



César Chávez: A Personal and Historical Testimony

Richard A. García

The Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 63, No. 2. (May, 1994), pp. 225-233.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0030-8684%28199405%2963%3A2%3C225%3ACCAPAH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7>

The Pacific Historical Review is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Notes and Documents

César Chávez: A Personal and Historical Testimony

RICHARD A. GARCÍA

*The author is a member of the ethnic studies department in
California State University, Hayward.*

The living spirit grows and even outgrows its earlier forms of expression; it freely chooses the men in whom it lives and who proclaim it. This living spirit is eternally renewed and pursues its goal in manifold and inconceivable ways throughout the history of mankind.

C. G. Jung

When the genius of the people is released, it is a powerful force.

César Chávez

It is not often that any of us consciously participates in a historical event. I did on Thursday, April 29, 1993, when 35,000 people marched in Delano, California, to honor the memory of César Chávez. I was not quite sure what to expect, but I knew I had to go. I first met and supported Chávez and the Farm Workers Union in the late sixties. Consequently, personal memories, personal reflections, and the desire to be in the presence of César Chávez again drove me to pay my last respects.

Most of the thousands were there to “remember” their personal or public memories of Chávez, but countless others were there to experience “the end of an era” or were there to “liberate” and resurrect César Chávez from just being a union leader, a “Mexican American hero,” or a “Chicano symbol.” Many had already started to see him as a national metaphor of justice, humanity, equality, and freedom. It seemed to me that many of us were there

consciously or not to place César Chávez in the pantheon of national and international American heroes. This was underscored by the statements sent by the Pope, the President of Mexico, and President Bill Clinton.

As I was marching, an image came to my mind: the image of John Adams when he was on his deathbed and was told that Jefferson had just died. Adams discounted the news of death. "Jefferson lives," he declared. Of course, he meant in the soul of America. In a similar fashion, we were there, I felt, on April 29, marching down the dusty, hot streets of Delano not to acknowledge that Chávez was dead, but to proclaim that Chávez lives—in the Mexican and the American soul, as well as in the international soul.

The majority of the marchers were farmworkers and their families. They came because they were touched by Chávez's presence. There were also many of us, the old students and the old activists now turned academics and intellectuals. We were there to feel the innocence of the sixties, the fieriness of yesteryears' rebellion, and the *lumbre* (the fire) of Chávez's heart and will. We wanted that period back. In this essay, I want to explore Chávez's sense of his own historical presence, the sense of spirituality that he exuded, and the fire in his heart that he instilled in us.

In May 1969, I met César Chávez at a breakfast at a downtown hotel in El Paso, Texas. In attendance were a cross-section of the city's Mexicanos: representatives of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MECHA), the Alianza (a south El Paso barrio youth group with ties to Reies López Tijerina of New Mexico), Mexican American local politicians, university professors, local teachers, community leaders, students, and some farm workers, as well as Anglo American "friends" of the farmworkers. Chávez was seeking support for the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee which, with AFL-CIO help, had been engaged since 1964 in a protracted struggle with agribusiness. A more immediate goal of these populist meetings in which he had participated throughout the country was the grape strike and the promotion of his innovative secondary consumer boycotts.

The Mexican Americans at the breakfast were there not only to show their support for the boycotts, but also to meet the now famous Chávez, especially to "feel" his presence. For all of us, Chávez seemed to represent cultural solace and potential leadership in an alienated and powerless world. He seemed to represent our

lost sensitivity of the land, our historical past, and our cultural traditions. Consequently, regardless of our ideological orientation, all of us at the meeting felt the “presence” of our lost *Mexicanidad*. Although nobody said it, many of us perceived a spiritual savior rather than a political leader.¹

What all of us Mexican Americans, with our young Chicano sons and daughters, were experiencing at that meeting was what philosopher Philip Wheelright has called a “poetic consciousness” being recontextualized.² There we began to “see” and to “feel” from a new angle of vision that transcended the meeting. Each of us with our different perspectives entered the “world of Chávez,” as one would enter a new text, and experienced, between our personal view and the new context, a new vision of reality.

Chávez uttered very little at that breakfast: “support,” “agribusiness,” “familia,” “togetherness.” His words were almost unnecessary since the message seemed so clear. Chávez liked to give facts and felt that each listener could read the truths of oppression from the litany. But the message for many of us was not so much in the “facts” than in the “presence” of Chávez. This was reminiscent of Christ’s followers listening to him and his “word” and feeling his persona. Chávez’s “presence” did not denote power, action, or political program, but rather something more akin to the Indian Juan Diego in Mexican history who was the messenger of Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1531—the humble innocence that is the bearer of the words of another world.

The atmosphere projected by Chávez’s presence and persona was, metaphorically, of a new reality of trust, hope, love, and brotherhood. As a result, all of us Mexicanos felt the possibility of peace, not the chaos of the sixties; a stability of brotherhood, not the radicalization of the youth; and a world of consensus, not the turbulent world of radical politics, nor the cries of “Uncle Tom” or “Aztlán,” or “revolución. The breakfast meeting engendered commonalities, not differences.³

For most of the Mexicanos attending the breakfast, the central configuration, consequently, was Chávez’s spiritual “presence” which

1. I took notes on my observations and reflections at the meeting. This essay is for Karina who helped me see beyond the dusty streets of Delano.

2. See Philip Wheelright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington, 1973), esp. chaps. 4-6.

3. For insights into Chávez and the 1960s and 1970s, see Jacques Levy, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York, 1975) and Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard A. García, *César Chávez: A Life of Struggle and Sacrifice* (Norman, 1995).

was intertwined with symbols: of religion and motherhood—Our Lady of Guadalupe (which Chávez promoted), the farm workers' flag (which became the symbol of the eternal campesino), and the atmosphere of a struggle for justice and dignity (which Chávez espoused). What we mythically felt was what anthropologist Octavio Romano has argued was the central core of our mexicanidad: indianism, immigration, spirituality, historical struggle, and the quest for freedom from oppression and ontological definition.⁴ As essayist Richard Rodríguez wrote in 1992: "Chávez wielded a spiritual authority that, if it was political at all, it was not mundane and had to be exerted in large, priestly ways or it was squandered. César Chávez was a folk hero."⁵

With Chávez, Mexican Americans throughout the Southwest had stopped thinking of their own "self-constructed" worlds of individualism, egoism, racism, money, poverty, and barrios. Our private individualized worlds for a morning in 1969 had become responsive to our hearts and not to our heads. Chávez, that morning as he had done over the last number of years, had established what Wheelright has suggested is a new responsive-imaginative act which each Mexicano present at the meeting could feel: their separate but common "soul," historically, ontologically, and epistemologically. Chávez, throughout the Southwest, had become "la causa," and la causa was each Mexican's need for redemption from modernity. Chávez was a metaphor for our lost ethnic paradise. The problem was our interpretation of this "paradise." When the question was asked: "César, when will you become the leader of the Chicano Movement?" The new responsive-imaginative presence was broken. The mood was now political, ideological, and temporal. Chávez's persona, with its dynamics of mystery, awe, and "presence," was broken at this point when the meeting turned to the concrete realities of issues, problems, theories, and ideologies.⁶

Nevertheless, Chávez's "presence" had touched all those in attendance. He had for a moment formed the living spirit of our existence and forged a regressive-progression Sartrean vision of hope, innocence, and possibilities. It was not Rudolfo "Corky"

4. Richard A. García, "Creating a Consciousness, Memories and Expectations: The Burden of Octavio Romano," in Tatcho Mindiola, Jr. and Emilio Zamora, *Chicano Discourse* (Houston, 1992), 6-31.

5. Richard Rodríguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York, 1992), 68.

6. I asked Chávez the question about leadership since many of us in 1969 wanted to know how he perceived his role beyond the farm workers struggle.

Gonzales's political-historical visions of "I am a Joaquin," nor the revolutionary visions of Reies López Tijerina's struggles for Tierra Amarilla, nor the pragmatic third party formulations of José Angel Gutiérrez's Raza Unida Party. Instead, it was a vision of a pastoral past blessed by la Virgen de Guadalupe. However, if Chávez's "presence" was enduring as a new symbolic representation of the Mexican American/Chicano "soul," his organizational strategies and ideological stances were open to criticism.⁷

As Richard Rodríguez has accurately pointed out, "by the late 1970s, Chávez had spent his energies in legislative maneuvers. His union got mixed up in a power struggle with the teamsters. Criticized in the liberal press for allowing his union to unravel, Chávez became a quixotic figure; Gandhi without an India."⁸ Moreover, Chávez did not accept the poet Alurista's mythical Aztlán nor the militant Chicanos new ethnocentrism. Chávez was mythical without being mystic; he was ultimately a union leader in search of a vision. A vision that would be shaped by the 1960s sociopolitical context.

The context which set the stage for the "presence" of Chávez was established by the Mexican-American intellectuals in the early 1960s. In a conference headed by the leading Mexican-American intellectual, Julian Samora, the socioeconomic and intellectual conditions of the Mexican American community were analyzed, and ultimately resulted in the publication, *La Raza: Forgotten Americans* in 1966. Scholars and political leaders such as George Sánchez, Ernesto Galarza, Eduardo Quevedo, Eugene González, Bernardo Valéz, Julian Samora, and others met at Notre Dame University and later in San Francisco to help formulate the themes and ideas with which they wanted to shape the Spanish-speaking communities.⁹

Educator George Sánchez, for example, emphasized the need for the persistence of the Spanish language as key to gaining access to the consciousness of "Lo Mexicano." John A. Wagner, a clergyman, underscored three basic linkages within the Spanish-speaking mind: poverty, spirituality, and diversity of religious affiliation. Catholicism, he said, was predominant, but Protestantism of different variations was also central because it linked a ministry of

7. Richard A. García, "The Chicano Movement and the Mexican American Community, 1972-1978: An Interpretative Essay," *Socialist Review*, VIII (July-Oct. 1978), 117-136; Carlos Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (London, 1989).

8. Rodríguez, *Days of Obligation*, 68.

9. Julian Samora, ed., *La Raza: Forgotten Americans* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1966), v-xvii.

spirituality with one of economic help. Wagner believed that Mexicanos found something lacking in the United States Catholic church; it did not meet the needs of their spirituality: an inter-relationship of leadership, hope, and trust. Chávez, he felt, could fulfill that need.¹⁰

Political scientist John Martínez noted that, outside of union leadership, most of the Mexican-American leadership was middleclass. Neither unions nor the viable political organizations such as the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), the Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organization (PASSO), the Community Service Organization (CSO), GI Forum, or the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the oldest and strongest—seemed to possess a spiritual core or a philosophy that reached every Mexican American. LULAC had originally (1930s–1950s) seemed different, but by the late 1950s and early 1960s it had lost much of its “spiritual” and political potential.¹¹

In short, these organizations and even the most prominent politicians of the early 1960s, such as Henry B. González of Texas, Edward Roybal of California, Kiki de la Garza of Texas, and Henry Montoya of New Mexico did not have the national or “ethnic” presence to be a major leader of the Mexican-American communities.¹² There were no Martin Luther King Jr.’s in Mexican American politics in the early 1960s. What the Samora group did was to forge a politics that crossed Tocquevillian pluralism with Mexico’s traditional authoritarianism: the man on the white horse, but receptive to the issues in the community rather than to a political program. Chicanos envisioned a Mexican-American Franklin D. Roosevelt who had the qualities of Lázaro Cárdenas. Ironically, this cry for a new leader and era sought community not individualism, leadership not civil servants, justice not welfare or political revolution, and meaningful integration not prideful separation. The Mexican-American intellectuals sought to return to an ethnicity based on “Lo Mexicano,” not to incorporate a world nationalism. As the Samora group announced: “The Spanish-speaking population has reached a stage in its development where its influence is being felt in local, regional, and national matters. Private and public agencies at all levels are ready to listen to the ideas and even demands that [this group] is ready to express.”¹³

10. *Ibid.*, 1-26, 27-46.

11. *Ibid.*, 47-62.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Samora, *La Raza*, 211. See also Richard A. García, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929–1941* (College Station, Tex., 1991).

This new group of intellectuals was receptive to Chávez's spiritual leadership, and the new *grito* (cry) was for an ethnic "presence," especially in the person of the emerging Chicano youth.

By 1968, young Chicanos throughout the United States were accepting Chávez as their own. Stan Steiner, in his very popular and widely used book in Chicano studies courses, *La Raza: The Mexican American* (1969), sought to capture the attention of these Chicano voices.¹⁴ Steiner's book became the text for young Chicanos, like José of California who argued on behalf of "Brown power" and who believed that Chávez was struggling for "family ties" and "tribal ties." Other youths, like those engaged in the Crusade for Justice in Colorado, supported Chávez because they believed he supported their cultural nationalism and antipolice sentiment. Still others saw Chávez as being in the tradition of a Mexican peasant or in the mold of a Mexican revolutionary such as Emiliano Zapata or Pancho Villa. He emerged as larger than life in the "Corrido of César Chávez" which lifted him from only a "temporal presence" to the "mythical presence" of a folk hero.¹⁵

Ironically, such sentiments caused growers to view the Chávez movement as racist and separatist. Indeed, many of the youth also believed this. To the Chicano youth, Chávez was for La Raza—the people, the race. It was only a short leap of faith for the radicalizing barrio youth, the university students, and the nascent Chicano intelligentsia to believe that Chávez stood for separation, third world nationalism, and class (union) struggle. It was also only a short leap of historical fiction to link Chávez as the personification of the "Chicano" struggle that had gone on since the 1848 war with Mexico. Historian Rodolfo Acuña, for example, wrote that "César Chávez emerged as the central figure in the [farm workers'] strike [in 1965]. Events converted him into a Ghandi-like Mexican leader, although from the beginning it was emphasized that this was not a Mexican fight, but rather one for the rights of all humans." "Chávez," Acuña argued, was the right man to get the nationalistic Mexicans together with other workers and friends. Chávez put them all under the red flag with the distorted eagle and a banner of the Virgin de Guadalupe.¹⁶ Chávez, in spite of the lens through which Chicano radicals perceived him, said, "La Raza? Why be racist? Our belief is to help everyone, not just one race. Humanity is our belief." Steiner observed that when Chávez told Chicanos this, "their faces

14. Stan Steiner, *La Raza: The Mexican Americans* (New York, 1970), 166.

15. *Ibid.*, 120-121, 315.

16. Acuña, *Occupied America* (2nd ed. New York, 1981), 269-270.

fell” in disbelief. They had thought he was a nationalist, not a humanist.¹⁷

For Chávez, civil rights was linked to a fight for human rights. He would often say of Mexican Americans, specifically the farm workers: “We are weak. And the weak have no rights, but [only] the right to sacrifice until they are strong.” In the same way, the young Chicanos, especially through the voice of their radical journal *La Raza*, argued that they also wanted “the guarantee of our constitutional rights,” but they felt that this meant “our rights as a people who have their own culture, their own language, their own heritage, and their own way of life.” They thought that Chávez believed the same. However, Chávez meant rights under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. But for the youth of the barrios and the universities, Chávez’s civil rights were interpreted as cultural rights, and as rights for a colonized people to self-determination, self-empowerment, and communal empowerment. Stan Steiner claimed that in the Chicano mind “civil rights became cultural rights.”¹⁸ Consequently, for the Chicanos of the sixties, the fiery cries of “Huelga! Huelga! Huelga!” and “Viva Chávez!” carried the whisper of a militant historical-cultural memory, a rhythm of political struggle, a sense of national pride, and a movement of radical activism. They felt that Chávez agreed with the codification of the ideas of Alurista’s *Plan de Aztlán* which called for the “return” to the homeland of Aztlán. They accepted his “presence” and his spiritual leadership.

That morning in El Paso, Texas, as was happening throughout the Southwest, the Mexican Americans not only saw themselves in Chávez but felt the *lumbre espiritual* (the spiritual fire) that he radiated. They felt their right “to be” and not just exist without power and in sorrow. Chávez himself said it best: “It is a question of suffering with some kind of hope. That’s better than suffering with no hope at all.” We all sensed this *lumbre* in the presence of Chávez and tried to make it our own as we whispered quietly and reverently: “César,” “César,” “César” in almost mantra fashion. We found in Chávez the *lumbre por dentro* and through him—the messenger—found it in ourselves, regardless of class or age. Chávez was, metaphorically, our soul and our vision in a world of nothing-

17. Steiner, *La Raza*, 317.

18. These statements are taken from Steiner, *La Raza*, 170, 171.

ness and chaos. Chávez was not only the soul, but the fire in our soul—the logos of the Chicano experience.¹⁹

In spite of his death, César Chávez still lives in his philosophy that cooperation is the aim of life, common respect is the basis of cooperation and happiness, and spirituality and humanism are the criteria of respect. As Chávez said, we need “a cultural revolution. And we need a cultural revolution among ourselves not only in art, but also in the realm of the spirit. As poor people and immigrants, all of us [Americans and Mexicans] have brought to this country some very important things of the spirit.... We must never forget that the human element is the most important thing we have—if we get away from this, we are certain to fail.” César Chávez remains for the twenty-first century a mirror of our Mexican and American agrarian soul, our liberal and humanistic traditions, and our need to maintain justice as the philosophical cornerstone in a new world of diversity.²⁰

19. Luis A. Solis-Garza, “César Chávez: The Chicano Messiah,” in Edward Simmen, ed., *Pain and Promise: The Chicano Today* (New York, 1972), 298. The Chávez quote on hope is on p. 304.

20. Levy, *César Chávez*, 92, 163. For the influence of Dolores Huerta, see Richard A. García, “Dolores Huerta: Woman, Organizer, Symbol,” *California History*, LXXII (Spring 1993), 56-72.