrested participants. Many

Brown Berets who rushed to support the youth were arrested as “outside agitators.”

Chicana/o parents and organizations denounced the police attacks, and added their voices to the call for educational improvements. But the schools refused to make any changes and resorted to the courts to quell the protests.

Three months after the blow-outs, a grand jury indicted 13 Chicana/o college students and activists, including seven Brown Berets and Sal Castro, a teacher who had supported the actions. The felony charges included “*conspiracy to commit misdemeanors*.”¹⁹⁶ It took two years of court appeals before these absurd charges were ruled unconstitutional. The California Department of Education continued to harass Sal Castro by attempting to revoke his teaching credentials.

However, the Los Angeles blow-outs led the way to walkouts with similar demands throughout the West and Southwest. In March 1969, more than a hundred students walked out in Denver. A month later, 1,300 youth walked out of two high schools in San Antonio, Texas. Students hit the streets in Santa Clara, California; Elsa, Crystal City, and Abilene, Texas; Phoenix, Arizona; Chicago, Illinois; and small towns such as Sunnyside, Washington.

In May 1970, young Chicanas/os walked out of a Delano, California high school to protest the administration's refusal to allow a Raza speaker at an assembly. They stayed out for the remainder of the school year. When they tried to attend their graduation ceremonies, they were beaten and arrested.¹⁹⁷

By focusing national attention on the grim state of Chicana/o education, the blow-outs won some changes in curriculum and school policies. And they solidified the unity of Chicana/o parents, students, and political militants.

¡Raza sí, guerra no!

The Vietnam War profoundly radicalized civil rights activists throughout the country. U.S. capitalism's hunger for profits and world domination was exposed as the source of both racism and militarism. In addition, the heroism of the Vietnamese freedom fighters inspired resistance to

oppression at home and awoke new interest in socialist ideas.

Most people of color opposed U.S. aggression in Southeast Asia. But the Black movement at this time, except for the Black Panthers, was highly influenced by cultural nationalism and generally stood apart from what separatist currents defined as the “white” antiwar movement. Chicanas/os, however, jumped in *en masse*. They constituted a powerful and independent wing of the movement and were instrumental in exposing the racism that assigned a disproportionate number of Brown and Black soldiers to the front lines in Vietnam.

In the U.S. Southwest, where Chicanas/os were 10–12% of the total population, Raza youth comprised 19.4% of that region’s Vietnam casualties. Texas Chicanos sustained 25.2% of the casualties from that state.¹⁹⁸

Poverty and racism forced Chicanos to become cannon fodder. More Latinos served in Vietnam than any other ethnic group.¹⁹⁹ Economic need pushed them into the military; institutionalized racism barred them from college and therefore from draft deferments. Almost without exception, Chicano draftees were assigned to combat units. Chicanos had the highest death rate of any ethnic group — twice that of whites.²⁰⁰ Ending the war was clearly a life-and-death question for Chicana/o youth.

Campus activists, Brown Berets, and members of the Denver-based Crusade for Justice became the first of thousands of Raza draft resisters. Chicano college students, who were privileged to be among the few who escaped the draft, acted on their deep-felt responsibility to speak out against the war that was killing their relatives and friends.

In 1969, the Brown Berets formed the National Chicano Moratorium Committee to organize antiwar protests in the *barrios*. Their first demonstration, in Los Angeles on December 20, 1969, attracted 2,000 people. The second moratorium two months later numbered 6,000. (The antiwar movement called some major demonstrations “moratoriums,” meaning they stopped normal activity in protest of the war.)

The movement went national in March 1970 when the second National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, sponsored by the Crusade for Justice, committed itself to organizing moratoriums all over the country. Hundreds of demonstrations took place in the following months, with marchers numbering from several hundred to thousands.

The federal, state and local governments mobilized the police to prevent the antiwar and anti-racist movements from coalescing. Their desperation to halt the militancy was shown by their response to the national Chicano moratorium on August 29, 1970.

The demonstration was held in the *barrio* of East Los Angeles. Chicanas/os from all over the country and their supporters swelled the protest to 30,000. The event was one of the largest expressions of opposition to the war and it was truly a community affair, featuring a large proportion of families and children. Nevertheless, the parade route was lined with cops and the march was tailed by two buses filled with riot-gear clad sheriff’s deputies.

While the rally was underway in Laguna Park, police escalated an insignificant shoplifting incident near the edge of the park into a major confrontation. Five hundred police swept down on the unsuspecting crowd, cracking heads and unleashing a barrage of tear gas. Soon 1,200 policemen occupied the park. Street-fighting went on sporadically into the night. By the time the dust settled, three Chicanas/os were killed, 61 injured, and around 200 were arrested.

The most notorious incident was the killing of Rubén Salazar, a columnist for the *LA Times* and news director for the Spanish-language TV station KMEX. Salazar had recently been threatened by the LA police chief for exposing the death of two innocent Mexicanas/os in a police manhunt. On the day of the moratorium, Salazar had covered the protest and, late in the afternoon, joined co-workers in a nearby bar. Cops converged on the building, claiming to be looking for a man with a gun. They refused to let customers leave and then shot a 10-inch tear gas missile into the bar. The missile struck Salazar in the head.

Everyone fled out the back door of the bar. Salazar’s friends frantically told police that he was still inside, wounded or dead, but the police ignored them and continued to fire tear gas into the bar. Not until two hours later did they bother to look inside.

The cops who ambushed Salazar were never brought to justice.

The violent reaction of the state drove many Chicana/o activists to even deeper commitment to the Vietnamese liberation struggle. Along with a vast number of other Americans, they continued to protest and

demonstrate until U.S. troops were finally withdrawn from Vietnam. In Los Angeles, Chicana/o moratoriums became annual events to commemorate the August 1970 demonstration and its martyrs.

The establishment used brute force in an attempt to break the Chicana/o antiwar movement because it feared that a revolutionary explosion would occur if the social movements of the '60s were welded into a united front. The introduction of cultural nationalist politics, however, proved more destructive to unity than the government's iron fist.

The call for Aztlán

Fervent shouts of "Chicano Power!" and "Chicano Pride!" resounded during the late 1960s and early '70s. The slogans expressed a surging racial consciousness and a determination to quell Anglo domination. They broadcast the radical, self-affirming character of the struggle. Though these declarations of pride and power did not refer to nationhood, many Chicana/o students and activists, along with leftwing theorists, confused the new mood with nationalism.

To some degree, this mistake was understandable. The inspiring militancy of struggles for national liberation in Vietnam, Cuba, Latin America and Africa was well known. Therefore many people assumed that rebellion on the part of *any* oppressed people automatically spelled the existence of a nation. But this isn't the case. As previously discussed, the matter depends entirely on whether the group in question is in fact a nation.

Chicano scholar Richard A. García described the confusion of Chicano pride with nationalism when he observed that in "the 1960s and early 1970s Mexican American youths became psychological and cultural nationalists as well as political and ideological nationalists. It was not until 1972 that Chicana/o youths began to attempt a differentiation between nationalism as a sense of pride and identity, and as an ideology."²⁰¹ Unfortunately, García does not clear up the matter because he continues to use the term "nationalism" to represent both concepts.

Under the watchword of nationalism were lumped all advocates of an independent Chicana/o *identity*. This included militants who did *not* desire a separate Chicana/o nation, as well as those who *did* want a sovereign Chicana/o state, some who urged reunification of the U.S. South-

west with Mexico, and others who sought to isolate *el movimiento* from outside struggles on the chauvinistic grounds of Chicana/o exceptionalism.

Because the same word was used to describe highly divergent concepts and strategies, the distinctions between the various viewpoints were blurred. But, as was discussed in Part 1, differentiating between an *independent identity* and a *national existence* is crucial. Confusing the two concepts introduced contradictions in analysis, goals and program that proved to be disorienting and destructive to the Chicana/o movement.

The turn toward nationalism was an anomaly because Chicanas/os historically have engaged in multiracial efforts or, when necessary, in non-separatist, autonomous organizing. They did not orient to separatism until the end of the 1960s. This shift was a reaction to raw and brutal racism and also reflected the strong influence of cultural nationalism among Blacks.

The magnet of Black nationalism

In the late 1960s, after 15 years of grueling struggle, a large sector of Black freedom fighters grew demoralized. The mass of whites in the labor movement had failed to come to their defense. The reformist civil rights leaders had not achieved victory. Revolutionaries, such as Malcolm X, had been slaughtered, jailed and exiled. Deprived of key leadership, many Blacks retreated into single-issue, separatist, and narcissistic politics.

Black socialist Tom Boot trenchantly explained the impact of this development on the African American movement:

Black militants took this audacious [Black Power] slogan, which never originally dealt with nationhood, and made it into a nationalist slogan implying a call for a separate state. "Black Power" was transformed from a tactic into a matter of program, and its application became an excuse for abstention from and disinterest in class struggle.²⁰²

Stymied mass organizing led to a frustrated retreat that was cloaked in militant posturing. Confrontation with the system diminished. African-style dashiki shirts and Afro hairstyles replaced cogent political theory. Black masculinity was glorified; Black women were excluded from lead-