

Toward an Operational Definition of the Mexican American

Fernando Peñalosa

The sociological study of the Mexican American, until very recently almost the exclusive province of Anglo sociologists, is about to be launched into a new period of development that should certainly produce more fruitful, more realistic, and more relevant data and conclusions than have previously been forthcoming. Before we move into this new period, however, we would be well advised to map out somewhat more carefully the population we are going to study. In developing a relatively new field, it is not so important to attempt to produce immediately the right answers as it is to ask the right questions. If we ask simple questions, we may get simple and probably misleading answers, particularly since our subject is not at all simple, but exceedingly complex. Mexican Americans may constitute one of the most heterogeneous ethnic groups ever to be studied by sociologists. With reference to the scholarly study of the Mexican American, we would be well advised to stop trying to find the "typical" or "true," and seek rather to establish the range of variation. Generalizations extrapolated from the community in which a Chicano writer happened to grow up or that an Anglo sociologist or anthropologist happened to have studied can be particularly misleading.

It is furthermore essential that we avoid simplistic either-or types of questions, such as: Are Chicanos a people or not? Do they have a distinctive culture or not? Or, is there such a thing existentially as the Mexican American community or not? Realistically we are handicapped in attempting to answer these types of inquiries in which the alternatives are already implicitly limited by the question itself. A much more productive approach might be rather to consider prefixing our questions with a phrase such as "to what extent..." so that we ask to what extent do Mexican Americans constitute a stratum, possess a distinct subculture, etc.

Scholars, both Chicano and Anglo, have furthermore spent countless hours debating the question of the correct name for our group, and then attempting to define the entity for which the supposedly correct name stands. Perhaps the time has come to move beyond terminological and definitional polemics to an

examination of some of the dimensions along which we might explore our subject in an attempt better to understand its character.¹

The method of procedure in this paper will be as follows. A series of questions will be asked about the Mexican American population. An attempt will be made to answer each one, based on the writer's admittedly limited perception of the current state of knowledge, and to point out some possible lines of future research along that dimension. Someday, when we have approximately adequate answers to the questions posed, we may have a more or less acceptable operational definition of the Mexican American. By way of overview, these questions will be discussed:

1. To what extent do Mexican Americans constitute a separate racial entity?
2. To what extent do Mexican Americans conceive of themselves as belonging to a separate ethnic group?
3. To what extent do Mexican Americans have a separate or distinct culture?
4. To what extent do Mexican Americans constitute an identifiable stratum in society?
5. To what extent is it realistic to speak of Mexican American communities?
6. To what extent are differences in historical antecedents reflected among Mexican Americans?
7. To what extent are regional socioeconomic differences significant among Mexican Americans?²

Let us then direct our attention to each of these questions in turn.

To What Extent Do Mexican Americans Constitute a Separate Racial Entity?

A goodly number of Mexican Americans and others are confused as to the biological nature of this particular group. An Anglo American may carelessly divide people into whites, Negroes, and Mexicans, or a Chicano may assertively speak of "La Raza."³ The recently increasing use of the term "brown" similarly represents pride in the group's presumed racial distinctiveness, analogous not only to the Negroes' newly found blackness but also to "La Raza Cósmica" of José Vasconcelos. Although most Mexican Americans are of mixed Spanish, Indian (both southwestern and Mexican), and Negro descent, a large proportion are not physically distinct from the majority American population; hence the group as a whole cannot be characterized in terms of race.⁴ "Race" is essentially furthermore a nineteenth-century notion that is rapidly becoming obsolete in physical anthropology and related disciplines. In any case, biological differences as such are no concern of the sociologist; only the ways in which notions of race influence people's behavior concern him. The topic of our discussion is therefore what social scientists refer to as socially supposed races. Regardless of whatever mythology may be involved, however, if the majority group considers Mexican

Americans as a race, and insists therefore on continuing to treat them in a discriminatory fashion, then the consequences are nonetheless real: not only the deprivation and segregation, but as the progress of the Chicano movement has shown, racial pride. Not all the consequences of racism are necessarily negative.

Some historical perspective is needed here. With reference to color discrimination, Manuel Gamio noted in the 1920s that dark-skinned Mexicans suffered about the same type of discrimination as Negroes, but that medium-complected Mexicans were able to use second-class public facilities. Even light-brown-skinned Mexicans were excluded from high-class facilities, while "white" Mexicans might be freely admitted, especially if they spoke fluent English.⁵ To what extent is this type of scale still applied in public facilities or in other areas of public and private life, and what social factors affect its application? Furthermore, we might well examine the extent to which differences in physical appearances are socially significant to Mexican Americans themselves. The fact that we live in a racist society, where the primary factor affecting a person's status and life chances has always been the color of his skin, means that it is unrealistic to attempt to sweep an unpleasant situation under the carpet and pretend it does not exist.

To What Extent Do Mexican Americans Conceive of Themselves as Belonging to a Separate Ethnic Group?

Tentatively, at least, we might characterize an ethnic group as a subpopulation that shares a common ancestry and that is distinguished by a way of life or culture significantly different in one or more respects from what of the majority of the population, which regards it as an out-group. Do Mexican Americans conceive of themselves in this manner? If they thus conceive of themselves, what is the degree of separateness perceived? It depends, of course, on whom you ask. But it may be hypothesized that answers would probably fall along a spectrum or continuum, of which it is not too difficult to identify three principal segments: those at the extremes, and one at or near the center.

These segments can be characterized according to varying self-conceptions and variations in self-identity. At one extreme are those who acknowledge the fact of their Mexican descent but for whom this fact constitutes neither a particularly positive nor a particularly negative value, because it plays a very unimportant part in their lives and their self-conception. At or near the middle of this putative continuum are those for whom being of Mexican ancestry is something of which they are constantly conscious and which looms importantly as part of their self-conception. Their Mexican descent may constitute for them a positive value, a negative value, or more generally an ambiguous blend of the two. At the other end of the continuum are those who are not only acutely aware of their Mexican identity and descent but are committed to the defense of Mexican American subcultural values, and strive to work actively for the

betterment of their people. Tentatively I would like to suggest, without any implication as to their "correctness," that the terms "Americans of Mexican ancestry," "Mexican Americans," and "Chicanos" are sometimes used for those who closely resemble the three types suggested.

Research is needed to determine whether indeed such a continuum can be identified, and if so, what are the proportions of persons falling at various points along its length, and with what other social indices these positions are associated. Sample surveys would seem to be one of the most direct ways of attacking this problem.⁶

To What Extent Do Mexican Americans Have a Separate or Distinct Culture?

Mexican American culture or subculture, whatever its precise nature, composition, and structure, if such are even determinable, appears to be a product of multiple origins, as one would expect in light of its history. The focus of its synthesis and emergence is of course the barrio, and it is here and not toward Mexico that we must focus our primary attention. At the same time, we should not minimize differences between the way of life of Chicanos residing inside and of those residing outside the barrio.

Tentatively it may be suggested that the chief sources of Mexican American culture are four in number. First, there is the initially overriding but subsequently attenuated influence of what is usually called "traditional" Mexican culture, the way of life brought by most of the immigrants from Mexico during several centuries.⁷

Secondly, there is the initially weak but subsequently growing influence of the surrounding majority American culture. Mexican Americans are subject to approximately the same educational system and mass media of communication as are other Americans and participate to varying extents in the economic, social, intellectual, and religious life of the broader society. A careful comparison of the way of life of persons of Mexican descent in the United States with that of people in Mexico will help substantiate the notion that the former are first and foremost "Americans," and only secondarily "Mexican Americans."

A third source of influence upon Mexican American culture is class. The fact that the bulk of the Mexican American population has been concentrated at the lower socioeconomic levels of the society means that some aspects of Mexican American culture may have their source in behavior characteristic generally of lower-class people regardless of ethnic group. Thus, for example, the alleged relatively high crime rate (at least for certain types of crimes) among Mexican Americans can perhaps best be explained in terms of social class rather than ethnicity, as well as in terms of the relative youth of the group as a whole and differential law enforcement practices. Apart from the question of Anglo discrimination, insensitivity, and incompetence, Mexican American problems

in education seem to be as much class problems as they are cultural problems. Educational studies comparing lower-class Chicano students with middle-class Anglos are as methodologically faulty as they are socially pernicious. Neither must it be forgotten that class discrimination is as real in this country as racial or ethnic discrimination.

The fourth source of influence on Mexican American culture results from the minority status of its bearers. The term "minority" is not properly a numerical concept (Chicanos outnumber Anglos in East Los Angeles), but rather a term suggesting that the group has less than its share of political, economic, and social power vis-à-vis the majority population and hence suffers from educational, social, occupational, and other economic disadvantages mediated through the processes of prejudice, discrimination, and segregation. Inasmuch as the concept of culture basically refers to the sum total of techniques a people has in coping with and adapting to its physical and social environment, there have been developed some special cultural responses among Mexican Americans to their minority status, as occurs among members of other minority groups. These responses may be viewed as very important components of the admittedly heterogeneous and ill-defined Chicano subculture. An obvious example of this sort of trait is the Chicano movement itself, which is both a response to the majority culture and society and an outstanding component of Chicano culture. But even here the matter gets complicated, for it is necessary to recognize that the movement has borrowed at least some of its goals, values, techniques, and strategies from both the black and Anglo civil rights movements.

It is suggested therefore that Mexican American culture is a multidimensional phenomenon and must be studied in terms of these four dimensions at least (there may be more), as well as in terms of its historical, regional, and ecological variants. It is highly unlikely that all the various strands will ever be completely unraveled and laid out neatly side by side for us to see, but neither must we lose sight of the heterogeneous origins of Mexican American culture, the nature of the varying continuing influences on it, and its continuously changing nature, as we seek to ascertain its differential dispersal, influence, and persistence among persons of Mexican descent in this country.

To What Extent Do Mexican Americans Constitute an Identifiable Stratum in Society?

A number of social scientists who have studied the relations between Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans in the Southwest have described these relations as being "caste-like."⁸ That is, the nature of interethnic relations was said to bear some resemblance to the relations between castes in India and elsewhere. In the United States the situation that undoubtedly most closely resembles a color caste system is the traditional pattern of race relations in the South, with its supposedly superordinate white caste and subordinate Negro caste.

Although Mexican-Anglo relations have never been as rigid as black-white relations there may still have been a resemblance, particularly in certain communities, strong enough to characterize them as "semi-caste," "quasi-caste," or "caste-like." That is, there would be manifested a strong degree of segregation, blocking of entrance to certain occupations, political impotence, ritual avoidance, and taboos on intermarriage stemming from notions of "racial" or "color" differences. Intermarriage is an important criterion, for marriage implies social equality between partners. The idea that Mexicans and Mexican Americans are not whites was certainly more prevalent before the World War II period, or at least people expressed the idea more frequently without worrying whether or not anyone might take offense. The current situation in this regard is unclear.⁹ It may be that the continuing low rate of intermarriage, the tacit or explicit superior-inferior nature of ethnic relations, and the concentration of Mexican Americans in certain jobs and their virtual exclusion from others mean that Mexican-Anglo relations still approximate a semi-caste system, although increasingly less so.

If Anglo-Mexican relations appear to be moving away from a caste basis to a class basis, and the evidence is definitely pointing in this direction, the internal stratification of the Mexican American population looms increasingly more important. With a few exceptions, our knowledge of Mexican American stratification has had to depend so far primarily on the rather impressionistic accounts of a handful of Anglo social scientists. We know that, generally speaking, Mexican American rural populations have less differentiated social class structures than the urban ones; that is, the status spread is greater in the city than in the country. We know some of the variables associated with socioeconomic status and self- and community perception. Much more, we do not know.

Impressionistic accounts and reworking of U.S. census data in the manner of the UCLA Mexican American Study Project have not been enough. Careful original sample surveys to study the interrelations of "objective" stratification variables as well as the study of the "subjective" perceptions by Chicanos of their own internal stratification systems are urgently needed. Only thus will the myth of the class homogeneity of the Mexican American population be thoroughly discredited and its heterogeneity adequately documented.

To What Extent Is It Realistic to Speak of Mexican American Communities?

One badly neglected area of research is the extent to which Mexican Americans have a feeling of belonging to an identifiable Mexican American community and the extent to which their participation in its organizations and other community activities enables us to identify leadership roles and a social structure as well as a body of sentiment. Regional and ecological considerations are of primary importance here. Degree of community feeling and participation undoubtedly varies among such places as East Los Angeles, Pomona, Tucson,

Chicago, or Hidalgo County, Texas, to mention but a few. It varies between those who live in the barrio and those who live outside. Rural-urban differences are likewise significant. Rural Mexican Americans were never able to establish true communities in California, for example, because of Anglo pressures and because of the migratory work patterns of most of the people, according to Ernesto Galarza.¹⁰ The range and variation of "communityness" must be empirically studied, not assumed a priori, both within populations and among a sample of different locales reflecting the differential impact of relevant regional and ecological variables.

To What Extent Are Differences in Historical Antecedents Reflected among Mexican Americans?

To a certain extent, this question foreshadows the succeeding one inasmuch as the principal regional variations have emerged because of different historical antecedents, and hence it is possible to separate analytically but not empirically the geographical and historical dimensions.

The Mexican American population in the United States from 1848 down to the present has been continually expanded and renewed by immigration both legal and illegal from Mexico—a continuously changing Mexico. Mexican immigrants who came, for example, before the revolution, during the revolution, shortly after the revolution, and more recently, came in each case from a somewhat different Mexico. Those coming in at the present time as permanent residents come for the most part from a Mexico vastly more industrialized, urbanized, modernized, and educated than the Mexico of our fathers or grandfathers. How well have immigrants from different periods of Mexico's history, and their children, fared in the United States? What have been the differential rates of mobility and/or assimilation? We should also raise questions about generational differences, and about the differential composition of Mexican American local populations in terms of their historical antecedents. How are these kinds of differences associated with significant social indices, rates of acculturation, and self-perception and self-identity variables?

To What Extent Are Regional Socioeconomic Differences Significant among Mexican Americans?

A number of Mexican American regional subcultures can probably be identified. The historical and geographical factors affecting the emergence of these subvarieties are of crucial importance in understanding their present nature. It is important to realize, for example, that the Hispanos of New Mexico and Colorado evolved their culture in isolated mountain villages fairly remote from Anglo civilization; that the Texas-Mexicans are not only concentrated along the

border but are also located geographically in the South with its unique tradition of discrimination and prejudice; and that the Chicanos of Southern California have been caught up in a changing situation of rapid urban growth.

In all areas of the Southwest, the shift from rural to urban has been a highly significant trend. The overwhelming majority of southwestern Mexican Americans now live in urban areas. These Mexican American urban settlements have grown primarily through migration from the countryside, so that the bulk of the adult residents of those communities have not yet completely adjusted to urban life. The kinds of problems they face therefore are quite different from those they had to face in the small towns and rural areas from which they came. Simple agricultural skills are no longer enough for the security of employment. The kinds of job opportunities available are primarily industrial and increasingly require a high degree of either manual dexterity or intellectual skills or both. The needs of automation are furthermore constantly raising the level of skills required in order to compete successfully in the job market. So the urban Mexican American is pushed further and further away from pre-industrial skills, habits, and attitudes and directly into the modern industrial social order with all its complexities and problems.

At the opposite extreme, Mexican Americans in such a place as rural Texas score the lowest on all the social measures. It is in this area that the permanent residences of many migratory agricultural laborers are concentrated. There is perhaps less social differentiation of Mexican Americans here than in any other area of the Southwest, and the most vigorous preservation of so-called traditional Mexican rural culture.

The Spanish Americans, *Hispanos*, "manitos," or "mejicanos" are the descendants of the original racially mixed but Europeanized settlers of New Mexico and southern Colorado, when this area was under Spanish rule but administered and colonized from Mexico. Traditionally most of the *Hispanos* lived in isolated rural areas and were economically and socially handicapped. In recent years, they have become increasingly urbanized as many have been forced off their lands by the more competitive Anglo farmers, or as mines were closed. Many *Hispanos* left New Mexico and Colorado during the World War II and postwar periods. Many came and continue to come to Southern California and other areas of high urbanization. Here we have another case of attempting to unravel the strands, as Chicano urban populations are increasing in heterogeneity with reference to interstate geographical origins. The sociological study of the Mexican American should include the systematic comparative examination of regional variants of the admittedly hard to define and identify Chicano culture and community (and not just a series of monographic reports, each one on a separate community), as well as the way in which these differences are being gradually obliterated in the urban milieu.¹¹

In summary, seven questions were posed with reference to the Chicano population, some tentative answers given, and some areas for future research indicated. It is not the writer's intention to imply that a series of adequately

documented answers to these questions would constitute the corpus of Chicano sociology. There are a number of other extremely important unmentioned questions and topics that are obviously part of such a sociology, such as those relating to family life, value systems, power relations, bilingualism, education, and many others. Rather, the explicit intention and hope is that the answers to these questions will help in the formulation of a sociological definition of our subject population before we tackle the multitude of difficult intellectual and social questions that lie ahead of us.

Notes

1. The terms "Mexican American" and "Chicano" are used here for convenience as equivalent and interchangeable, without any implication as to their "correctness" or the "correctness" of any other term or terms that might have been used in their place.

2. The careful reader will have detected that the writer's philosophical bias is strongly nominalistic, that is, he conceives of "culture," "community," "ethnic group," etc., not as "things," but rather as labels that refer to abstractions conjured up by the social scientist or others as a convenience in handling the data they are trying to understand. For example, the latest issue of *El Chicano*, a newspaper published in San Bernardino, California, carries the headline "Mexican Community Demands Dismissal of Judge Chargin." This is a figure of speech, of course, inasmuch as if the community is indeed an abstraction, it cannot demand anything; only individuals or organized groups can demand.

3. Readers of this journal are undoubtedly acquainted with the fact that throughout the Spanish-speaking world Columbus Day is referred to as "El Día de la Raza," the word "raza" in this context referring to all persons of Hispanic culture, as it does in the motto of the National Autonomous University of Mexico: "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu." Nevertheless, in matters social, words mean what their users want them to mean.

4. See Marcus Goldstein, *Demographic and Bodily Changes in Descendants of Mexican Immigrants* (Austin: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas, 1943), and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La Población Negra de México 1519-1810* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Fuente Cultural, 1946).

5. Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 53.

6. The writer is currently carrying out a random-sample survey of the Mexican American population of San Bernardino, California, with reference to internal social stratification, self-identification, and perception of community and subculture. I hope that the results will throw some light on these questions.

7. The pitfalls of stereotyping in this area are very great, as so ably pointed out by Octavio I. Romano-V., "The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican Americans," *El Grito* 11 (fall 1968): 13-26.

8. Walter Goldschmidt, *As You Sow* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1947), 59; Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier, Nueces County, Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934); Ruth D. Tuck, *Not with the Fist: Mexican-Americans in a Southwest City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1946), 44; Thomas E. Lasswell, "Status Stratification in a Selected Community" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1953); Robert B. Rogers, "Perception of the Power Structure by Social Class in a California Community" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1962); James B. Watson and Julián Samora, "Subordinate Leadership in a Bi-cultural Community," *American*

Sociological Review 19 (August 1954) 413-21; Ozzie Simmons, "Americans and Mexican Americans in South Texas" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1952); William H. Madsen, *The Mexican-Americans of South Texas* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964).

It may be argued that since the authors of all these studies are Anglos they may have had a slanted view of the situation, yet it should be understood they are reporting Anglo residents' perceptions of the social barriers they themselves have set up.

9. After the 1930 census, in which Mexicans were listed as a separate "race," persons of Mexican descent were subsequently put back into the "white" category largely because the Mexican American leaders of that time insisted Mexicans were "white." Similarly, the Chicano population is substantially the same as the 1950 and 1960 census category "White persons of Spanish surname." Understandably, therefore, the recent emphasis on "brown" and "La Raza" has some Anglos confused. With reference to the possible relevance of the caste model, it should be pointed out that the nature of the discrimination against Chicanos has been primarily social rather than legal, as has been the case for blacks in the South.

10. Lecture in the University of California Extension Series "The Mexican American in Transition," Ontario, California, spring 1967.

11. One of the findings of the writer's "Spanish-surname" sample survey of Pomona was that in every case in which a household contained a "Spanish American" adult, that person was married to a "Mexican American." It may be hypothesized on the basis of this admittedly flimsy evidence that in urban Southern California, Hispanos are more likely to marry children or grandchildren of Mexican immigrants than they are other Hispanos because there are no real barriers between the two groups and the statistical odds are therefore against the endogamy of the smaller group. To what extent this may be true of other areas of the country it would be hazardous to guess.