

The New Mexican-Americans in Wartime America: How the “Zoot Suit Riots” and the “Second Generation” Transformed Mexican-American Ethnic Politics

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Abstract

This paper looks at the unique demographic, economic, and cultural state of ethnic Mexicans living in the United States during World War II and how the “Zoot Suit Riots” both reflected the wartime ethnic relations between Latinos and Anglos and influenced the future of Mexican American civil rights movements. In particular, the riots will be examined within the context of the emergence of a *pachuco* youth culture within the second generation of US-born ethnic Mexicans. Newspaper articles of the time and complimentary research will also show how popular public perception of the events affected the way in which Mexican American community leaders would negotiate the ethnic politics of civil rights until the 1960s.

Introduction

One of the most notorious episodes in the history of US ethnic relations, and certainly in Mexican American history, was the so called “zoot suit riots” that took place in wartime Los Angeles. From June 3 to June 13, 1943, white servicemen on leave squared off with the local Latino population in downtown and East Los Angeles in a series of violent clashes that left many Mexican-American youth badly beaten and soured the ethnic relations between the Anglo community and Latinos in Southern California and throughout the United States. The riots were largely initiated by Navy men stationed in Los Angeles, who formed mobs – sometimes with the civilian population – and hunted down Mexican American youth (known as *pachucos*) clad in their iconic “zoot suits” as a result of rising tensions between them and the sailors. Leading up to the events, the *pachuco* youth and their subculture had been the subject of rising Anglo fears over the rampant criminality spreading out of the *barrios* and into the city as this unique Mexican American generation made themselves known to the public⁴.

But what many assumed at the time to be a military crusade for criminal justice was nothing short of a race riot, with Anglo mobs of servicemen - unofficially sanctioned by local LAPD - pulling Mexican-Americans out of theaters and off of cable cars, stripping them of their clothes, cutting their hair, and severely beating them, targeting on ethnic grounds whether or not they were wearing the *pachuco* “zoot suit” uniform. This important historical incident had lasting political and social effects on the future of Mexican American relations within mainstream US society. But how did the

⁴ Leonard, Kevin Allen. *The Battle of Los Angeles: Racial Ideology and WWII*. University of New Mexico Press (2006), p.130

riots reflect the state of the Mexican American population during the 1940s? And how would these events shape the future of the Mexican American civil rights movement?

In this paper, I will show how the unique state of the Mexican American population – but especially the first US-born generation of Mexican immigrant parents (commonly referred to as the second generation) – coupled with the anxiety of World War II laid the groundwork for an eruption of racial tensions in Los Angeles. And, I will show how the public perception of the “zoot suit riots” created by the sensationalistic press affected the future of the Mexican American civil rights campaign in two ways: (1) Popular interpretation of the events placed the blame on Mexican American youth, bridging a correlation between ethnicity and crime; and (2) Popular denial of there being any racial discrimination during the riots on behalf of the servicemen lead to the perception of there being no racial element of discrimination in the plight of Mexican American communities. With Mexican American activists on the defensive against a powerful new wave of anti-Mexican sentiment, they preached uncompromising assimilation as a strategy for civil rights while ignoring the more complex problems of discrimination that contributed to the socioeconomic disparity between Latinos and Anglos in the United States.

Mexican Americans, *Pachucos*, and World War II

By the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor and America’s entrance in World War II, the state of Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans in the United States had changed demographically and the climate of wartime had given them new opportunities as well as created sudden new pressures. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Latinos in the US were faced with the threat of economic turmoil and nativist backlash. Thousands were deported (or “repatriated”) to Mexico, oftentimes regardless of US citizenship, while immigration was virtually halted. The remaining population became largely settled and by 1940, according to the US Census, for the first time in history the majority of US Spanish speaking people were native-born US citizens⁵. Many historians saw the World War II period as an important time for Mexican-Americans, when the political and cultural conflicts they experienced during the Great Depression subsided and gave way to new economic and political opportunities under the banner of American unity thanks to the war effort⁶. But David Gutierrez points out that although the many ethnic Mexicans were US citizens, 60% of the ethnic Mexican population were either unnaturalized Mexican nationals or members of the elusive second generation and not experiencing the same perceived economic or social benefits of the war: “Although thousands of Mexican Americans did begin to think of themselves more as

⁵ Griswold del Castillo, Richard. “The Los Angeles ‘Zoot Suit Riots’ Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives”. *Mexican Studies/ Estudios Mexicanos*. Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer, 2000), p.367

⁶ Gutierrez, David G. *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*. University of California Press (1995), p.117

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Americans than as Mexicans during the 1940s, thousands more remained deeply ambivalent about their cultural and national identities even at the height of the war”⁷.

A large proportion of this ambivalence toward the perceived economic opportunities of the 1940s stemmed from the “problem of the second generation”, from which the *pachuco* gang subculture emerged. Caught between the mainstream of US society and the world of their immigrant parents, the second generation was a unique demographic that represented the first generation of US native-born Chicanos immersed in their own distinct subculture, yet participating in the collective culture of 20th century American mass society in plain view of Anglos. Many became isolated from their parent’s culture as a result of intergenerational tensions that included “language differences, disputes over diet in the home, outright rejection of parental authority, and, at the extreme, juvenile delinquency and crime among US-born Mexican American youth”⁸. The *pachuco* subculture emerged in the Mexican neighborhood clubs or gangs of South Texas and Southern California in the 1930s and spread out to larger urban areas by the 1940s was not exclusively associated with criminal delinquency, but largely emblematic of the second generation’s distinctiveness. *Pachucos* (or *cholos*) were characterized by a hybrid English-Spanish slang (*calo*), tattoos, and the zoot suit, which constituted “long jackets with exaggerated shoulders, pegged pant legs, thick soled shoes, long watch chains, and wide-brimmed pancake hats worn over duck-tail haircuts”⁹.

The Anglo reaction to the emergence of this *pachuco* subculture that eventually reached crisis proportions by the time of the “zoot suit riots” in the summer of 1943, was caused by a fusion of vocal and latent racial antagonisms and the patriotic fervor and paranoia stirred up after the attack on Pearl Harbor. “As tensions and uncertainty built up both before and immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the problem of the second generation contributed to a rapid erosion of interethnic relationships”¹⁰. Ethnic Japanese on the West coast were placed in internment camps and greater pressures to conform during wartime were put on ethnic Mexicans and other minorities as a result of the “highly charged atmosphere of ultrapatriotism, xenophobia, and jingoism”¹¹. But while Mexican American community leaders saw the wartime as an opportunity to unite Mexican Americans in patriotic harmony with the rest of the United States through enlistment and job opportunities in the war economy, second generation Mexican American youth became the targets of Southern California Anglos.

The corrupted trial and sentencing of 21 Latino youth in the murder of Jose Diaz in late 1942 – known as the “Sleepy Lagoon Murder” – came to be seen as a highly indicative case of racial

⁷ Ibid., p.118

⁸ Gutierrez, p.119

⁹ Ibid., p.123

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p.118

prejudice during this time. And although the convictions were reversed in Appeals court in 1944, the sentencing and sensationalist news coverage of the trial heightened interethnic tensions in Los Angeles and helped serve as a precursor to the riots that summer. Confrontations between servicemen and *pachucos* during this time also increased as Navy men became more intolerant of the flashy style and ambivalence of second generation Mexican American youth. Pagan argues that the unusually high density of sailors in *pachuco* areas helped contribute to the growing tensions:

“City planners first complicated the social geography of these low-income, mostly Mexican neighborhoods in erecting a million-dollar training school for the all-white Navy there. Not only did this make all the more obvious the wages of racialized privilege, it also exposed the families in this area to the widespread problem of controlling the often uncivil behavior of military men on leave”¹²

But, regardless of the exact causes and details of the riots themselves, it is the public perception and the impact of the riots that affected the way Mexican Americans adapted their ethnic identity and fight for civil rights during World War II and after.

Public Perception of the Riots and the Impact on Mexican American Ethnic Politics

Despite the “riots” being a series of attacks by Anglo servicemen and some civilians on Mexican Americans, “the events were widely publicized in the local and national press as yet another example of Mexican’s inherent barbarity, hooliganism, and questionable loyalty”¹³. Los Angeles newspapers, including the *Times*, the *Herald-Express*, and the *Daily*, along with national publications, such as *Time* and *Life*, ran headlines describing Mexican American youth as “Marauding Latin Gangs” and “Roving Wolf Packs”¹⁴. Although the violence continued until June 13, on June 9 the Navy ordered the city of Los Angeles a restricted area off limits to men of the Navy, Marine Corp, and Coast Guard. On that day, the *LA Times* ran an article chronicling the “zoot suit war”. Instead of being seen as instigators, the Navy men were depicted as righteous LA defenders “augmenting the work of city police”: “[G]roups of soldiers moved through the district with watchful eyes on men looking for trouble”. The article refrained from mentioning any abuses done on the part of the servicemen, instead itemizing incidents of “groups of zoot suiters” attacking sailors from behind and beating them viciously before fleeing like cowards. Two soldiers were “walking peaceably along the street” when “at least 15 zoot suiters jumped from auto-mobiles and attacked them”. Another innocent sailor was “beaten and kicked by a gang of zoot suiters...as he was waiting for a bus”. It restates the official Navy announcement that described the sailors as

¹² Pagan, Eduardo Obregon. “Los Angeles Geopolitics and the Zoot Suit Riots, 1943”, *Social Science History*. Vol. 24, Issue 1 (2000), p.224

¹³ Gutierrez, p.124

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.125

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acting in “self-defense against the rowdy element” and then goes on to defend the servicemen – “who banded together and took on all persons they found clad in zoot suits” – on the basis that they were “egged on” by “thousands of civilians assembled in the area”¹⁵.

Although the servicemen went on to target Mexican Americans – and some African American and Filipino youth, as well – with or without “zoot suits”, the article in the *Times* is indicative of the changing tide in the press at this time, which in the face of protests and accusations of discrimination wished to deny any racial element of the riots by identifying the criminal perpetrators as “zoot suiters”. After the outbreak, some government and community officials, as well as Mexican American activists, raised concerns about the “racial” dimensions of the situation, but ultimately sensationalist news coverage and even later official reports asserted that racial discrimination was not a factor in the riots while blaming the riots officially on the Mexican American youth¹⁶. This reflected a common historical trend in disguising racial or ethnic tensions in terms of mere criminality, leading to the negative reception of those Mexican American activists who often vocalized socioeconomic discrimination as a factor in their plight.

On June 17, LA newspapers published a statement made by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt at a press conference on June 16. She said that she believed the riots resulted from “long standing discrimination against Mexicans” and that “for a long time I’ve worried about the attitude toward Mexicans in California and the States along the border”. She even went on to say that “race problems” were expanding throughout the US and that “we must begin to face it”¹⁷. LA newspapers responded harshly to the First Lady’s assertion that race played a major part in the riots. They also seemed to ignore the claims made by members of the Coordinating Council for Latin American Youth (Made up of both Anglos and ethnic Mexicans, it was established by the LA County Board of Supervisors in 1941 to address the many problems facing the second generation, particularly juvenile delinquency), the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, and smaller Spanish language and English language newspapers. Leonard points out that these people and other “middle-class Mexican Americans agreed that discrimination against people of Mexican descent was a problem”¹⁸.

On the same day as the *Times* article, the Los Angeles Spanish-language daily newspaper, *La Opinion*, published a statement made by the Coordinating Council for Latin American Youth addressed to the Head of the Office of War Information, the Head of the Division of Foreign Languages, and President Roosevelt. It describes the “Battle Between Marines and Pachuco” as an “unprovoked” attack by marines and soldiers on “Mexican zoot suiters” that has expanded violence

¹⁵ “City, Navy Clamp Lid on Zoot-Suit Warfare”, *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 1943

¹⁶ Leonard, p.157

¹⁷ Leonard, p.175

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.177-78

to women, children, and “black communities”. It accuses the local press of sensationalizing the riots and inciting further violence, which is “prompting racial antagonism”. The statement appeals to the Office of War Information and urges “immediate intervention...so that it moderates the local press which has openly approved of these mutinies and which is treating this situation in a manner that is decidedly inflammatory”, claiming that the situation “will undoubtedly have grave international repercussions which will inevitably damage the war effort”¹⁹. This appeal, however, would go largely unnoticed within the public perception of the riots and the ensuing backlash against ethnic Mexicans in the United States would transform their approach to negotiating the world of ethnic politics.

Defenders of Mexicans in the riots that claimed discrimination was a root cause would be accused of stirring racial agitation during a time of war and often denounced as Communists or even agents of a larger Communist plot responsible for the riots. The California State Legislature’s Tenney Committee on Un-American Activities (1945) claimed that “pursuing the party line on racial agitation”, Communists “continually fed the fires of racial antagonism by charging that Mexican youth in the United States was being subjected to police brutality, race discrimination, segregation, and humiliation”²⁰. The Committee went on to blame the riots on those publications that emphasized discrimination and socioeconomic disparity as the causes of violence: “They played an important part in the agitation of the Mexican Pachucos, both in preparing for the riots and in keeping the issue alive when the violence had ceased”²¹.

This renewed hostility toward ethnic Mexicans forced many Mexican-American activists and community leaders into defensive positions. The apparent social and economic benefits of wartime America had been curtailed by the nativist backlash against the distinctively *pachuco* subculture of the second generation and the renewed ethnic antagonism that followed the riots. But because attempts to address discrimination as a factor in the socioeconomic disparity affecting much of the Mexican-American population would be perceived as disruptive during a time of war, many activists continued to champion an ineffectual campaign for civil rights that ignored these factors. They employed wartime rhetoric that focused on the loyalty and “American-ness” of the Mexican American community, usually expressing “explicitly assimilationist rhetoric that emphasized American patriotism as well as the critical need for pan-American unity during wartime”²².

And while this strategy allowed for some successes and gains in the Mexican American civil rights movement during the 1950s, the denial of discrimination as a cause for the desperate socioeconomic conditions of many and the suppression of a distinctive Chicano culture that lay at

¹⁹ “The Battle Between Marines and Pachucos”, *La Opinion*, June 9, 1943

²⁰ Gutierrez, p.126

²¹ Griswold del Castillo, p.384

²² Gutierrez, p.128

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the heart of the “problem of the second generation” would still threaten the possibility of having a meaningful debate over Mexican American ethnic politics. The assimilationist approach to civil rights would become even more ineffective as anti-Mexican sentiments in the United States grew as the effects of the *bracero* guest worker program (which began as the Emergency Farm Labor Program in 1942) became more noticeable. New waves of Mexican immigration as a result of this program led to the mass settlement of more unnaturalized Mexican nationals and contradictory mass deportation (like “Operation Wetback”) took place during the 1950s as a result of growing public concerns. It would not be until the strong Chicano and Mexican American student movements of the late 1960s that Mexican American activists changed their strategy by embracing their unique *chicano* culture that began with the first second generation of zoot-suited *pachucos*.

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