

MEXICAN AMERICANS: THE AMBIVALENT MINORITY

Peter Skerry

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reviewed by TIM W. FERGUSON

This Independence Day, the *New York Times* revived the idea that Hispanics might be shifting to the GOP. The peg for this story was the 43 percent of the Mexican-American vote that helped Richard Riordan win the Los Angeles mayoralty. The notion is premature at best. For one thing, the circumstances were unusual—Riordan, a Catholic Republican, was opposed by a Chinese-American Democrat who banked his hopes on black precincts and took Latinos for granted. More important, the turnout among Mexican-Americans was even lower than usual; the *L.A. Weekly* figured them at 10 percent of the electorate, barely above what they'd been in 1973, before their numbers in L.A. tripled.

Near the end of the *Times* story was a discordant quote from Peter Skerry, director of UCLA's Washington program, who observed that the group in question was basically working-class and Democrat. Skerry could have said more—and has. In *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority*, he paints a complex picture of an ethnic bloc whose history of being exploited now includes a skillful appropriation by the political left.

The Spanish-surnamed elite that is now steering this group toward "racial claimant politics" must overcome the deep-seated conservatism of the masses, Skerry says, but manipulation by

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the professional and intellectual few is frequently successful. Comparing San Antonio (where Mexican influence is relatively ingrained and stable) with Los Angeles (where the foreign-born percentage of population is four times that of San Antonio), Skerry argues that the latter environment invites ideological misrepresentation. Among the villains are an electoral machine that virtually anoints representatives for L.A.'s Latino areas, grievance-oriented national organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF); and activism on campuses that are still a "safe haven" for 1960s-style militancy.

Fundamentally, however, he believes the problems stem from an acceptance of mass illegal immigration (by libertarians and neoconservatives as well as the left) that has disrupted, in places like Los Angeles, the natural development of



what might broadly be called citizenship.

Turning to San Antonio, the author sympathetically describes the Saul Alinsky-trained organizers, led by Ernesto Cortes, who galvanized Mexican-American residents to demand, as a constituency like any other, their share of city services. Comparisons are drawn with the ethnic politics of Boston, which is cast on the whole as a positive model. Skerry admires Willie Velasquez's Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, and favorably describes home-grown politicians such as former mayor—and now HUD secretary—Henry Cisneros, whom he regards as genuine agents of their people even as their stars have risen. He finds it paradoxical that in Texas—the "Mexicans' Mississippi," according to L.H. Gann and Peter J. Duignan in *The Hispanics in the United States*—Mexican Americans have developed a greater sense of belonging. Texas was also the birthplace of the various national groups—MALDEF, LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), the American GI Forum—that have identified themselves with concerns of the community.

"Community" is an awful term, but it is an alternative to "minority," whose use begs a question Skerry calls central. Are Mexican Americans a minority, entitled to special "rights"? Or are they "ethnics," assimilating themselves as so many of the nation's other cultures have done and are doing? Skerry clearly prefers the second course, but he is apprehensive that, outside of San Antonio, the story is not unfolding that way.

The Los Angeles model is a disaster, and for that Skerry places considerable blame on wide-open immigration policies:

The hundreds of thousands of immigrants arriving in Los Angeles have brought with them the traditional values of rural villages and small towns left behind in Mexico. But in Southern California such values have few places to take root and sustain themselves. Moreover, they stand in stark contrast to the pervasive, even intrusive American mainstream. Thus, in Los Angeles these newcomers face a choice between two quite disparate alternatives, with very

little in between. In San Antonio, on the other hand, a distinct Mexican-American subculture has had more opportunity to develop and lodge itself in strong community institutions.

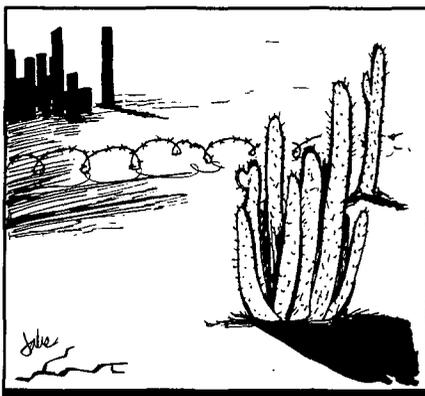
Not only has the influx into Los Angeles brought upheaval to close-in "suburban" areas, where ordinary street activity has been laid low by gunplay and vandalism, but in Latino areas such as East L.A., Skerry says, overcrowding and transience have pushed out homeowner families that are the key anchors. Successive waves of illegal newcomers set back attempts to absorb Mexicans into the mainstream, and impede the formation of basic social units. "Compared to the San Antonio cousins," Skerry notes, "Mexicans in Los Angeles lack strong identification with their neighborhood or parish."

Mexicans have a low naturalization rate, and the huge numbers of noncitizens thwart the evolution of an organic Mexican-American politics in L.A. Canvassing for voters, Skerry observes, is highly inefficient when precincts are full of the ineligible. Under laws that establish electoral districts by population rather than numbers of voters, officials are selected by tiny turnouts and need maintain no real popular base. As such, representatives owe their allegiance not to a naturally moderate constituency, but to the left-liberal agenda-setters who arrange their campaign financing. (This remains far from a seamless union with the left. The liberals Skerry spoke with express frustration that Mexican Americans, to the degree they eschew definition as a racial minority, don't make as good a "cause" as blacks; and the elite's agenda, especially on abortion rights, keeps candidates out of Catholic churches, where they might actually interact with constituents.)

In Los Angeles, the predominant "machine" has been headed by city councilman Richard Alatorre and state senator Art Torres. A breakaway faction led by Los Angeles County supervisor Gloria Molina is more rooted in community activism but similarly leverages low turnouts and also draws outside ideological infusions, in its case from well-off feminists in and out of the city. Serving interest groups in Sacramento is the name of the game in California, leaving the East L.A. power brokerage less

accountable, and less benign, than political machines elsewhere. In using the extended Voting Rights Act (VRA) to widen its clout, the machine has worked with MALDEF and other groups with national agendas. (The classic example came in the 1991 supervisorial race, when a MALDEF lawsuit voided the primary victory of Sarah Flores, a moderate of Mexican descent. After a gerrymander to ensure a Latino supervisor, Molina was elected by a paltry turnout of voters.) Contemporary application of the VRA, Skerry writes, has led to "rotten boroughs" susceptible to outsider string-pulling. The extraordinary drought of Latino officeholders in L.A. (not a sole city councilman or county supervisor from 1962-85) has been broken, but the city's largest ethnic segment still has no real organic politics.

The reason, Skerry would say, is again the dislocative effect of immigration. MALDEF and other pressure groups



fight limits on access to the U.S. welfare state by the millions who cross the border, whose arrival in turn assures the continued, symbiotic reign of the sitting politicians and the pressure groups. All the while, Skerry notes, the free-market right nods its head.

Skerry's framework is sociopolitical, with only scattered references to anything economic. To his way of thinking, the number of ethnics active in politics and in public-sector jobs is a mark in San Antonio's favor. One could argue that the stronger private-sector emphasis in Los Angeles, and indeed in Dallas and Houston, is a positive reflection: San Antonio is relatively poor even today. But it is not enough to tout L.A.'s comparative vibrancy; the heavy involvement of recently arrived Latinos in the Los Angeles riot of 1992 makes it

clear that economic man still seems to need a civic compass.

To establish that is not to resolve what might be done, about either immigration or the struggle to assimilate newcomers. Few would suggest repeating the massive repatriations that actually shrunk the Mexican-born population of the U.S. in the 1930s and 1950s. Some breather from illegal entries, at least into saturated areas, would surely help—and in fact may already be occurring. Many conservative Republicans would be content to keep immigrant hands out of the welfare-state cookie jar. But in this vein the trend toward immigration of whole families, versus more trouble-prone single males, is a mixed blessing. It provides more stable households but also opens up a panoply of state benefits, especially when children are born as U.S. citizens. Thus, an attack on public subsidies to the "undocumented" is likely to involve an assault on intact Latino families. (The same is the case with local Asian refugees, big recipients of handouts even while working hard and leading normal suburban lives.)

In regard to shoring up citizenship standards, there is much to Skerry's points. Political organizations, whether confrontational like the Alinsky bodies or accommodationist like the old LULAC, can help deracinated people get a piece of their new rock. By contrast, the encouragement of attitudes drawn from the post-1965 civil rights campaigns for blacks, of being victimized and apart, is a recipe for prolonged social schism. "In our impatience with the wrongs suffered by racial minorities," Skerry writes, "we forget what a long and arduous process it is for immigrants to become full participants in American life. . . . By trying to jump-start the process, we end up short-circuiting it."

Complexity dictates that the case for a blending with the native U.S. culture cannot be made unreservedly. In some ways, the new arrivals, in fact, assimilate rapidly—so fast that Skerry sees a backlash among the younger Latinos that results in some of the retro nonsense on the campuses. People have to be taught how to rip off the worker-compensation system, but they learn quickly. The California Identity Project by four Chicano scholars at UCLA last year drew a flattering portrait of the personal-responsibility traits of Latinos, but some

of those habits tend to diminish in later generations of U.S. residency. And now, we hear from the state of California that unwed births among Latinas have skyrocketed to nearly the rate among blacks. Maybe settling in isn't always a good thing.

Nonetheless, the sense of a shared stake in things political is a prerequisite for peace in economic cauldrons such as Los Angeles. Yet this foundation of unity often goes unbuilt. Left-liberal elites in California, brown, white and black, run the politics of the barrio from the top down but can effectively fan the fires of discontent below. They have fostered a minority-rights atmosphere that

has muddied Mexican-American opinion on two subjects on which it might otherwise be anti-elite: bilingual education, which parents have been duped into accepting as a quick route to English proficiency; and unlimited immigration, now "the overarching and defining issue of Mexican-American politics." Contrariwise, Skerry argues that these hair-trigger issues and the onset of "minority" status do harm. He doesn't think all the rhetoric will lead to "our own Quebec," but he does see a world of hurt on the heels of liberal impulse. The prospect of a lasting divide is more sobering than any blip in the Republican vote among Hispanics is heartening. □

teens were too uneducated to understand it.

The latest champion of natural morality comes in the unlikely form of a social scientist from California. In *The Moral Sense*, James Q. Wilson writes in the language of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and social biology, rather than that of the traditional moral philosopher, so it may be that he stands a better chance of being listened to and understood. But he is still doing battle with the dominant tendency of modern thought, from Marx's contention that morality and religion were mere "phantoms formed in the human brain" to Richard Rorty's denial of any "core self" or distinctively human quality whatsoever.

Wilson's purpose is not to act as advocate for any system of morality but rather to establish the basis for all morality in human nature. This is territory not to be ventured upon lightly. Sartre thought he was nailing God's coffin shut with his denial that any such thing as human nature existed. But Wilson comes to the question with an empirical outfit that now seems much more the right equipment for resolving it. The core of his book consists of chapters on Sympathy, Fairness, Self-Control, and Duty, which draw upon a combination of common sense and the latest research in the social sciences to show that the foundations of any developed morality are not cultural artifacts but congenital human dispositions—that we are furnished by God or Nature with a more or less sophisticated understanding of right and wrong.

I remember reflecting on this some years ago when I took my two-year-old son for his first experience of day care. As I left him there and he struggled to hold back the tears, I thought: Who taught him that it was better to be brave than to cry? Neither his mother nor I had, so far as I knew. And yet romantic reverence for nature seems to take it as given that such restraint is artificial, the product of the arts of civilization working upon authentic nature. "Curse braces; bless relaxes," said Blake—because braces are man-made and relaxes are natural. Freudianism is based on the same dualism. But maybe "repression" and self-control are natural, too. As Shakespeare said, the art itself *is* nature.

THE MORAL SENSE

James Q. Wilson

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reviewed by JAMES BOWMAN

Considering how intellectually weak the case for it is, moral relativism in our time has proved remarkably resilient. The belief that our ineffable human dignity entitles us to decide what moral rules we will and will not obey, either as a culture or, most recently, as individuals, is obviously the very negation of rule and morality. But like some fabulous, scaly movie monster, this belief can absorb shot and shell from some pretty devastating intellectual cannonry without slowing in its progress toward the helpless town that it has taken it into its head to devour.

I remember how my own goodtime teenage relativism was finally blown out of the water when I read, under the mistaken impression that it was just a book about education, *The Abolition of Man*, by C.S. Lewis. At the time, that book was already a generation old—a generation that had grown up with "situational ethics" and hippie, do-your-

own-thing morality not obviously impeded in their careers by such philosophical cavils. A generation later, as a teacher, I tried to use the same book to make some dent in the invincible self-satisfaction of children who, seemingly from birth, had never doubted that every man was his own Moses. By that time,



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