

Chicano Movement Anniversaries

Marking 50 Years of Struggles

By Roberto Rodríguez

Editor's note: *La Voz de Esperanza* offers this article as an entry to upcoming Chicano Movement anniversaries in San Antonio and across the Southwest. It is an excellent source for Mexican American Studies courses that are now "acceptable" in this state.

The next several years will see a number of 50-year commemorations of the events that helped to launch the historic Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. For some, the movement was a series of legal actions, strikes or huelgas, civil rights protests, and mass rallies and marches, all challenging the permanent dehumanization of Mexican peoples in the U.S.

For others, the movement was a levantamiento, an insurrection or a liberation movement. Whatever it was, it was generally outside of the national conversations on race, though for the right wing, it was simply "un-American."

The movement was never unified in ideology or action — outside of "Brown Power" — though those that took part in the initial uprising (1968-1972) took part in what political scientists refer to as a "primary process," the equivalence of the explosion of a political volcano. This eruption saw the unleashing of pent-up anger, but also the unleashing of creative forces, resulting in the creation of many political, social justice and cultural arts organizations, many of which survive to this day.

The commemoration of those foundational events will give educators the opportunity to teach history to the younger generations who know little of that historic era, outside of Cesar Chavez. It actually has the potential to create many teaching moments and to foment another political eruption, particularly amongst those most targeted by society during this extremely hostile climate.

Some historians will take a more expansive view and mark the mid-1960s through the 1970s as all being part of that primary process, a time in which Mexican peoples in the US finally exploded in fury, no longer willing to accept de jure and de facto segregation, discrimination and in general, a dehumanized status. Others will view this same era as the beginnings of at least 50 years of an ongoing political movement. And still others will see those same 50 years as a continuation of struggles against a permanent second-class status and exploitation that commenced after the 1846-1848 US War against Mexico, in which Mexico lost half its lands and the people their human rights; this while becoming "foreigners in their own lands."

Many people have always believed that in retrospect, this movement would come to be viewed as an Indigenous insurrec-

tion. And truthfully, many still believe that, including that this movement is part of a resistance that began when the first arrows greeted Columbus.

That said, 2018 will mark 50 years since the Los Angeles Walkouts, when some 10,000 Eastside students walked out of their schools to demand educational civil rights and a bilingual and a culturally relevant education. Memorialized as "The Blowouts," they also took place in other parts of the US, including Arizona and Texas.

The year 2018 will also mark 50 years since the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre of hundreds of student activists in Mexico City, many of whom fled as exiles here, later making a profound impact on the Chicano Movement.

The year 2019 will mark 50 years since El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán was crafted at the 1969 Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, held at Denver's Crusade for Justice. It is at which time that for some, the idea of a Nation of Aztlán, on the lands stolen from Mexico by the United States, became a political ideal.

While some fervently believed in the idea of a Chicano nation, for most it was poetic expression or in the spiritual realm, as relative to other liberation movements around the world at that time, steps to effectuate this nation never actually took hold.

It will also mark 50 years of El Plan de Santa Barbara, which triggered the creation of Chicano/Chicana Studies nationwide, and

the creation of student activist organization MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), while creating a "conciencia Chicana." This Consciousness broke from previous generations who saw themselves either as Mexican or as American or both. However with this new Consciousness, they saw themselves as peoples with an Indigenous consciousness that were rejecting subservience of any kind whether political economic or even cultural. 2019 will also mark 50 years since the founding of the Chicano Press Association, an organization that facilitated the spread of that conciencia nationwide.

In 1519, colonizing Spaniards first arrived on Mexico's shores and thus, 2019 will mark 500 years of colonization. This confluence, if 1992 is any guide, may in fact contribute to another one of those primary processes. 1992 of course was 500 years since the arrival of Columbus. Because many of the countries imposed celebrations on Indigenous (mixed populations also) and African peoples, there was push back that continues to this day, a push-back of anything that smacks of or is a reminder of colonialism.

In 1970, young movement activists created La Raza Unida Party, giving notice to the nation that Chicanos were no longer to be taken for granted, while convening their historic national con-



vention in 1972. Also in 1970, the Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional did something similar for Mexicanas/Chicanas.

The year 2020 will mark the 50th anniversary of the August 29, 1970, National Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War rally — the largest Chicano protest in US history. While three people were killed at this East LA protest — including famed journalist Ruben Salazar — it is the one event that most exposed this movement to the world.

In 1971, the first national Chicana Conference was held in Houston, Texas, which was dedicated to the specific concerns of Chicanas. Chicanas had always fully participated in every struggle, though male historians always tended to “white” them out, and issues specifically focused on gender were not generally prioritized until after this gathering. Also that year, La Marcha de la Reconquista, from Calexico to Sacramento, California, was staged, creating a movement consciousness all along its route.

This timeline is actually arbitrary because the National Farm Workers Association — the organization cofounded in 1962 by Cesar Chavez, Helen Chavez and Dolores Huerta — commemorated its 50th anniversary in Delano, California, in 2012. It later evolved into the United Farm Workers of America. While the union never claimed to be part of the Chicano Movement, Chicano movement activists were inspired by it and supported its many huelgas. 1962 also saw the founding of the Movimiento Nativo Americano, an organization that asserted the Indigeneity of Mexican Americans. One of the cofounders was Jack Forbes, who went on to become one of the preeminent American Indian scholars and who published in 1962 *The Mexican Heritage of Aztlán*.

There were many more such historic events; some forgotten, though some have already been commemorated, including the 1966 United Farm Workers-led march from Delano to Sacramento in support of farm workers’ rights in California, as well as the similar march in Texas that year, which was also commemorated in 2016.

In 1967, members of La Alianza Federal de Mercedes, a land grants organization, staged an armed courthouse raid in Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico, precipitating the largest manhunt in New Mexico history, in search of the land grant activist-leader Reies López Tijerina. The event was commemorated in New Mexico earlier this year.

Counterintuitively, the idea of a nation of Aztlán was not part of the land grant struggle, even though that part of the country was the only one actually up in arms regarding issues related to land. Also, in 1967, the Brown Berets were created and soon spread throughout the US Southwest. Well often seen as similar to the Black Panthers, this Chicano organization, while believing in self-defense, was never actually armed in the same manner as the Panthers.

That year, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales of the Crusade, wrote “Yo Soy Joaquín,” a poem that was made into a short film by Luis Valdez of the theatrical troupe Teatro Campesino, which itself was founded in 1965 as the cultural arm of the United

Farm Workers. The poem is credited with defining the idea of “Chicanismo,” which is also arguably the poem that triggered the Floricanto — Flower and song — In Xochitl In Cuicatl — or poetic expression of this movement. Corky and the Crusade, though, were more associated with being the primary exponents of revolutionary Chicano nationalism. It was the antithesis of a narrow and inward-looking nationalism.

Because the mainstream media, schools and government view US history through a black-white prism — as a continual tension between white and Black America — this will be the first time many will learn about these events or organizations that were founded during that era and that continue to survive, such as the Southwest Council of La Raza in 1968, that

later became the National Council of La Raza (now UnidosUS), MALDEF, or the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund was also founded in 1968. FLOC, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, was founded in the mid-60s.

During the incipient stages of the Chicano Movement, the Mexican American Youth Organization and the United Mexican American Students, were founded in Texas and California, respectively, in 1967. Both, along with several other student organizations, eventually merged to become MEChA.

To be remembered is that many pre-movement organizations fought for political representation (MAPA) and civil rights, though they were more integrationist and assimilationist (LULAC and the AMERICAN GI FORUM), as opposed to the later more radical and militant Chicano organizations. Among the many movement organizations created at that time, CASA-HGT and the August 29th Movement (ATM) with its competing ideologies, were reflective of the Chicano Movement. In general, CASA-



(Top left clockwise) Dolores Huerta who cofounded the National Farm Workers Association in 1962 is the best known Chicana activist, even today. (Right) In 1971 the first National Chicana Conference was held in Houston, Texas. (Bottom right) In 1970 La Raza Unida Party was formed convening a historic national convention in El Paso, Texas in 1972. (Left) Floricanto en Aztlán by Alurista was first published in 1971 inspiring a Chicano cultural and artistic revolution.

HGT did not believe in borders and ATM believed in the right to self-determination, including the right to a separate nation.

Anniversary celebrations can be inspiring and educational, but they can also fall into nostalgia (war stories) at which time, succeeding generations can feel disconnected from long-ago events. This is especially true now, since the Chicano movement challenged issues that have yet to be resolved, such as education, labor, civil, human and immigration rights abuses. Furthermore, succeeding generations are now tackling issues that were not openly discussed or prioritized 50 years ago, such as gender and LGBT specific issues. This raises the question: How should these historic events be remembered?

Perhaps a memory project, akin to Denver's Chicano Movement Legacy project is in order, but also to be remembered is that the recall of events will not by itself precipitate a new rebellion. The younger generations must find a connection or relevance to that earlier movement with today's repressive environment.

To be sure, the topic of memory and the Chicano movement is complex. One perspective holds that there was not one movement, but many, each with various perspectives and offshoots. And thus, invariably, there will be many ways in which these anniversaries will be remembered and observed. Because the fight for Chicano civil and human rights did not actually begin in the 1960s, an additional question becomes: In which way was the Chicano Movement different than the previous generations?

Arguably, at least 4 things distinguished this movement: mass protests, a language of rebellion and liberation (as opposed to a language of assimilation), a cultural renaissance and an incipient Indigenous consciousness. This movement precipitated an unprecedented backlash of law enforcement surveillance and violence against its participants. Its bold assertion of "Brown Power" and "Brown is Beautiful" also was not readily accepted even by many within their own communities, many of whom had long accommodated to the point of docility in the face of blatant violence and discrimination.

As documented in the Long Road to Delano, while Mexican peoples had led militant labor struggles before the 1960s,

those actions generally were organized with a worker's consciousness, and not necessarily among racial/national lines. The Chicano Movement, through its mass protests, generally asserted a class or worker's consciousness, but also a mestizaje and an Indigeneity as part of its character and organizing principles. Additionally, the language of the movement was beyond integration, justice and equality; it was revolution, insurrection, liberation, reparations and nationhood.

In the realm of cultural consciousness, it differed from previous generations that had either assimilated or asserted Mexican pride. This pride was distinctly Chicano/Chicana (and now, additionally Chicax). This included being proud of being Mexican and mestizo/a, and yet it had a tinge of a romantic Indigeneity; as in ancient Aztec (along with Aztlan), Maya and Olmec cultures. Only later did an actual decolonial Indigenous consciousness become a part of this movement; that is, in its emphasis on the rights of living and diverse Indigenous peoples and communities — particularly those on whose lands we live — as opposed to those in museums or from faraway lands. Through ceremonial Danza and related groups, many became a part of re-indigenization movements, while for others, it occurred as a result of direct connections with other Indigenous peoples and movements on this continent.

From where I write this in Southern Mexico, amid a history of hundreds of years of Indigenous anti-colonial struggles, there is another view of the Chicano Movement; as a continuation of thousands of years of maiz culture(s) and part of that same 500 years of Indigenous resistance.

Perhaps the better question to end with is: How will it be different hereafter? Akin to Zapatismo — which accepts and aligns with all revolutionary struggles worldwide, regardless of race, gender, ethnicities and nationalities — perhaps by ensuring that many worlds are possible, especially within their own movement.

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...a world where many worlds can fit

A banner for the 50th Anniversary of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission Hearing on Mexican-Americans in the Southwest. The background is a grayscale cityscape. On the left, a large "50" is surrounded by wheat stalks, with a ribbon below it that says "Years Later HOLDING UP THE MIRROR". In the center, the text reads "50th Anniversary of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission Hearing on Mexican-Americans in the Southwest". On the right, there are logos for "300 SAN ANTONIO" and "OLLU OUR LADY OF LAKE UNIVERSITY".

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For more see: www.50yearslater.org