César E. Chávez, Mexican American History, and the History-Social Science Curriculum

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The study of the life and works of César E. Chávez provides an opportunity to incorporate into the school curriculum not only a notable individual who made significant contributions to our society, but also the Mexican American history that provides the context for his life. The significance of this should not be minimized, particularly if we consider that historically Mexican Americans have engaged in political campaigns to assure their inclusion in public school curricula and textbooks. In addition, there is the pedagogical importance of presenting the stories of people who are like a significant portion of students in our schools. The life and work of César E. Chávez offers many examples of his personal qualities of perseverance and determination, as well as his sharp understanding of our nation's social and political institutions. These personal qualities were demonstrated through his actions as he articulated the experiences not only of farm workers, but of all working people, and challenged the powerful to be accountable for their actions. Nevertheless, it would be unfortunate if we incorporated César E. Chávez the man into our school curriculum, but neglected to give attention to his cultural and historical context.

Thirty years ago, during the height of the Chicano Movement, Chicanos were criticizing the way their culture and history was both excluded and distorted by mainstream historical and social science studies. This included their absence,

or marginal position in textbooks and school curricula. For the Movement, knowledge about our history and culture was an important component in a program of empowerment, individually and as a group. However, scholars validated the critique and began to recognize that the response could not be simple additions or corrections. That is, the problem was conceptual, because most studies were conducted from the viewpoint of the dominant culture, and hence the Mexican American could only be examined from that perspective and in terms and values devised by the dominant culture. Increasingly, it came to be recognized that specific rhetorical measures were necessary to shift the focus so that marginal groups, like the Mexican American, could be included. For example, in considering the history of America, the extension of the time frame to include the period before the arrival of Europeans could become a way to re-conceptualize our understanding of the historical development of America. Another example is the extension of what we might consider as valid evidence for historical and social scientific studies. Including myths and oral traditions becomes a way of including other perspectives.

The value of these efforts to develop our historical understanding and our views about our diverse society has now been recognized by major professional academic organizations. The Organization of American Historians recently issued a report on their efforts to encourage an international perspective for the comprehension of U.S. history. In essence, they have proposed extending the geographical context for U.S. history as a way to include diverse cultural perspectives, and the common ties that bind us together. In a similar fashion, the

American Studies Association recently supported collaborative efforts to reconsider the typical undergraduate U.S. history course. American Studies takes a more multidisciplinary approach to U.S. history so they draw on various forms of "evidence" from political acts to cultural productions, but they shared the goal of devising a conceptual narrative that was inclusive. Their efforts have been encouraging, yet it must be recognized that it remains a challenge to encompass the diversity of America in a narrative that provides a basis for understanding, yet recognizes the multiplicity of perspectives and does not privilege any one.

The public holiday to honor César E. Chávez and the development of a curriculum based on his life and work presents another opportunity to advance these efforts, and especially by placing the man into the historical and social context. His life spanned most of the twentieth century, a period of significant developments in Mexican American history. The history-social science curriculum framework provides many opportunities to unite the study of the man with an understanding of Mexican American history and culture. Utilizing this approach to make these connections can provide a more complete understanding of the man, and avoid creating a distant hero figure disconnected from a world of real issues.

For example, an examination of the family into which Chávez was born and the circumstances of his early life and youth can open a door to Mexican American history of the early twentieth century. This period, up to the 1930s, was one of great transformations in Mexican American communities in California

and the Southwest because of political revolution in México, and rapid economic development in the U.S. The conversion of vast areas in California and Texas to commercial agriculture during the first decades of the century created a demand for labor, particularly a mobile, temporary work force. Mexican immigration increased dramatically after 1910, and by the 1920s social scientists had begun to identify and study the Mexican American population. These early studies frequently focused on the poverty, substandard living conditions, and culture of the recent immigrants who were swelling the size of urban barrios.

More recent scholarship has re-conceptualized this period emphasizing the social process identified as ethnic identity formation being negotiated by Mexican Americans within the larger U.S. culture. This approach makes use of racial formation theory that emphasizes the historical social construction of ethnic identity. Attention is given to how Mexican Americans, and especially immigrants, adapted Mexican cultural practices and combined them with U.S. culture to create an ethnic identity. Through a variety of organizations in cities and towns from California to Texas, Mexican Americans would attempt to define an ethnic identity in relation to the larger community, and attempt to secure equal rights and treatment in public and commercial establishments. Examples can be found in many areas of social activity, the mutual aid societies or *mutualistas*, the civic and patriotic organizations, civil rights organizations, education advocacy groups, student groups, labor unions and religious organizations.

This enlarged understanding of the development of the Mexican American community, and particularly how ethnic organizations were influencing values

and behavior, provides a potentially rich environment in which to appreciate the early development of César E. Chávez. One historian has used the phrase "Mexican American generation" to identify the many Mexican Americans who, by this period, had been born and/or raised on this side of the border and were creating a hybrid identity. They had no memories of México, considered themselves "Americans," and saw their future in this country. On the basis of this identity formation, this generation would experience the contradiction between their status as citizens, and their de facto treatment by society. Using their rights as citizens, this generation would take up organized challenges to segregation and discrimination.

Although this may have characterized the general social climate for the young Chávez, it would be especially important to consider the activities of labor unions during this period. More recent scholarship has attempted to make connections between Mexican American workers, and labor organizations in Mexico. This view calls to our attention the fact that by the late nineteenth century a significant industrial and agricultural laboring class had developed in Mexico. Sánchez, in particular, emphasizes how U.S. financed railroad construction in México during the nineteenth century increased the proportion of wage labor and other effects of the international market economy in northern México, where many immigrants to the U.S. began their journey. Closely related is the development of the Partido Liberal in México and the work of Enrique and Ricardo Flores Magón during the first decades of the twentieth century. Their

radical perspective included a critique of capitalism and supported organized labor.

This background enhances our understanding of Chávez's own experiences in the agricultural labor organizations of his youth as a farm worker. Despite a long history as industrial workers and an organizing tradition influenced by radical ideas supported by the Mexican Revolution, Mexican American workers were unable to sustain agricultural labor unions. During the 1930s, a number of significant Mexican American agricultural labor strikes took place in various parts of California, including Los Angeles County, the San Joaquin Valley and Imperial Valley. Growers attempting to enforce their low wage policy used extreme political pressure and even violence against the Mexican American strikers. Chávez's commitment to social justice and to organizing Mexican American agricultural workers can be viewed now as more than reflections of his character and personality, but how he was rooted in the historical context.

A similar approach could be taken to the later period of his life after World War II, but particularly the 1950s to early 1970s. The wartime military service of veterans and their decorated valor provided an additional reason for the "Mexican American generation" to claim their full citizenship rights of equality under the law. The American G.I. Forum was founded specifically for this purpose. Meanwhile, older organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) that traced its origins to the early 1920s, made renewed efforts to use the legal system to challenge segregation, particularly school segregation. In addition, it was during this period that Mexican Americans

began to play a more important role in electoral politics. The election in 1949 of Ed Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council is a particularly relevant example because of the Community Service Organization (CSO) involvement. The local CSO was organized in Los Angeles after Roybal's unsuccessful run for City Council in 1947. This is the same organization that would later employ Chávez in its San Jose chapter. Using voter registration and education along with mutual benefit type activities and services like credit unions and buying clubs, the CSO organized poor Mexican American barrios to take on civic issues affecting them by using the political system. The Mexican American Political Association had been organized by 1960 and through it Mexican Americans played active roles in a presidential campaign by one of the major parties for the first time. Some have suggested that it was the failure of the victorious Democrats to significantly include Mexican American representation in the new administration that fed the frustrations that were sparked by the Chicano Movement in the 1960s.

Whatever its causes, the Chicano Movement represented a new development in Mexican American history. This new generation appeared to overturn the outlook and approach of the earlier "Mexican American generation." While the earlier generation had made every effort to identify itself with the dominant culture, the Chicanos created a distinct identity that recalled Mexican and indigenous roots. The earlier generation made use of the legal system to advance their claims; the Chicanos used direct action and civil disobedience. Scholars might use the political party La Raza Unida or the student organization Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán as examples to illustrate the new

political identity. Despite the variety of these organizations, they shared a common attitude toward the dominant political system and culture. Whereas the earlier generation had faith in the universality of U.S. political values and sought by legal means to have them extended to include Mexican Americans, the Chicano saw a corrupt and oppressive system that systematically exploited and rendered powerless the Mexican American communities.

The shifting political identity among Mexican Americans was developing in an atmosphere of political disappointment with existing organizations. Chávez's decision to break with the CSO and to begin organizing Mexican American farm workers can be understood in this context. While the union he founded might not be considered, strictly speaking, part of the Chicano Movement, and in fact would later have its disagreements with Chicano groups over political questions, particularly immigration, it was nevertheless closely connected by the values they expressed. Chávez saw the necessity for Mexican Americans to form and control their own organizations, a value he shared with the Chicano Movement that worked hard to establish independent and community-based organizations. Chávez recognized the value of Mexican cultural images, including the indigenous, to organizing and motivating people to action; once again this is a characteristic he shared with the Chicano Movement.

The History-Social Science Framework provides the opportunities to incorporate the topics in Mexican American history that have been identified, and in honoring and remembering the life and work of César E. Chávez they take on special significance. The values he held most important, social justice, equality,

spirituality and nonviolence, and his historic accomplishments while finding expression through his unique personality are ultimately rooted in the Mexican American history that he experienced. It is through an understanding of that history that we can gain a greater appreciation for his life and accomplishments because we are able to see how they were possible because of what had come before. The Mexican American history of identity formation and struggle against segregation and discrimination had laid a foundation upon which César E. Chávez would build a lasting legacy for the exploited and powerless.

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