



The Latino Immigrant Labor Experience as Depicted in Film

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Abstract: The author argues that traditional macro-level methods of gathering data on populations create an impersonal depiction of the group. A useful pedagogical tool for teachers to counter this is to use fictional accounts in film and literature to put a more human face on the subjects being studied. Two films, *Bread and Roses* and *El Norte*, are used in this way to enhance or add another dimension to studies of the labor experience of Latino immigrants in the United States. The films are looked at through various sociological theories, Assimilation, Competition, and Neo-Marxist. The author concludes that Neo-Marxist theory best predicts the types of conflict and solidarity portrayed in the films.

I. THE LATINO IMMIGRANT LABOR EXPERIENCE AS DEPICTED IN FILM

Every year Latinos immigrate to the United States in large numbers. They have become the third largest group after whites and blacks in this country. Their experience has both similarities and differences to earlier large migrations of other groups. Sociologists have come up with various theories explaining the interactions of racial groups resulting from migration over the years. Sociologists use these theories to try to understand the dynamics and complexities of migration. They often gather macro-level data about labor force participation, education, language fluency, government service usage, health status, and more. While this methodology is useful it can often portray a very impersonal picture

of the migration experience. What this paper will do is use two films about the immigration experience of Latinos, *El Norte* and *Bread and Roses*, as if they were a data set in a sociological exercise which aims to add more dimension to our understanding of this subject.

This paper will argue that Neo-Marxist Theory offers the best understanding of the films' presentation of the labor experience of Latino immigrants in the United States. Assimilation Theory and Competition Theory cannot fully explain all of the dynamics portrayed in the films. Neo-Marxist Theory is affirmed in three important ways: 1) segmentation of the labor force through barriers to mobility for immigrants, 2) ethnic cross-class conflict, and 3) immigrant and native unity through class solidarity.

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II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Feagin and Feagin (1999) highlight the main ideas of the most popular theories on racial and ethnic relations. These theories easily apply to the interaction between racial and ethnic groups resulting from immigration. Three of these theories are applicable to Latino immigrants in the U.S., Assimilation Theory, Competition theory, and Neo-Marxist Theory. A few theories will be omitted because I do not think they really apply to this situation. The Bio-Social Perspective (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:34-35) will be ignored because modern social science recognizes that race is not a biological phenomenon but a social construction so any bio-social explanation is based on faulty arguments to begin with. Finally, Middle Man Minorities (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:40-41; Bonacich and Modell, 1980) would be more applicable to racial and ethnic groups that tend to be small business owners rather than farmers or workers like Latinos primarily are.

Assimilation Theory is a collection of a few Functionalist theories, the Race Relations Cycle by Robert E. Park (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:30. Park, 1950; Park and Burgess, 1970), The Stages of Assimilation by Milton Gordon (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:30-33; Gordon, 1964, 1978.), and Ethnic Pluralism (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:33. Glazer and Moynihan, 1970) by Glazer and Moynihan. Assimilation Theories argue that immigrants will adopt the mainstream culture and values of the dominant group to one extent or another. There is disagreement as to whether this process is cyclical or linear and as to whether or not they shed their original culture completely or if they re-identify more strongly with certain aspects of their original culture while adopting some aspects of the new culture.

The Race Relations Cycle is the cycle of recurring social interactions of “contacts, competition, accommodation, and even-

tual assimilation” (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:30). Interactions create competition among groups that force social re-organization. Through this re-organization subordinate groups eventually assimilate the values and culture of the dominant group. Gordon’s Stages is a linear model that progresses irreversibly from “cultural assimilation” to “structural assimilation,” to “marital assimilation,” to “identification assimilation,” to “attitude-receptional assimilation,” “behavior receptional assimilation,” and finally reach “civic assimilation” (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:31). Lastly, Ethnic Pluralism Theory doesn’t use a cyclical or stage based model; instead it argues that assimilation is more subjective, that groups will assimilate toward the dominant group, but they will also find aspects of their own culture which become important to them and they will re-create their own ethnic identities.

Competition Theory (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:35-36; Olzak, 1992) argues that entire ethnic groups compete on a socio-ecological level for land and resources. This theory focuses on a more local level and de-emphasizes social structure and institutionalized hierarchies. Stemming from its ecological base it focuses on how groups migrate and find niches—geographically, socially, and economically. It’s main point is that, “ethnic group competition and the accompanying ethnic solidarity lead to collective action, mobilization, and protest” (Feagin and Feagin, 1999; 35).

Feagin and Feagin (1999:37-38) present Neo-Marxist Theory, which refers to a collection of theories by sociologists utilizing the concepts of Karl Marx. Neo-Marxist Theory is different from the above theories in that it incorporates power and class as central to its perspective. Unlike the other theories which focus on whole racial and ethnic groups, Neo-Marxist Theory focuses on structures and institutions. Mario Barera (1979), for instance, has incorporated a Marxist class analysis into racially centered

Internal Colonialism theories. It can be said that the “heart of [Neo-Marxist Theory] is an interactive structure of class and race stratification that divides our society” (Feagin and Feagin, 1999:37). This theory has taken the basic framework of Marxism—that society is split into classes with opposing economic interests—and added the complication of racial stratification within each level of the class structure. Unlike the other theories which tend to homogenize racial and ethnic groups Barrera’s Neo-Marxist theory argues that the main division in society is by class. Ethnic and racial groups of the same class may unite against their own racial and ethnic group of a different class. However, due to competition this solidarity isn’t automatic, and racial groups within the same class may be antagonistic toward each other.

III. THEORIES APPLIED TO FILM

Upon viewing *El Norte* and *Bread and Roses*, it becomes clear that Assimilation Theory is an inadequate model for explaining the labor experiences of the Latino Immigrants depicted in these films. Both films are rife with conflict and power struggles that the Assimilation model would not predict. Most notably, in the end the main characters didn’t choose to assimilate into the workforce the American way. Enrique, in *El Norte*, thrice turned down the foreman job in Chicago which would offer him a Green Card because he didn’t want to abandon his sister. Enrique ends up at the end of the movie where he first started in the United States, standing on the corner looking for temp jobs—all because he refused to follow the given path to social mobility due to the conflict of values. American individualism lost to the strong family and community values he grew up with. In *Bread and Roses*, Maya chooses to ally with the union organizers and not the company—putting her at odds with the dominant individualistic

path to success. The result is that she is fired from her job and she gets deported back to Mexico. She ends up worse than Enrique. Clearly Assimilation Theory is too simplistic and can be dismissed.

Competition Theory has much more to offer. Immigrant ethnic groups find niches in the economy by performing certain aspects in the division of labor. In both movies immigrants often work next to white natives, but not with them. Enrique, in *El Norte*, works as a waiter in a fancy restaurant. The management is white but his co-workers are not. In *Bread and Roses*, the Janitors are immigrants and the offices they clean belong to rich white professionals. In *El Norte*, Rosa works in a garment factory sweatshop that produces clothing for white models to wear. Also, Rosa comments in downtown Los Angeles, where many immigrants work and live, “Where are all the Gringos? It looks like Mexico City.” Clearly ethnic groups have found niches in economic and social space just as this model predicted.

There are some weaknesses to Competition Theory however. It predicts too much solidarity along racial or ethnic lines, which neither of these films shows. In *El Norte*, Carlos, an American native of Mexican heritage whom the other Latino workers call “Pocho” and “Chicano,” calls IRS on his fellow co-workers out of jealousy. In *Bread and Roses*, Maya’s sister Rosa rats out her fellow Latino co-workers to their boss so that she can be promoted to supervisor of the new building. Also in *Bread and Roses*, Latino immigrant workers go on strike with immigrants of all backgrounds, going against their fellow Latino boss Mr. Perez. In both films these events are climactic to the plot and suggest that the main struggles in the lives of Latino immigrants are not drawn simply along ethnic lines.

In Neo-Marxist Theory race and class interact and produce layers of hierarchy and a segmented labor force that are revealed in both films. Three main aspects of

this theory are affirmed and highlighted by both of these films: 1) segmentation of the labor force through barriers to mobility for immigrants, 2) ethnic cross-class conflict, and 3) immigrant and native unity through class solidarity.

The working class has its own hierarchy that mirrors the racial hierarchy of the larger society. Latino immigrants are a racial minority and therefore are generally allowed only into the lowest positions. Both movies showed how lack of Green Cards or “papers” were barriers to more legitimate work. Immigrants are forced into jobs with less pay and benefits, less security, and no unionization. The jobs that these immigrants worked included, garment ironer, housecleaner, waiter/tress, and janitor. While these jobs are not necessarily always poor jobs, the better ones that are unionized with better pay and benefits are usually already taken by white workers. Mr. Perez, in *Bread and Roses*, even tells his employees that if they try to join a union it will check their papers, implying that they will be deported or at least fired. This is how racial hierarchies are structurally supported within the working class.

Ethnic cross-class conflict is also predicted by this model and is an important conflict in both films, though most notably in *Bread and Roses*. Mr. Perez is a Latino boss who clearly takes the side of the company over the employees. He goes so far as to tell Maya, “It’s about time we got someone young in here, got rid of some of these old f-ing hags. They’re worthless.” Clearly he doesn’t identify with his fellow Latinos. He only sees them as a “pair of arms,” as it is said in the movie *El Norte*. Perez rules the workplace through intimidation and arbitrary power. He fires old people and a pregnant woman just to maintain the low wages the company pays. He doesn’t ever show an ounce of sympathy for other Latinos. He also takes advantage of people in a desperate situation. He charges a “commission” for hiring undocumented workers. This is

similar to the Mexican that buys Rosa and Enrique in *El Norte*. There is something sketchy about what he is doing, though it is never explicitly shown in the film. It can be assumed that he gets some money for providing workers to the owner of the garment sweatshop and the factory owning woman from Chicago. He even says, “The whole economy would collapse if it wasn’t for the cheap labor we bring in.” Notice that he doesn’t refer to *immigrants* as coming in, but *cheap labor*. Like Perez, he too only sees Latino workers as a “pair of arms.”

Lastly, the inter-ethnic class solidarity displayed in *Bread and Roses* affirms the central point of Neo-Marxist Theory—that society’s main division is by class not race or ethnicity. The collective action undertaken by the janitors was supported and even helped along by a diversity of workers, students, and organizers. It took a class struggle to unite people into organization and protest. The Justice for Janitors campaign and the local janitors unions all supported the non-union immigrants fight for a union. Sam, the white college educated organizer even goes to jail with the immigrant workers. On a more symbolic level, the title of the film, and the slogan the janitors used, “We want bread but roses too,” connects across historical as well as ethnic lines. It is the slogan of young women textile workers who went on strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912. Over 40 nationalities, mostly European, were represented in this strike of over 30,000 people. The point of this parallel is that the struggle of those immigrants then and these immigrants now is the same one. Class is the common factor here, not ethnicity.

IV. CONCLUSION

The theory that best applies to the films’ presentations of the experience of Latino immigrant workers is the Neo-Marxist Theory. The movies and this theory

all suggest that Latinos, like all other racial and ethnic groups, are not a homogenous group, and cannot be understood as such. They may be toward the bottom of the racial hierarchy, but they too are divided by class. So while they may face barriers that stop them from getting good jobs within the working class, due to the racialized nature of the social system they are more likely to unite with fellow white and black workers against their class oppressor than they are to mobilize and unite as an ethnic group.

What this sociologist has learned about data gathering through this exercise is that while macro level data (i.e. population statistics) can be used to tell the characteristics of groups and is useful to show the fallacy of certain stereotypes (i.e., of a certain group doing this or that) it lacks a personal touch or humanity to it. Looking at films and literature as a data set for understanding social phenomena brings out all the complex relationships and tensions that are missed with macro level data. Humanity and life cannot be quantified without losing all of the aspects that really make them what they are. Qualitative research on the micro-level can highlight important features of the group being studied that might be much more useful in social policy decisions or with issues of representation than quantitative macro data. Fiction provides a narrative and perspective that is difficult to attain in case studies. Case studies that are written like a narrative must have an element of fiction to them anyways because the author is always both missing details and choosing to leave out others. So long as we remember that fiction is fiction and keep an eye out for statistically accurate representations I believe that using film and literature can be a useful tool for teachers and students if used to supplement a more macro-level statistic-based lesson plan.

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