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The Mexican Influence Shaping Present Culture in Chicago and Modeling Patterns for the Future

by Odette Benitez

(English 1102)

Stepping in the land where the horizon looks farther away, where the soil transpires strange aromas and the sun shines with an unknown intensity, represents an onerous step for any immigrant moving to the United States. Immigrants from around the world choose the United States as the place that will aid them to acquire a higher quality of life; but lately, Latino is the fastest growing immigrant group in the largest cities of the United States, Chicago among them (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 1). Currently, in the city of Chicago, Mexicans, who compose the majority of Latinos, have been moving into the city, revamping their surroundings and the physical and cultural landscape (Holli and Jones 353). This phenomenon has been occurring for several years now, bringing changes to the city and to the lifestyle of people, which at the same time, have provoked heated debates about the right of Mexicans to live on this American soil, and their right to modify it (Holli and Jones 359). It is fair to say that Mexicans have, whether consciously or unconsciously, had a heavy influence on the city and its development through the years (Holli and Jones 358). The Mexican presence in Chicago has positively influenced the life of the residents of the city by actively taking part in the government and seeking solutions that affect the whole community, at the same time that they have shared scents of their culture with Chicago, making it a rich place to explore and learn from and therefore laying the ground for a diverse society that can provide with a wide variety of abilities, knowledge and innovation to the outside world.

Mexicans, who compose around 23% of the Latino population in Chicago, started to move to the city in larger amounts around the 1960's, and since then, the Mexican population has steadily increased (Holli and Jones 353). There is no exact date as to when the first groups of Mexicans moved to Chicago, but it is certain that during World War I, some small groups of Mexicans moved to the city, as finding a job was not an issue (Innis-Jiménez 25). In addition to that, when the Bracero Program—an agreement between the United States and the Mexican government to hire Mexican workers for a limited period of time— was implemented around 1942, many Mexicans lived the American experience for the first time, and some of them were so amazed by seeing the quality of life they could get, that they decided to stay in the city (Jirasek and Tortolero 113). The original agreement was to hire Mexican workers for a certain period of time, bring them legally into the country, and then have them go back home to Mexico, and then eventually bring them back to the cities to work (Jirasek and Tortolero 113). This type of job provided Mexican workers with a good opportunity for them and their families under a legal status in the United States. Even though the workers returned home, they made connections with people and through time, they settled strong Mexican roots in Chicago, and it added to the later influence of the immigrants who came in the 1960's (Jirasek and Tortolero 113).

Most of the early immigrants from Mexico settled in the not-so luxurious neighborhoods of Chicago, as the vast majority of them came from poor rural areas of Mexico, with probably less of what they had in their homeland (Holli and Jones 353). The concentration of immigrants in certain parts of the city was due to the relations incoming immigrants had with immigrants already well-established in Chicago (Innis-Jiménez 27). This process allowed immigrants to have a finer transition from their old life to the life awaiting for them in the United States (Innis-Jiménez 27). Mexican immigrants were able to establish relations with people that also came from Mexico, if not from the same hometown (Innis-Jiménez 26). And although in a scenario where economic

conditions are straining the quality of life of the immigrant, the development of the person in the social environment determined how successful the person would be in overcoming the straining economic situation; at the same time that it helped to create a bonded society connected by a common background (Innis-Jiménez 27).

Although most Mexicans come to procure a higher quality of life, some others move from diverse reasons and some are educated professionals that come to the country to take high level positions in corporations and industries (Innis-Jiménez 29). A substantial portion of the Mexican immigrants that move to Chicago belong to the middle and lower class in Mexico; however, a small amount of the Mexican immigrants are educated people with college degrees that move to the city to take jobs that require their highly specialized skills (Innis-Jiménez 29). Those people coming to Chicago to take those jobs, provide innovative ideas to the people they work for; they also provide ideas that American workers may not thought of, and not because they are not clever, but because Mexican workers have a different background and have lived in a different environment and in a different culture (Jirasek and Tortolero 13). As well as the Mexicans that take the high level positions, the Mexican immigrants that take the low level positions also benefit the economy (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 64). The low level positions are characterized by strenuous physical work, a condition that most people raised in the United States are not willing to tolerate for the minimum wage (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 63). This condition benefits the American corporations by having their labor covered at the same time paying the minimum amount of money to their workers. Unfortunately, this condition partially damages the Mexican workers, because probably they are content with their job— given that the minimum wage is more likely to be a larger amount of money compared to what they earned in Mexico—but some of those jobs should be paid more than the minimum wage (Arredondo 86).

Nevertheless a large amount of Mexicans are working and middle class, and they have contributed significantly to take political decisions that benefit the whole community (Ruthhart and Perez 1). In the recent elections for mayor of Chicago, Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, the Mexican descendant candidate that challenged Rahm Emmanuel— the current mayor who over the years has brought progress to Chicago— was very close to win the election (Ruthhart and Perez 1). Garcia attracted a voluminous amount of Hispanic votes—among them the Mexican vote was the majority— and because of that, he was in the vicinity of becoming the first Latino mayor of Chicago (Ruthhart and Perez 1). This shows how collectively, Mexicans can influence politics, and although Garcia did not win the elections, he was within reach of doing so. Garcia gave a difficult challenge to Rahm Emmanuel, the mayor who has brought significant changes to Chicago and who had the support of many; Garcia also had a history with the people of Chicago, but his recognition was not as broad as that for Emmanuel. Despite that, he was able to almost win the election because of the Mexican-Latino vote (Ruthhart and Perez 2). Mayor Rahm Emmanuel won the elections, he had the support of U.S Rep. Luis Gutierrez, who recognized the “mayor’s refusal to deport immigrants living in the U.S. illegally” (Ruthhart and Perez 2). This shows how in fact, the Mexican community supported the Latino candidate, but they also supported the initiative of Rahm Emmanuel to help the community (Ruthhart and Perez 2).

There are some generational gaps between Mexicans born in Mexico and Mexicans born in the United States; however, Mexicans have managed to conserve their traditions, and they have also spread them over the place they habit (Arredondo 146). Mexicans born and raised in Mexico have a different perception of their culture; as most of them grew in situations of poverty, they have a more crude perception of struggle and hard work with little compensation; and when they see other Mexicans working in the city or on the farms, they see their family, and they feel they have a common purpose (Arredondo 158). In contrast, some Mexicans born in the United States, likely the second generation, who identify themselves as Mexicans, alienate from the Mexicans raised in Mexico and some of them refuse to speak Spanish, the language Mexicans speak (Arredondo 158).

Despite those generational gaps, Mexicans have been able to spread their culture and have an impact in Chicago. In some of the suburbs of Chicago, where there is heavy Mexican presence, there are demonstrations of Mexican traditions, for example from October 31 to November 2, Mexicans in Pilsen set up expositions to celebrate the Day of the Dead; and during those expositions, not only Mexicans gather to appreciate the day, but also people from other cultures, delight with the experience of learning from a Mexican, the most knowledgeable source in the topic (Jirasek and Tortolero 98).

Communities like Pilsen and La Villita —Little Village— have a heavy Mexican influence, those towns are basically recreations of the original Mexican life, they encompass physical places, Mexican customs, and the day to day interaction that brings together wisdom (Jirasek and Tortolero 93). Over the years, Pilsen and Little Village had become towns where the majority of the population, if not all of them, are Mexican (Jirasek and Tortolero 93). In those towns, people have created strong bonds of unity, they have constructed a real depiction of Mexican life, with typical stores, traditions and people from Mexico (D'Amato 85). Walking through Pilsen or Little Village gives people a sense of the reality of Mexican life, as people could go to those neighborhoods and find original Mexican products and experience how life is projected from a Mexican perspective without having to go all the way to Mexico (D'Amato 80). In Pilsen, founded in 1987 by Carlos Tortolero, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, became the National Museum of Mexican Art in 2006 (Johnson 1). This museum exhibits the work of Mexican and Mexican- American artists; and overall, the pieces exposed there communicate history and struggle of Mexicans, but it also depicts success, hard work and Mexican pride on humble roots (Johnson 1). Having those Mexican neighborhoods in Chicago provides people with a different insight about the city, for example, tourists from other countries who visit Chicago, are attracted to visit the Loop and admire the architecture and elegant life projected in it; but they are also attracted to see something different, they are attracted to see the diversity of the city, and because they probably notice a heavy Mexican presence in the city; they also want to explore those neighborhoods which contribute to the physical and cultural backbone of Chicago (Johnson 2).

Just as Mexicans represent one of the largest groups of immigrants in Chicago, they also represent culture and knowledge that influence those around them, meaning other Latino groups and even non-Latino groups (Holli and Jones 347). In Chicago, besides Mexicans, there are other Latino groups, like Puerto Ricans, who also have a heavy presence in Chicago, having therefore a close relation with Mexicans (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 62). For many years it has been said that Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have had an implicit rivalry, because of their cultural differences and the fact that Puerto Ricans do not always share the same status as Mexicans (Holli and Jones 352). Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, in contrast to the Mexican population which is a mixture of documented and undocumented people; this has caused some Puerto Ricans to believe they deserve a higher status in society, compared to that of Mexicans, because of their citizenship (Holli and Jones 352). In addition to that, much of the rivalry between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans has been created by others, not by themselves; some people classify them in the same category —Latino— and they both are, but from time to time, they would like to be recognized by their own specific culture (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 65). However this belief of rivalry is real, it is present in the older generations; younger generations of Mexicans—even those born in Mexico— and Puerto Ricans have embraced diversity more tightly, as they recognize that being Mexican or Puerto Rican —or any other ethnicity— will always be in them, but being Latino requires unity and strength, and they are willing to put up with that situation.

As the Mexican presence is increasing in Chicago, people notice their contributions and the development and cultural knowledge they bring to the community, but there are people who do not regard the Mexican presence as a positive event. Some people believe that Mexicans take jobs that belong to Americans, and therefore steal opportunities from them (Arredondo 56). They believe that

Americans should be the only recipients of the benefits that the nation offers (Arredondo 57). It is true that Mexicans in Chicago take a large amount of jobs; however, some of the jobs they take are physically heavy jobs that a large amount of Americans would not be willing to do for the minimum wage because of the same reason, because they believe that as American citizens they deserve high level jobs (Innis-Jiménez 29). In addition to that, Mexicans do not steal the jobs of Americans, the employers are the ones who decide who they are going to hire. The employment process does not depend on the Mexicans wanting to take jobs, but depends on the employers who want to hire people (Innis-Jiménez 26). Another objection of some people is that Mexicans are spreading their culture widely, they regard that event as a threat to the American culture, because they want the American culture to dominate over the land (Arredondo 55). For example, the existence of areas like Pilsen and Little Village, which highlights the Mexican influence in Chicago, increases the anxiety of some people by thinking that Mexicans are spreading too widely (Innis-Jiménez 44). It is true that the Spanish language is one of the most influential traits Mexicans spread, and some people regard this phenomenon as a latent threat to the entire American culture; and although it is spreading fast, it does not represent a threat (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 146). Americans will be Americans; just because another culture is spreading fast near their culture does not mean they will adopt it, they would find bizarre many of the Mexican traditions and ideas having an ancestry who has not had those traditions. Thinking that the Mexican culture could influence the American culture is not an attainable possibility in current time because Americans have strong values and strong traditions; and although the Mexican culture has also strong values and traditions, each culture is unique to its people, and its people are attached to it by decades of struggle, blood and victory.

It is true that Mexicans are in the United States to obtain a more pleasant life, but along that process they have become involved in the culture, they have shared who they are, their traditions, their food, their people, their language, their ideas and their voice. They acknowledge who they are, but they have come to accept and respect the place they live in, and they have also learned to work to improve that place. It is true that places like Chicago, may not be the place where they were born, but it is the place where future generations—of all races and ethnicities — will be born, and will live, but not struggle as much as we do. And just as the previous ethnic groups that had a popular age in the history of Chicago —Polish, Irish, Germans, Italians— Mexicans are also having a popular age, but that does not mean that they will take over the land, just as the other groups did not. Accepting people with a different skin color and a different background in American society would not mean ceding them control of the land, it would mean empowering them to prosper without societal pressures and empowering them to support the community that supports them.

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