

Multi-Ethnic Coalition Building in a Diverse School District

José Calderón

Critical Sociology
Vol 21, #1
1995

ABSTRACT: With rapid demographic changes occurring in communities and schools, there is a need of studies that focus on strategies for building cooperative relations between racial and ethnic groups. Using the methodology of critical ethnography, this article examines the process of coalition building in a school district where Latinos and Asian-Pacific Americans have become the majority. Although racial incidents led to conflict between the different racial/ethnic groups in the district, a multi-cultural leadership and ideology emerged to focus on the structural foundations of conflict.

This paper looks at the development of multi-ethnic coalitions, primarily between Latinos and Asian-Pacific Americans in the Alhambra School District, which is undergoing sharp demographic changes. The changes in the school district represent a process of displacement where there has been a double demographic transition. In this case, the Anglo population began to be displaced by Latinos before Asians became the majority in the school district.

The overall question I ask is: "Can Latinos and Asian-Pacific Americans overcome cultural and perceived class differences to coalesce and achieve meaningful participation in the school decision-making process?"

The main material for this narrative is taken from my field notes collected from April, 1991, to the present. As a parent of two Latino students in the Alhambra school district, I have had a special interest in studying and observing the character of inter-ethnic relations in the schools. From this interest, I was one of the founders and co-chairs of the Multi-Ethnic Task Force (now the Multi-Cultural Community Association) and I am presently the co-chair of the Alhambra School District Human Relations Advisory Committee.

Conflict and Coalition Literature

Because of a tendency in the literature to view ethnic relations in terms of black and white, there is very little written on the question of political relations between Latinos and Asian-Pacific Americans. The early sociological literature on ethnicity focused primarily on inter-racial conflicts between blacks and whites (Blauner, 1969; Van den Berghe, 1967; Harris, 1964).

In recent years some important works have gone beyond the black/white dichotomy to look at both the heterogeneity of the Latino and Asian-Pacific populations as well as at the conflicts and commonalities between U. S. ethnic/racial groups (Omi and Winant, 1994; Takaki, 1993; Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Lamphere, 1993; Espiritu, 1992; Villareal and Hernandez, 1991; Nyden and Wiewel, 1991; Andersen and Collins, 1992; Davis, 1990; Garcia, 1988; Keefe, 1988; Santillan, 1988; Borjas, 1985; Moore, 1985; Padilla, 1985). Some literature has also been written on Black-Latino political conflict (Conciatore and Rodriguez, 1995; Falcon, 1988) and on how Puerto Ricans compete with Blacks and other recent immigrants for scarce resources (Ginorio, 1987). Other literature has examined how the experiences of Mexican, Latin American, and Southeast Asian immigrants are quite distinct from that of European groups (Portes, 1979, 1985; Borjas, 1985; Kwong, 1987; Cheng and Bonacich, 1984).

In this realm, some works have been written on the politics of conflict between Latino immigrants and African Americans (Davis, 1994; Oliver and Johnson, 1984) and between African Americans and Korean immigrants (Cheng and Espiritu, 1989). The work by Oliver and Johnson is exemplary in exploring the economic structural reasons for inter-ethnic conflict. Their study is placed in the tradition of early urban theorists who analyzed ethnic conflict as related to the conditions of urban growth and development. However, they go one step further by emphasizing racial and economic factors that were not as prominent in the early American industrial city.

Oliver and Johnson stress that there is a great need for studying the impact of new immigrants and their interaction with the resident population and that there is also a need for studies that highlight the ways in which cooperative relations are established (Oliver and Johnson, 1984).

A recent work, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* by Raphael J. Sonenshein (1993), moves in this direction by looking at the role that leadership and ideology play in the development of biracial coalitions. Sonenshein proposes that the success of biracial coalitions depends primarily on an ideology or set of beliefs that are shared by groups who are commonly seeking political power. Although focused primarily on the incorporation of African Ameri-

cans in the electoral arena, this work is a significant contribution to how biracial coalitions develop at both the mass and elite political levels. As a contribution to the practical aspects of this literature, I utilize the concepts of leadership and ideology in examining the development of multi-ethnic coalition-building in a diverse and changing Southern California school district.

The Settling

The Alhambra School District represents the larger demographic changes taking place throughout California. The district serves a diverse student population of 20,526 including 51.2 percent Asian, 39.0 percent Latino, 8.1 percent White, 0.7 percent Black, and 0.1 percent Native American (Alhambra School District, 1993).

It includes the city of Alhambra and almost all of the city of Monterey Park and now has the largest concentration of Chinese students anywhere in the United States.

The city of Monterey Park exemplifies the larger changes taking place within the school district. Up until 1960, Monterey Park's population consisted of 85 percent Anglo, 3 percent Asian, and 12 percent Latino. By the 1980 census, its population had radically changed to 40 percent Asian, 37 percent Latino, and 20 percent Anglo. In 1990, while the Anglo population dropped to 11.7 percent, the Asian population grew to 56 percent and Latinos dropped to 31.3 percent.

The city of Alhambra has had similar demographic changes. In 1982 the ethnic breakdown included 23 percent Asian, 37 percent Latino, and 39 percent Anglo. By 1991, Asians were the largest group with 36 percent, followed by Latinos with 32 percent and Anglos with 30 percent. The demographic changes in the two cities and in the school district overall have resulted in ethnic relations that are characterized by examples of both conflict and cooperation.¹

Although city politics were historically dominated by growth and developer interests, a controlled growth movement emerged in the 1980s. This movement included some residents who were genuinely in favor of improving the quality of life in the region and others who had a tendency to blame all the "growth" problems on the new Chinese immigrants.

In 1986, alarmed by the growing number of Chinese residents and businesses in the city, an all-white city council endorsed a resolution making English the official language of the city. This resolution called for the U.S. Congress to immediately close the national borders, the use of English in all city literature, non-support to any city that supported sanctuary for new immigrants, and the use of city police in supporting the deportation of so-called "illegals." In November, 1987,

a multi-ethnic coalition, the Coalition for Harmony in Monterey Park (CHAMP) was able to defeat the resolution and lead a trend at the city government level toward more cooperation between the different groups.

Alongside the tensions at the city government level, there were numerous racial incidents involving Latino, Asian, and Anglo students. In 1986, one fight led to the stabbing of a Chinese student at Mark Keppel High School in the Alhambra School District.

Although the school district established a series of cultural "harmony" retreat programs to sensitize student leaders to the diverse cultures in the area, the tensions between the various ethnic groups now shifted from the city government level to the high schools.

On March 9, 1991, a fight between Latino and Chinese students at San Gabriel High School occurred when students began taunting each other with racial slurs. The fight escalated to include at least ten Latino students and two Chinese students. Subsequently, a special panel of school district employees held expulsion hearings for five of the Latino students. This hearing decided not to expel the five Latino students, citing a lack of evidence and positive identification of those involved.

On March 29th, another fight took place, also racially motivated, between two Vietnamese American students and two Anglo students at San Gabriel High School. One of the Anglo students involved in the fight was the son of an Alhambra policeman who placed pressure on the District Attorney's office to file charges. Subsequently the Vietnamese students were charged with battery on school property.

Out of these two incidents, two separate coalitions developed. The Coalition for Equality, led by members of the West San Gabriel Valley League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), was primarily made up of Latino parents and educational professionals. The Asian Coalition, led by the Chinese American Parents and Teachers Association of Southern California, included 21 different Asian groups. This group was largely composed of Chinese professionals including teachers, teachers' aides, and bilingual social service workers. They questioned the District Attorney's office directly as to why the Vietnamese students were singled out when the Latinos involved in a similar incident were not charged. They requested an investigation into the issue and pressured the school district to acknowledge that there was a racial problem in the school.

While the intention of the Asian coalition, according to the President Marina Tse, was to have the charges dropped, the District Attorney's office responded by filing charges of battery on school property against the Latinos involved in the first incident.

School officials did not help the matter and denied there were racial tensions in their school. One school principal blamed the whole inci-

dent on "machismo" while another blamed it on the natural "hormones" of teenagers.

Separate Coalitions

At first, the two coalitions were not able to come together because of perceived class and cultural differences. Within the Latino coalition, there were some individuals who perceived the Chinese as being primarily an entrepreneurial elite with substantial funds and resources. These individuals, although primarily from the professional and managerial sector themselves, perceived that members of the Asian coalition were predominantly Chinese businessmen of a higher class than themselves.²

Similarly, the Asian coalition was having identical discussions about the Latino community. Some members of the Asian coalition proposed that the Latino community was better situated to wield political power since they had a good number of visible politicians and established organizations that could represent their interests. Although both coalitions were primarily made up of members from the professional sector, it was difficult for the two coalitions to come together because of how they perceived each other's power.

As a result of these perceived differences, the Asian Coalition and the Coalition for Equality met separately over the summer months. Although meeting separately, the coalitions diligently took up the cases of the Latino and Vietnamese students by involving the parents of the students charged, ensuring legal representation, attending all pre-trial hearings, speaking at school board meetings on their behalf, and communicating the coalitions' concerns with the District Attorney's office.

Multi-Ethnic Leadership in Coalition-Building

One of the primary components for the building of biracial coalitions is the existence of an "interracial leadership" that can develop trust and equal political status over time (Sonenshein, 1994).

Although the coalitions functioned separately over the summer, the leaders of LULAC and the Chinese American PTA began to meet informally to find ways to bring the two coalitions together. These meetings were essential; had they not taken place, the media and school officials could have further divided the groups.

Some local media printed articles that made it sound as though the Chinese American PTA had been responsible for the filing of charges against the Latinos. Further, at various school board meetings, some school board members took the heat off themselves by also pointing the finger at the Chinese American organization.

School discipline procedures (i.e., suspension, expulsion, the calling in of city police, and the filing of criminal charges) rarely deal with why students are in conflict, but tend to focus on the actions (on the fighting) that it took to resolve the conflict. Consequently, the underlying basis for conflict remains unresolved. On the one hand, it is important to laud the academic accomplishments of Asian students in the schools. On the other, there is a need to get at the roots of why, overall, the Alhambra School District is failing to meet the educational needs of Latinos.

Continued pressure by the Multi-Ethnic Task Force on school administrators to focus on these issues led to the establishment of an official advisory group to the school board, the Alhambra School District Human Relations Advisory Committee. This 30-member committee has broad representation from the Multi-Ethnic Task Force, PTAs, teacher's unions, staff, administrators, and student representatives from the district's three high schools.

In May, 1993, this committee wrote and passed through the school board, a policy to deal with hate crimes. This policy requires all principals to develop a school-wide plan for "creating an environment which allows all persons to realize their full individual potential through understanding and appreciation of society's diversity of race, ethnic background, national origin, religious belief, sex, age, disability, or sexual orientation." As part of this policy, the school district also agreed to promote conflict resolution techniques and to provide a voice for students regarding these issues.

The passage of this policy, as well as continued incidents of racial conflict between Latino and Asian students, gave impetus to the Multi-Ethnic Task Force transforming itself into a membership organization. Calling itself the Multi-Cultural Community Association, the organization took the lead in obtaining funding for the institutionalization of conflict resolution classes as part of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Although the participants of coalition-building efforts in the Alhambra School District had the commonality of being professionals, they divided along ideological lines. In both the Asian Coalition and the Coalition for Equality, a "narrow nationalist" ideological interest that emphasized "doing only for your own group" kept the coalitions from merging into one. Only when a leadership emerged to combat the divisiveness of school and state institutions was the ideology of separatism able to be neutralized. Rather than focusing on the cultural and perceived class differences between the various ethnic groups,

this leadership built an effective multi-ethnic coalition by uniting on a common ideology that focused organizational efforts on the structural foundations of conflict.

The success of coalitions between ethnic groups from varied cultural and historical backgrounds, as the Alhambra School District example has shown, depends on a type of leadership and ideology that can build short-term tactical alliances into long-term strategic goals for systemic and institutional change. This is crucial to whether the institution can be moved to make the types of changes needed to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse population.

Many schools are still structured in a traditional top-down hierarchy which was used at one time to meet the demands of an assembly line type of society. With advances in new information-oriented technologies and the trend toward a more interdependent world, there is a need to reform school districts in the direction of diversifying the curriculum and governance structure to involve parents, teachers, and students in the decision-making process. Whether such efforts succeed will go a long way toward establishing whether coalition-building between different ethnic/racial groups is a short or long-term development.

Notes

1. Recent literature on the Monterey Park and Alhambra region includes: Calderon (1988, 1990), Horton (1989, 1992), Horton and Calderon (1990), Saito (1993), Pardo, (1990), Fong (1993), and Yen Fen Tseng (1994).

2. A recent study by Associate Professor Paul Ong of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center shows the inaccuracy of these perceptions. Although the median income of Asian-Pacific Americans is higher than that of the White population, they have more people in poverty (14 percent compared to 9 percent of Whites). Although Asian American entrepreneurs comprised 2.6 percent of all firms in 1987, they accounted for only 1.7 percent of all receipts. Further, there are a disproportionate number of Asian-Pacific Americans concentrated in low and mid-level positions with little hope of advancing into the managerial strata.

3. Pitzer College students, as part of a project funded by the Ohio Campus Project and a class titled "Community and Social Responsibility," expressed concern not only about the disproportionate number of Latino students grouped in lower-level classes but also about the teacher expectations that varied according to class level.

References

- Andersen, Margaret L. and Patricia Hill Collins. 1992. *Race, Class, and Gender*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Blauner, Robert. 1972. *Racial Oppression in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Borjas, George J. and Marta Tienda. 1985. *Hispanics in the U. S. Economy*. Orlando: Academic Press.

The leaders of the Asian Coalition and the Coalition for Equality came together every time a divisive issue came up. Further, these divisive issues were openly discussed at the general meetings of the two coalitions. Gradually, those members which were openly blaming other ethnic groups for the problems became a minority.

By the end of the summer, the two separate coalitions were able to overcome the divisions and tensions by focusing on the structural reasons for the problems. In December, 1991, at a meeting attended by 70 individuals from both coalitions, the Multi-Ethnic Task Force was formed which included representatives from the Asian, White, and Latino communities.

Common Ideology and Interest

Sonenshein proposes that biracial coalitions are more likely to develop if the different groups are close in ideology and if leaders are able to help in ameliorating any conflicts of interest (Sonenshein, 1993).

In the Alhambra School District coalition-building effort, the coalition participants were primarily from professional occupations. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright has categorized these positions in the stratification structure as being in "contradictory locations" since they have a tendency to vacillate between class interests (Wright, 1985). Hence, as in the Canadian example described by Richard Thompson (1979), the ideological similarities or differences could not be discerned by merely examining the occupational statuses of the participants since they were all part of the professional category. Here, the use of ethnographic description and interpretation proves useful for drawing out how the intersection of class and ethnicity can unite and divide members of the same social stratum (Thompson, 1979).

Before the Asian Coalition and the Coalition for Equality merged into one coalition, they both had individual members that espoused a "narrow nationalist" ideology. This ideology promoted the practice of "doing only for one's own group" and blaming other racial/ethnic groups for "one's" gains or losses. It differed with the leadership's ideology in both coalitions which sought to overcome the divisive tactics of insensitive school administrators, the district attorney's office, and the media and instead to focus on the institutional and structural foundations of the conflict.

The leadership in both coalitions was able to neutralize the ideology of separatism by uniting the majority of members around ten different proposals aimed at changing the status quo in the school district. These proposals included: a review of disciplinary procedures, the application of conflict resolution programs, the implementation of a multi-cultural curriculum, sensitivity training for all school

personnel, and the involvement of parents, students, and teachers in the decision-making process. The "separate" coalitions evolved into one coalition by agreeing that ethnic/racial tensions in the school district involved larger inequities that required multi-ethnic collaboration. These inequities included the question as to why Latinos have had such a high expulsion and drop-out rate in the school district. A school board report of the academic years 1989-92, written by Assistant Superintendent Diane Saurenman, showed that Latinos comprised 56 percent of all student drop-outs. At a meeting with the Multi-Cultural Community Association in the Fall of 1993, school administrators informed the group that this pattern had been going on for 20 years and they did not know how to explain it.

In terms of the number of high school graduates completing a six-component group of requirements for admittance into college, the figures were even more dismal when Latinos were compared to other groups in the schools. In the years 1990-1992, Latinos ranked the lowest of all ethnic groups in completing the requirements at all three high schools. At Alhambra High School only 17 percent of Latinos completed the requirements as compared to 38 percent of Asians and 26 percent of others. At Mark Keppel only 3 percent of Latinos completed as compared to 28 percent of Asians and 8 percent of others; and at San Gabriel High the pattern was 4 percent for Latinos as compared to 29 percent for Asians and 12 percent for others.

What followed from these figures were the post-graduation aspirations by ethnicity. In the period 1989-1992, the average at all three high schools revealed that while 80 percent of Asian graduating seniors aspired to four-year colleges, only 11 percent of Latinos had such plans. Instead, at Alhambra High, 60 percent of Latinos opted for vocational/technical schools and 64 percent chose military service or the work force (Saurenman, 1993).

While school officials utilized expulsions, arrests, and the police as a means of dealing with the increased tensions on the campus, the Multi-Cultural Community Association rallied the various ethnic groups around abolishing a tracking system which grouped Latino students at the lower class levels based on ability. The Association utilized participant observation studies carried out by Pitzer College students to argue that most Latinos students were tracked into the lower-level A, B, C courses and not into the honors and advanced placement levels.³ Simultaneously, the Association led coalition efforts around issues that affected all students. In a presentation to the school board on March 21, 1993, a parent with two children in the Alhambra school district spoke for the Multi-Ethnic Task Force in pointing out that:

- Calderón, José. 1989. "How The English Only Initiative Passed in California." Pp. 93-109 in *Estudios Chicanos and the Politics of Community*, edited by Mary Romero and Cordelia Candelaria. Oakland, CA: Cragmont Publications.
- _____. 1990. "Latinos and Ethnic Conflict in Suburbia: The Case of Monterey Park." *Latino Studies Journal* 1(2):23-32.
- Cheng, Lucie and Edna Bonacich. 1984. *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cheng, Lucie and Yen Espiritu. 1989. "Korean Businesses in Black and Hispanic Neighborhoods: A Study of Inter-group Relations." *Sociological Perspectives* 32(4):521-534.
- Conciatore, Jacqueline and Roberto Rodriguez. 1995. "Blacks and Hispanics: A Fragile Alliance." In *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, edited by Paula S. Rothenberg. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Davis, Mike. 1990. *City of Quartz*. New York: Verso.
- _____. 1994. "Compton Blues." *The Nation* 295(8):268-271.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. 1992. *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Falcon, Angelo. 1988. "Black and Latino Politics in New York City: Race and Ethnicity in a Changing Urban Context." Pp. 171-194 in *Latinos and the Political System*, edited by Chris F. Garcia. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Fong, Timothy P. 1994. *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Garcia, F. Chris. 1988. *Latinos and the Political System*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ginorio, Angela B. 1987. "Puerto Rican Ethnicity and Conflict." Pp. 182-206 in *Ethnicity and Conflict: International Perspectives*, edited by Jerry Boucher, Dan Landis, and Karen Arnold Clark. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hardy-Fanta, Carol. 1993. *Latina Politics, Latino Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Harris, Marvin. 1964. *Patterns of Race in the Americas*. New York: Norton.
- Horton, John. 1989. "The Politics of Ethnic Change: Grass-roots Responses to Economic and Demographic Restructuring in Monterey Park, California." *Urban Geography* 10(6):578-592.
- _____. 1992. "The Politics of Diversity." Pp. 215-245 in *Shaping Diversity*, edited by Louise Lamphere. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Horton, John and José Calderón. 1990. "Language Struggles in a Changing California Community." Pp. 186-194 in *Language Loyalties*, edited by Jim Crawford. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Keefe, Susan E. and Amado M. Padilla. 1987. *Chicano Ethnicity*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Kwong, Peter. 1987. *The New Chinatown*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Lamphere, Louise. 1993. *Structuring Diversity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Moore, Joan and Harry Pachon. 1985. *Hispanics in the United States*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Nyden, Philip W. and Wim Wiewel. 1991. *Challenging Uneven Development*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Oliver, Melvin and James H. Johnson, Jr. 1984. "Inter-Ethnic Conflict in an Urban Ghetto: The Case of Blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles." *Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change* 6:57-94.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960's to the 1980's*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Padilla, Felix M. 1985. *Latino Ethnic Consciousness*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Pardo, Mary Santoli. 1990. "Identity and Resistance: Mexican American Women and Grassroots Activism in Two Los Angeles Communities." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Los Angeles.
- Portes, Alejandro. 1979. "Illegal Immigration and the International System: Lessons From Recent Legal Mexican Immigrants to the United States." *Social Problems* 26(4):425-438.
- Portes, Alejandro and Robert L. Bach. 1985. *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Saito, Leland. 1993. "Asian Americans and Latinos in San Gabriel Valley, California: Ethnic Political Cooperation and Redistricting 1990-92." *Amerasia Journal* 19(2):55-68.
- Santillan, Richard. 1974. "Latino Politics in the Midwestern United States: 1915-1986." Pp. 99-118 in *Latinos and the Political System*, edited by F. Chris Garcia. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Saurenman, Dianne. 1992. *Alhambra School Board Report According to Policy and Regulations 5113.2*. Alhambra, CA.
- Sonenshein, Raphael J. 1993. *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Takaki, Ronald. 1993. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little Brown and Co.
- Thompson, Richard H. 1979. "Ethnicity Versus Class: An Analysis of Conflict in a North American Chinese Community." *Ethnicity* 6:306-326.
- Tseng, Yen-Fen. 1994. "The Chinese Ethnic Economy: San Gabriel Valley, Los Angeles County." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 16(2):169-189.
- U. S. Bureau of the Census. 1980. *Statistical Abstract*. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- _____. 1986. *Statistical Abstract*. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- _____. 1990. *Statistical Abstract*. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Van den Berghe, Pierre L. 1967. *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*. New York: Wiley.
- Villareal, Roberto E. and Norma G. Hernandez. 1991. *Latinos and Political Coalitions: Political Empowerment for the 1990's*. New York: Praeger.
- Wright, Erik Olin. 1985. *Classes*. New York: Verso.