



ONCE AGAIN IN SPRING IMMIGRANTS TAKE TO THE STREETS

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ABSTRACT. In the spring of 2006, between 3.5 and 5 million people took to the streets of 270 U.S. cities to protest the intended criminalization of immigrants and bill H.R. 4437. It was an unprecedented social phenomenon that supersedes classical definitions of social movement and notions of collective demonstration. It is best explained by examining the convergence of the numerous features that comprised it.

KEYWORDS. Immigration, undocumented immigrants, Mexico, marches, criminalization.

Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who has pride. And you cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.

Cesar Chávez

INTRODUCTION

So far, not much had been said on the political character of immigrants. They are supposed to be politically apathetic, utterly individualistic; people who, unlike the native population, face the social and economic problems from an entirely personal perspective. It used to be said that they “voted with their

feet” and abandoned the country. They were also the “escape valve” for an entire nation’s social, economic, and political problems. Their alleged escapism, pessimism, individualism and opportunism were conceptual weapons in the hands of the status quo, which used them as scapegoats to preserve social order. Immigrants never played a role or were even mentioned in the debates about “new

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social movements.” Feminists, gays, anti-nuclear activists, antiglobalizers, everyone had a place in the postmodern political spectrum except for the “*indocumentados*” of the United States, France’s “*sans papiers*,” the “*sudacas*” of Spain.

But when U.S. politician and Wisconsin representative James Sensenbrenner Jr. came up with the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act (H.R. 4437)—a proposal approved by the United States House of Representatives—this turned out to be so extreme, repressive and restrictive that it was immediately rejected by the immigrant community. The first to react where the United States’ Latinos, particularly the Mexicans; they were soon joined by other immigrant communities and, finally, a wide portion of U.S. society. The initial reaction turned into activism, agitation, organization, collective action and public protest. A phenomenon of this sort is difficult to define, as the concepts of “new social movement” and “collective action” do not address something of this magnitude.

According to Xóchitl Bada (Bada et al., 2006), who has followed this process closely, the first protest took place in Philadelphia on Tuesday, February 14, 2006, and according to journalistic sources, involved around 5,000 people—not bad for a city that has seen recent immigration flow. The second protest took place in Washington D.C. on Monday, March 6, and was attended by some 30,000 people (Bada et al., 2006). These first signs taking place in the historical and political hearts of the nation went unno-

ticed by many. Four days later, on Friday, March 10, the dumbfounded press reported on the great Chicago march, which brought together some 300,000 people. On Saturday 25, Los Angeles saw almost half a million people take to the streets, while Denver counted around 50,000. Finally, on Monday 27, Detroit hosted the last massive protest, which was attended by around 50,000 people (Bada et al., 2006). Many other cities held their own, smaller marches.

More demonstrations took place in April. The one in Dallas, which was capably coordinated by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the umbrella of all Latino organization in the United States, gathered some 400,000 people—including many students. The multiethnic New York march involved some 100,000 demonstrators (Cordero, 2006). The grand encore came on May 1st, when the masses took to the streets to celebrate “Immigrant Workers’ Day” and protest their intended criminalization. Los Angeles, Chicago, San Jose, Denver, San Francisco and many other small and medium-sized cities saw people of all ethnicities, nationalities and religions pour out onto their streets.

Even though some of the planning and organization had only started in early January, this turned into a genuine tidal wave of public demonstrations: approximately 3.5 million people marched between February 7 and May 1st. These protesters were later joined by middle and high school students, who organized nationwide “walk outs” and, on May 1st, Labor



Day in most of the world but not the United States, by people from around the globe. A boycott that sought to evidence immigrants' contributions to U.S. economy was also organized.

What initially appears to be an unforeseen, impulsive chain reaction is, on closer inspection, the result of a long and complex process. Migratory, political and social aspects, as well as the alliances between unions, churches, employers and certain sectors of the political class all played a role in the construction of this movement. Sensenbrenner's proposal and its approval finally triggered it.

THE MIGRATORY FACTOR

In the past twenty years, a new migratory pattern has emerged and, as a result, the profile of the "illegal" or "undocumented" immigrant who works and lives in the United States has changed significantly. Currently, the total number of undocumented immigrants is estimated at 12 million: 57 percent are Mexican, 24 percent come from other parts of Latin America, 9 percent are Asian, 6 percent are European and 4 percent are African (Pasell 2005). In 1986, when the U.S. immigration system was overhauled under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and 3.2 million illegal workers acquired legal status, 76 percent were Mexicans.¹

The data show two striking and important changes: illegal immigra-

tion increased threefold over twenty years, and the amount of undocumented Mexicans decreased by 20 percent. Undocumented immigration from the Caribbean, Central and South America grew noticeably, as did that from others continents. Although Mexicans are still a substantial part of the immigrant bloc, they no longer comprise such a vast majority. The increase in undocumented immigrants itself is the result of the new legislative and border control policies introduced by IRCA. The regularization of 3 million immigrants in 1986 resulted in the either legal or illegal arrival of their families. Increased border control, walls and the channeling of resources toward the Border Patrol increased the costs and risks of illegally crossing the Mexico-United States border. The Mexican and Central American immigrants who managed to cross the border could not transit between countries as freely as they used to, so they remained in the United States for increasingly longer periods (Massey, Durand and Malone, 2002).

The geographical distribution of Mexican and Central American immigrants has also changed in the past two decades. Traditional destinations such as California, Texas and Illinois remain at the top of the list, but the percentages have changed. The case of California is paradigmatic: in 1990 it housed 58 percent of Mexicans but by 2000 that figure had dropped to 43 percent (Durand and Massey, 2004). Places like Georgia, Nevada, Florida,

¹ An estimated 1 million undocumented immigrants were left out of the program. This means that, in 1986, some 4 million people did not have regular status.



New York, New Jersey and Utah are some of the new potential destinations (Zúñiga and Hernández, 2005), and the increase in Central and South American immigration and its dispersion has, for the first time, resulted in multinational encounters (Smith, 2006; Fortuny and Solís, 2006, Durand and Téllez, 2006). New York is no longer merely Puerto Rican and Dominican territory: now Mexicans, Colombians and Ecuadorians have substantial presence. Miami has ceased to be exclusively Cuban, and changes are taking place in Washington D.C., Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Dallas. A Latino identity is growing out of Latin American interaction on U.S. soil, and it is a malleable concept: one can be Mexican, Chicano and Latino all at the same, without apparent contradiction.

This budding unity is part of what has brought a large and otherwise scattered community together in repudiation of immigrants' intended criminalization and the fight for legalization—that is, citizenship. It must be pointed out, however, that it was U.S. immigration policy that turned all foreign workers, many of them temporary, into immigrants; residents in the literal sense, regardless of legal status. This change was crucial in the case Mexicans, as they were the most likely to move back and forth as temporary workers.

THE POLITICAL FACTOR

Every twenty years or so, the United States overhauls its immigration sys-

tem. In 1921 its reforms were limited to European flow; in 1942 it began the Bracero Program with Mexico; in 1964 it established the system of national-origin quotas; in 1986 it declared amnesty under IRCA and instituted an agricultural worker program. A new reform is expected in 2007 and, if historical cycles mean anything, we can say that the conditions are ripe for it: immigrants themselves, along with academics, politicians, NGOs and civil groups all knew that the time had come to discuss new immigration policies. The attacks of September 11, 2001 made this even more necessary: the subject of immigration became tied to national security and distinguishing anti-terrorist measures from immigration reform became a crucial step.

The United States tends to address immigration problems under the desperate maxim of “do something.” But the problem is quite complex and involves political, social, economic, cultural, bilateral and border issues. “Doing something” every now and then is not a solution, just a temporary relief that allows politicians to finish their term feeling like they have solved the problem. Immigration reform policies are usually extremely tough, and the moderate proposal by Kennedy and McCain (S. 1033/H.R. 2330), which addresses the issues of national security and immigration in an intelligent, generous and realistic manner is the exception rather than the rule. Naturally, this project was rejected by Congress in 2005, though it has been brought back in 2007.



The coupling of national security and immigration has polarized debates and fostered a wave of proposals with a characteristically nativist and particularly anti-Mexican discourse. Although the data no longer support this, Mexicans are seen as the only possible source of so-called illegal immigration—their status as neighbors makes them prime suspects. It is assumed that Mexico itself can in turn deal with Central American immigration in exchange for some concession. Finally, the Mexican and, to a lesser extent, other Latin American governments are actively joining the U.S. debate and lobby for potential agreements or immigration programs. The Vicente Fox administration (2000-2006) was particularly assertive in this regard, unlike previous PRI administrations that upheld “the policy of no policy” (Durand, 2005).

Current immigration debates are taking place in a charged political and electoral climate. In 1986, IRCA was silently passed without much notice and undocumented immigrants themselves were not sure what to think of it. And yet, it completely transformed the immigration pattern (Massey, Durand and Malone, 2002). Eighty percent of undocumented immigrants received regular status, and not one of them ever took to the streets to ask for anything. This far-reaching amnesty, however, did not include those who had arrived during the first part of the 1980s and could not prove that they had lived and worked in the United States for five years, or that they had spent their last year working in

the agricultural sector. The excluded groups were mostly from Central America, people who had fled the wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala (Hamilton, 2001; Menjívar, 2000).

Many of these excluded Central American immigrants had had extensive political experience in their countries of origin: it was they who started the legal and political battles to obtain regular status. After many years of paperwork, long waiting periods and struggles, Nicaraguans were finally recognized as refugees and granted permanent residency in 1997 under the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), which also included some Salvadorians and Guatemalans (Menjívar, 2000). However, many other Salvadorians and Guatemalans were seen as economic migrants and many of them were deported during the 1980s. A few were granted asylum and others filed suits with the support of NGOs and religious groups (Hamilton y Stoltz, 2001). In 1990 they were granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which allowed them to work but stopped short of giving them permanent residency. This status was renewed several times until, in 1997, a class action lawsuit allowed thousands of Guatemalans and Salvadorians to partially regularize their status (Menjívar, 2000). These struggles set the legal and social precedents for the massive immigrant demonstrations of today, which are driven by the popular Mexican catchphrase “*si se puede*”: “yes, we can.”



By 2004, immigrants, their organizations, lawyers, sympathetic politicians, academics and representatives in Washington had managed to reach an agreement and support the Kennedy-McCain immigration bill. Lawyers like Frank Sharry, of the National Immigration Forum, have lobbied in Washington for years in order to promote a sensible and fair bill, and the Asociación Tepeyac of New York was among those who supported S. 1033/H.R. 2330 proposal. In short, a concrete strategy had been devised and immigrants could not be accused of having nothing but a long list of complaints

THE SOCIAL FACTOR

At the turn of the 21st century, the composition of the U.S. population underwent dramatic changes. The 2000 census confirmed that Latinos were now the largest national minority and had surpassed African Americans. Latin American populations have a tendency to grow at an accelerated rhythm, but in the case of the United States, this tendency is coupled with the constant arrival of more immigrants groups that comprise an annual flow of some 550,000 people. Although this incoming flow reinforces cultural and linguistic identity it also limits social opportunities, as the recent arrivals find themselves on the lower echelons of the social hierarchy.

The aforementioned geographical mobility of Latinos in the United Sta-

tes has resulted in multinational marriages as well as multinational contacts. Parents of different nationalities have children who take on the cultural identity of their place of residency as the Latino character becomes increasingly dissociated from Latin American or Caribbean national identities. A similar process has taken place among Chicano groups, who have adopted new names and now include a more extensive cultural gamut. Academic circles have responded in their own way, and while “Chicano” research has decreased, “Latino” and “Hispanic” studies are on the rise. The National Council of La Raza, originally Mexican and Chicano, now includes more cultural denominations. NGOS that used to identify themselves as Mexican or Central American have opened up to other nationalities. The National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALAAC) was established in 2004; it currently includes almost a hundred individual organizations and operates in seven cities of the United States –another step in the construction of a pan-Latino character that incorporates national, regional and communal identities.

This change has not been easy or automatic. During the premiere of the movie *Frida*, some protesters showed up with placards that read “Frida: not Chicana, not Latina, not Hispana. MEXICANA.” The national identity and its accompanying set of symbols continue to bind people in ways that are difficult to avoid or forget. And yet, U.S. radio and television stations designed for a Spanish-speaking audien-



ce have continued to shape a uniform Latino identity by catering to the general group rather than any specific components. Anchors, show hosts and singers seek to tone down their national or regional accents in the search for a hybrid pronunciation that is acceptable to all parties. The “Hispanic market” has become sizeable portion of the entertainment industry, and it was Latinos who made it into a coherent enterprise.

THE CULTURAL FACTOR

There is a crucial difference between temporary and permanent immigrants: while the first have no desire to integrate, the second do and this conditions their attitude toward their host society. The passing of IRCA broke the circular flow that had characterized Mexican migration to the United States. Legal immigrants never went back to Mexico and became permanent U.S. residents, while undocumented ones extended their stay as much as possible and ended up remaining in the country. Circumstances forced them to integrate and their migratory pattern has become increasingly like that of Central and South American exiles that arrive in the United States with the intention of staying.

The social integration of immigrants no longer takes place inside the proverbial melting pot of the United States but within the peculiar, current system of ethnic classification and its four major groups: white, African

American, Asian American and Hispanic (or Latino). Unlike the former three, which do imply some specific racial content, the criterion that defines “Hispanics/Latinos” is primarily cultural. Latinos, after all, are fundamentally *mestizos*, a mixture of European, indigenous, black and Asian blood. This type of categorization has resulted in the need to introduce the more detailed categories of “white not Hispanic or Latino,” “black or African American not Hispanic or Latino,” “Asian not Hispanic or Latino,” and so on. If these criteria had been applied back in the 1960s, the categories would have been something like “white, not Irish,” white, not Italian,” etc.

While whites are immovable in their category and blacks and Asians are conditioned by physical appearance, Latinos can theoretically run the gamut of racial categories. The drive to find them a specific slot is not only the result of census policies—the U.S. Latino community embraces this because, otherwise, they would not be a cultural force or a concise statistic. The term Pan-Latino is currently gaining acceptance although, for that matter, there could also be Pan-Asians, Pan-Africans and Pan-whites: recent Eastern European immigrants (e.g. Russians) have become part of the white contingent.

Despite the impositions of the U.S. classification system and marketing strategies directed at Latinos (the term “Hispanic,” in fact, is intrinsically tied to concept of the “Hispanic market”), the reality is that specific national identities are still at the fore-



front of cultural identification. Latino and/or Hispanic identity is under construction, as are the older concepts of Latin American and Hispanoamerican unity—an idea that has never quite congealed. And yet, U.S. Latino identity has a brighter future than the “*Patria Grande*,” the regional amalgamation proposed by Latin American intellectuals. Latino unity is based on a similar continental provenance, a *mestizo* origin, a shared religion (mostly Catholic),² and a shared language (Spanish). Race, religion, language and a colonial and pre-Columbian past are common elements; national identity and character, individual histories and nationalist obstinacy still separate us.

And yet, all Latinos came together during the 2006 marches. Even though the first demonstrations were accompanied by an array of national flags, many of them Mexican, on May 1st the organizers opted for the U.S. flag in a show of political union and cultural integration in the road to legalization.

THE ALLIES

When addressing the 2006 demonstrations it is better to speak of allies instead of alliances. A political alliance implies stipulated agreements and mutual participation in the taking of decisions. Allies, on the other hand, play a secondary role: they can give or take support, but are not directly involved and do not take too many ris-

ks. Of course, they get to share in whatever benefits are obtained.

Churches, particularly the Catholic one, were the immigrants’ main allies: proposal H.R. 4437 directly affected their interests and work. Los Angeles Cardinal, Roger M. Mahony, wrote a letter to President George W. Bush two weeks after the approval of Sensenbrenner’s bill and objected to the fact that, according to it, any member of the clergy could be penalized for providing religious or social services. He went on to argue that giving communion to undocumented immigrants could be interpreted as a service or spiritual support and that the priests could not ask everyone who came to mass to provide documents. H.R. 4437 was indeed quite explicit about prosecuting anyone who provided an undocumented immigrant with any kind of help or service. The catholic organization Justice for Immigrants put it thusly: “Anyone or any organization who ‘assists’ an individual without documentation ‘to reside in or remain’ in the United States knowingly or with ‘reckless disregard’ as to the individual’s legal status would be liable for criminal penalties and five years in prison. This could include church personnel, who provide shelter or other basic needs assistance to an undocumented individual” (Justice for Immigrants, 2005). The Catholic Church’s opposition to the proposal, which the House of Representatives had approved 239 to 182 votes, was key in the battle

² Seventy percent of Latinos describe themselves as Catholics; 23 percent consider themselves Protestants in a general sense (Bada, Fox and Selle, 2006).



against the project. Most of the Latin American immigrants that arrive in the United States are practicing Catholics and the Church's future largely depends on its Latino constituency. According to Passel (2005), 81 percent of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants are Latin American. Hence, Catholic involvement in issues of immigration reform and the creation of parishes for immigrants is not surprising.

The Church's support during the 2006 marches was fundamental. There were certain disagreements: they were not happy about holding the demonstrations during the work week and did not like the idea of the boycott. In the end, however, hundreds of priests, religious workers and organization members also took to the streets. Additionally, church members had their say in some of the organizational decisions. The Bishop of Chicago requested that the demonstration take place downtown, in Grant Park, in order to guarantee the security of those involved. It seems the Cardinal was concerned about possible clashes with opposition groups. On May 1st, an ecumenical event involving priests, pastors, rabbis and other religious leaders was celebrated.³ According to Cano (2006), the Church was able to influence and in some cases control the demonstrations in small towns and cities where its influence supersedes that of other groups. This was not the case in larger cities where the population had access

to other modes of organization and communication.

After the Church, the immigrants' next big allies were the unions. Worker organizations have long opposed immigrant presence given its role in the falling costs of labor. Undocumented immigrants in the United States have also often been used as strike-breakers. In the past decade, however, the U.S. working class has diversified and now includes millions of Latino workers. In 2005, an estimated 1 million union members were of Mexican origin. Furthermore, many of the current local, area and regional leaders are Latinos. On the other hand, unions had to face the changes in the labor market as an increasing amount of jobs were outsourced to other countries. Those that remain are related to the service industry, agriculture and some types of manufacture, and this realization gave way to a new type of unionism under the coalition Change to Win (CTW), which defines its new policy toward low income workers in its Agenda for Workers Strength. Among its new goals are "embracing the diversity of the national labor force, including organizing immigrants, ethnic-racial minorities, and women" (Turner and Cornfield, 2007). The future of the working class is in the jobs currently taken by most immigrants, and recent events testify to unions' new policies. In Los Angeles, a new program supported by the group Janitors for Justice serves as an umbrella for workers in the cleaning ser-

³ Interview with Artemio Arreola, Casa Michoacán, Pilsen, Chicago, October 2, 2006.



vice industry. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and NDLON (National Day Laborer Organization Network) have recently joined in support of day-laborers rights.

The marches of Chicago and Los Angeles served as a wakeup call for U.S. unions, which, for all their bureaucratic machinery and organizational capacities, had never managed to bring so many workers to streets. In some cases, the unions supported the demonstrations by providing funds, setting up placards and giving speeches. But the May 1st demonstrations surpassed all of their expectations and organizational network. They were initially skeptical, arguing that the United States did not celebrate International Workers' Day and that the date was associated with the deaths of several policemen. The Chicago community leaders decided to go ahead with the planning and, in the end, the unions and other organizations, such as the Los Angeles demonstration bloc, which favored another date, adapted to the Chicago schedule.

The immigrants' third ally was a particular sector of the political class. The organizers requested the participation of certain political leaders, especially those of Latino origin. The politicians were concerned about the outcome of the demonstrations, the lack of security measures (which, given the size of the marches, were practically nonexistent), and potential clashes with opposition groups or police. Every case has its own story but,

in the end, most of them agreed to participate and made appearances at the demonstrations. In Los Angeles, Mayor Antonio Villarraigosa, who is of Mexican origin, gave a speech. In Chicago, the governor, the mayor and several congressmen showed up at the last minute. It is difficult to gage how much impact the demonstrations had on the U.S. political class, but the Senate's S. 2611 bill, issued in late May, 2006, was certainly a direct result of these marches. The bill, a response to H.R. 4437, involved a much more moderate approach to immigration.

The immigrants' fourth –and more surreptitious– allies were the employers themselves. Although specific economic sectors have their own agendas in Washington, a number of small businessmen and corporate representatives protested against Sensenbrenner's proposed measures. Their concern was understandable, to say the least: they would have been guilty of hiring, abetting and concealing undocumented workers. One of the most shocking declarations came from J.W. Marriott Jr., CEO of Marriott International, the United States' largest hotel chain. In an interview with USA Today, he stated that more than half of Marriott's workers were foreign-born, spoke 47 different languages and it would have been impossible to determine each and everyone's legal status. Although traditionally a Republican supporter, Marriott complained about the extreme-right faction running Congress. He even said, half jokingly that, since he completely



agreed with Washington Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, “I guess we’ll be in the same jail cell” (*USA Today*, April 10, 2006). According to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Verification of Employment Authorization Basic Pilot Program introduced in 1997 does not work properly. The database is obsolete, no status changes are registered and, even worse, about 40 percent of rejected individuals have working papers that are in order (*La Opinión Digital*, February 13, 2007).

Some of the larger demonstrations took place on work days (Monday and Friday), which would theoretically result in reprimands against absent workers. Still, there were no major incidents: many small businesses closed for the day and owners joined their workers on the streets. This kind of veiled support cannot stand against the nativist, anti-immigration wave, but it is a promising start. Anti-immigrant policies directly affect the country’s businesses and economy, and this is something to consider when weighing political costs.

Chicago: an analysis

The Chicago leaders played a major role in the organization of the March 10 and May 1st marches, which brought together hundreds of thousands of demonstrators. They were also the ones that turned the movement into a national event. After the first march in Philadelphia and the second one in Washington, the March 10 Chicago demonstration was a

popular explosion comprising nearly 300,000 people. This was the turning point for protesters, as their cause took over the national news.

And yet, the popular movement that brought between 3 and 5 million marchers together (Bada et al., 2006) was not a spontaneous act of protest. Years of discrimination, jingoism and legal reprimands, alongside struggles, committed organizational work and networking brought it into being. In fact, the great marches of Los Angeles, Dallas and Chicago deserve to be studied in detail.

In the specific case of Chicago, we can identify three catalytic events that led to the 2006 massive marches. The first took place in 1996, when Chicago Tribune journalist Mike Royko wrote an aggressive article against Mexico in which he stated that the nation was a “corrupt narco-state ... a useless country that should be invaded and turned over to Club Med.” He judged that “there is no reason for Mexico to be such a mess except that it is run by Mexicans” (Miner, 2003). Of course, the reaction did not take long: Hispanic radio stations were flooded with listeners’ responses and complaints, and a 3,000 people contingent protested in front of the paper’s downtown Chicago offices demanding an apology. The paper had to issue two apology statements after the first one failed to satisfy activists (Hinojosa, 1999).

Two years later, in 2005, a Hispanic radio station interviewed a member of the Minuteman Project who spoke aggressively against undocu-



mented immigrants. The fact that this person was of Hispanic origin was more than the Chicago Hispanic community could bear. Radio shows took the audience's calls and interviewed analysts, priests and community leaders. Finally, a protest call was issued and, to everyone's surprise, some 30,000 people showed up and marched requesting amnesty. Then came H.R. 4437 and the March 10 and May 1st demonstrations (Martínez and Piña, 2005). In all these cases, the protests were organized as reactions to perceived aggressions, but the kind of massive response they garnered was based on a wide communal network that included churches, clubs, radio stations and Hispanic journalists.

CONCLUSIONS

As has been previously stated, the spring 2006 demonstrations cannot be described as a social movement or a collective demonstration in the orthodox sense. The marches were not engineered by a given organization but resulted from a collective effort that involved far-ranging alliances and networks; they took place on a massive scale (3.5 to 5 million participants), were a nationwide phenomenon (270 cities), and received extensive attention from the media –altogether, a very rare set of circumstances. The fact that these massive protests resulted in no violent or regrettable episodes is all the more surprising. Although in some cases opposition

groups organized their own marches, there were no arrests and no vandalizing, as happened in France during the autumn of 2005. The only unfortunate event was the suicide of eight-grader Anthony J. Soltero, who helped organize one of the student walk-outs in California and Texas and, because of this, received threats involving criminal charges from his school authorities.

Many analysts have wondered whether this massive avalanche of demonstrations could be repeated in the future, but such questions are irrelevant. What matters is what has already happened: immigrants, minorities, churches, unions, businesses and other sectors of U.S. society participated in a colossal retort to a colossal attack. The 2007 Chicago and Los Angeles marches gathered only 5,000 and 10,000 people respectively. The perfect storm took place in spring 2006, and the conditions that created it are not only very difficult to attain but also very difficult to reproduce.

It is important to point out that this was a veritably national social phenomenon: it transcended ethnic, class, religious, political, geographic and generational barriers. It included a diversity of social sectors (workers, employers, professors, students), a range of ethnicities (Latinos, Asians, Africans), and a variety of religious organizations (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim). Despite the presence of political leaders it espoused no particular political agenda. And it involved the participation of old and young, which gave it a multi-generational, familial character.



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