

Review

Matthew A. Hale

Pardo, Mary S. 1998. *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Cultural Politics of Community Mobilization in East LA: Reflections on *Mexican American Women Activists* by Mary Pardo

An historical act can only be performed by "collective man", and this presupposes the attainment of a "cultural-social" unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world, both general and particular, operating in transitory bursts or permanently. Since this is the way things happen, great importance is assumed by the general question of language, that is, the question of collectively attaining a single cultural "climate".

-- Antonio Gramsci



The (re)election of George W. Bush highlights the importance of cultural politics in shaping our "climate" of class struggle. Neo-conservative ideology and religious evangelism have played a major role in the American and transnational capitalist classes' retrenchment over the past two decades, enabling and legitimating both the intensification of traditional forms of capitalist exploitation, as well as the revival of violent dispossession as a means of accumulation on a scale unheard of since the early days of colonial pillage and commons enclosure (Harvey 2004). This should give us pause to reconsider Gramsci's call to consolidate diverse identities and wills within a unified "conception of the world" as a step toward building a subaltern counter-hegemony. Gramsci's strategy no doubt rings a bit Machiavellian to postmodern ears, but the situation at hand seems to demonstrate that in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci was simply addressing quite frankly the realities of

class struggle. As much as he appreciated the diversity of Italy's myriad cultural forms and identities, he also recognized that the Fascist movement had managed to restore capitalist power and justify imperialist expansion primarily due to its superior organizational strategy in the face of the socialists' fragmentation.

Mexican American Women Activists by Mary Pardo illustrates how subaltern activists and "organic intellectuals" can mobilize pre-existing cultural identities and networks to unify diverse wills in struggles for collective interests. When, in 1986, the California Department of Corrections overruled Assemblywoman Gloria Molina's objection to its plan to build a state prison in her district in Eastside Los Angeles, she contacted residents and community organizations to get their feedback. Most of them expressed vehement opposition and began to mobilize their fellow residents to challenge the DOC. In the process of this struggle, the activists turned to traditional cultural forms as resources for developing new organizational strategies. Religion and religious networks played an essential role. As Pardo points out:

[T]he church centered the struggle, legitimated it for the entire community, and attracted media attention with the creation of the Mothers of East Los Angeles [activist group] As in other Latino working-class communities, the church [served as] a strategic place for the development of women's social and political networks and leadership skills. (Pardo 1998: 139)

Pardo focuses on religious institutions and networks as material bases for community mobilization, but it would be interesting to explore the ideational aspects at play here. The neo-conservative movement has managed to secure an ideational linkage between certain religious discourses and government policies that support the strengthening of capitalist and imperialist power, so the question of how to sever this connection and develop alternative, progressive ones has become central to the global multitude's struggle, and the Eastside LA case might provide a useful model. In her chapter on the background to the events in question, Pardo touches on the shift in the Vatican's political orientation beginning in 1962, and she comments that "[t]he realization of [the Church's tremendous] potential [for advocating working-class community betterment] varies from region to region", comparing San Antonio favorably with Los Angeles (28). The intricacies of this historical and geographical variation might make valuable subject matter for an ethnographic study addressing the connections between religious discourse and political ideology.

Pardo devotes more space to documenting other cultural fields in which the activists work, such as ethnicity and gender. She opens the book with a powerful quotation from one of the founders of the group MELA (Mothers of East LA), Juana Gutiérrez:

As a mother and as a resident of East Los Angeles, I shall continue fighting tirelessly so we will be respected I say "my community" because I am part of it. I love my *raza*, my people, as part of my family; and if God

allows, I will keep on fighting against all the government officials who want to take advantage of us. (Pardo 1998: 1)

This statement illustrates the importance of gender, ethnicity, and geographical identity in activist discourse. As in the Mexican anti-nuclear power movement (García-Gorena 1999), the identity of "motherhood" plays a salient role in all the community struggles examined in Pardo's book. The association of motherhood with community activism may intersect with religious sensibilities, for it is a priest, Father Moretta, who initially encourages the women of his parish to form MELA: "I thought the women would be calmer and easier to control than men" (Pardo 1998: 113). What should be noted from the perspective of organizational strategy, however, is that the women do not passively accept the priest's notions about femininity, but rather draw on alternative sensibilities in developing a more "fitting" identity of activist motherhood through the process of struggle. When, for instance, Father Moretta asks the women to wear white mantillas in imitation of the Argentine Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, at first they go along with it -- "out of respect for Father Moretta" -- but later they voice disagreement with the gendered assumptions embedded within the mantillas: "We are supposed to be *las abnegadas*", one woman jokes, a term Pardo footnotes as connoting "submissive or selfless behavior, often used in reference to the role of motherhood" (117). Another woman says, "I used to rebel against wearing those white rags because frankly I associate wearing a scarf with doing housecleaning!" (118). In the end, the women are able to invert this symbolism by wearing the mantillas as headbands or tying them around their upper arms. Pardo points this out as evidence that "symbols of struggle may not be so readily transported across national and cultural boundaries" (118), but I think this also exemplifies the way that activist culture draws on pre-existing forms and re-shapes them in the process of struggle.

While inverting the symbolic power structure conventionally associated with "motherhood", the MELA also build on existing meanings of this identity to justify their activism and to question dominant political narratives. As suggested by Juana Gutiérrez in the passage above, the mother's traditional responsibility for her immediate family has been expanded to include the broader collectivities of "community" and even "*raza*". "Motherhood" has thus shifted from the conventional category denoting biological maternity: "When you are fighting for a better life for children and 'doing' for them, isn't that what mothers do? So you don't have to have children to be a mother" (115). This new identity provides a position from which to engage in collective action that conventional gender roles might have prohibited, as well as to contradict the political narratives upheld by masculine voices of authority. Erlinda Robles remarks:

My husband couldn't believe things happened the way that they do. He was in the Navy twenty years, and they brainwashed him that none of the politicians could do wrong. So he has come a long way. Now he comes home and parks the car out front and asks me, "Well, where are we going tonight?" (Pardo 1998: 130)

Erlinda has thus seized upon the hyper-masculinized trope of military service and reversed its power connotation -- as the MELA reversed the connotation of "motherhood"

-- so that it now describes a kind of subordination. More importantly, this is a subordination that compromises the authority of her husband's political narrative ("that none of the politicians could do wrong"), thereby opening a space for Erlinda's counter-narrative (that politicians should not be trusted, that civilians should fight for their own interests, etc.). We might say that the geography of knowledge claims has been reversed. Whereas a conventional, androcentric and militaristic paradigm would define the political as a masculine sphere and privilege the knowledge claims of military men in particular because of their proximity to the state, here it is Erlinda's *distance* from the state, her identity as a mother and her proximity to the civilian community that privilege her narrative, and it is her husband's intimate -- and subordinating -- experience of state power that has compromised his ability to make a critical appraisal of its mechanics.

Probably most important of all, however, is that the MELA's cultural politics stay close enough to the ground of conventional sensibilities that the community -- including most of the men -- is able to accept their new role as activist leaders. Erlinda's husband expresses pride in his wife when he says, "The women are carrying the flag for the family" (128).

Juana Gutiérrez' invocation of her *raza* -- her ethnic collectivity -- brings us to another cultural field in which East LA residents conceive and carry out their struggles. Ethnic symbols as seemingly apolitical as food turn out to bear weight in the process of community mobilization:

As Erlinda described the traditional Mexican food women prepared for the fund-raisers, I asked how they had decided what items to offer. She said ethnic food sold the best. After mass in the morning, people wanted "their Mexican food". When women tried selling [less labor-intensive] "Anglo food" such as hot dogs or ham and eggs, sales decreased and the people complained. Food choices express more than habit; they also provide a way to bind an individual to a group. (Pardo 1998: 175)

Besides providing a ground on which to organize opposition to unwanted encroachments and support for collective projects within the neighborhood, ethnic identity becomes an essential factor in rallying support from people and organizations in other neighborhoods and beyond the bounds of East LA. An ethno-symbolic geography plays a role here as well:

East Los Angeles, historically the first neighborhood with a large concentration of Mexican Americans in the city, is a symbol of an "ethnic heartland", so Mexican Americans from outside the community joined the struggle in solidarity. These outside supporters included individuals as well as representatives of Chicano student groups and the chapters of state and national Latino organizations (Pardo 1998: 107)

Ethnic identity provides a discursive field with corresponding institutions and networks through which disparate local groups such as MELA can link up in mutually supporting

relationships. It thus serves as a means to overcome geographic and other forms of separation, a rubric in which to perceive and fight for interests common to "a multiplicity of diverse wills". Conversely, ethnicity also provides a weapon with which to sow dissension in the ranks of state power. Pardo tells the story of how MELA used this tactic to crash a Department of Corrections job fair intended to garner support for the prison project:

Dolores Duarte approached the only Latino [DOC] representative and began scolding him: "You know you are on the wrong side of town. You have nerve to sit here in a Hispanic area and let them do that to YOUR people. You say you want to give jobs to people who don't want the prison here -- your OWN people. And you support these gringos. You go along with them after the way we have been treated. You want to dump everything on us!" (Pardo 1998: 122)

The tactic worked: "The job fair ended in chaos, the intention of the demonstration achieved" (122). Activists thus employ ethnic identity to achieve unity and win support for their own struggles, on the one hand, and to sow discord within enemy ranks, on the other.

Such a double-edged sword of course runs the risk of cutting the swordsman, and ethnicity, like "race", has long been used by ruling classes to divide and conquer their rebellious subalterns. The same may be said for the other lines of identity and difference explored above -- religion and gender. One weakness in Pardo's book is that she celebrates the strategic value of these cultural fields without paying sufficient attention to the way that reified notions of identity and difference can work to the benefit of class domination by obscuring the interests that subalterns share through their common relation to the means of existence -- and to the class that controls the means of existence. In fact, Pardo treats "class" as a "social identity" analogous to ethnicity and race: "Ethnic, racial, class, and gender identities are not isolable but may be emphasized or combined differently depending on who is present and how the actor assesses the situation" (253). After giving lip service to the Marxian conception of "working class" as including "all workers who do not own the means of production", she then goes on to posit a distinction between "middle class" and "blue collar or working class" that she bases "partly on people's relation to work and partly on their own perceptions", providing the example that "moving to a suburb is seen as 'moving up' the socioeconomic ladder" (255). It is this latter, subjective sense of "class" that Pardo chooses to use in her analysis. I would argue that this subjective sense of "class" certainly needs to be studied as a cultural phenomenon, but that the Marxian category cannot be so lightly brushed aside. Pardo fails to recognize that people can imagine themselves in terms of one class identity while existing according to the laws of an entirely different class reality. The residents of Monterey Park, for instance, may imagine themselves as "middle class", but at bottom they still depend on working for capitalist bosses in exchange for a salary. My point is simply that cultural constructions of identity -- in terms of ethnicity, gender, religion, or class -- can be used by subalterns -- or what we might call the "working class" in a broad, Marxian sense -- as weapons of resistance, but they can -- and are -- also used by ruling

classes to divide and conquer.

The question remains, then, as to how we -- the global multitude or "working class" -- can take advantage of these cultural resources to our best common advantage while overcoming our present condition of being divided and conquered through some of these very same cultural entities. Roger Rouse offers a suggestion:

Given that power works through the medium of cross-class coalitions, it is crucial to work simultaneously to undermine the ties that link subordinate members of dominant coalitions to the bourgeois groups that form their cores and, more constructively, to foster alternative coalitions across established lines of difference. (Rouse 1995: 398-9)

Rouse is in effect arguing that we relinquish, or at least redefine, some of the cultural lines of difference that Pardo celebrates in her book in favor of identities that correspond more closely to our shared relations to the means of existence. But how do we go about redrawing these lines of identity and difference? By standing on the street corner chanting the *Communist Manifesto*? Or perhaps, returning to the *Prison Notebooks*, we should heed the advice of Antonio Gramsci:

A philosophy of praxis must be a criticism of "common sense", basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that "everyone" is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making "critical" an already existing reality. (Hoare and Smith 1971: 330-1)

This paper has examined excerpts from *Mexican American Women Activists* as case studies for thinking about how subaltern activists and "organic intellectuals" take "already existing reality" -- various cultural phenomena and "common sense" -- and attempt to "renovate" and reshape it into forms more appropriate for collective struggle. The examples have shown how religious, gender, and ethnic identities have contributed to community mobilization and struggle, as well as to the circulation of struggle through the establishment of ties among disparate local activists and larger networks and organizations. In considering how we might redraw some of these lines of identity and difference according to shared relations to the means of existence, we should note that Pardo provides a few encouraging examples of this, even if they are small-scale and unstable. The Monterey Park struggle to remove a parole office from the neighborhood required that residents overcome their antagonisms based on ideas about ethnic difference and mobilize around a shared set of "middle class" sensibilities (Pardo 1998: 142-62). This case, however, typifies the way that subjective notions of "class" identity can function like religion or ethnicity to divide people with common interests. In imagining themselves as "middle class", Monterey Park residents attempt to divorce themselves from the problems of the "working class" as symbolized by the convicts visiting the parole office, without recognizing the connection between their own subordination (as

evinced by the difficulty of their struggle) and that of their imagined others, or the possibility of joining forces with the latter.

A better example is the circulation of environmental justice struggles through networks such as Greenpeace (Pardo 1998: 135). This actually overlaps with the circulation of struggles described above, except that here, as an open conclusion, I want to draw attention to how activists from East LA entered into relationships of mutual support with activists in non-Latino communities throughout the West Coast by recognizing their common material interests. Here we see the potential for developing an alternative cultural politics based on a broader "working class" identity.

Works Cited

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