

**AMERICAN ME?**  
**DOES “SÍ SE PUEDE” TRANSLATE TO “YES WE CAN”?**  
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***Introduction***

Recently, philosophers of the “American” tradition have initiated a sustained effort to both resurrect some of the lost figures of their tradition and to show how much of an influence/impact this philosophical tradition has had on *American* society.<sup>1</sup> Latino/a figures and their contributions to *American* society have been conspicuous by their absence in this recent *American* renaissance. In this essay, I make the case that *American* philosophers engaged in this renaissance effort should consider readjusting their priorities to more closely resemble current *American* realities. I propose that the focus of this current *American* renaissance should instead be directed on recognizing Latino/a figures and their contributions to *American* society, even if these figures and contributions do not directly connect to the *American* philosophical tradition of yesteryears.

My argument has two interrelated parts. The first part argues that if the *American* philosophical tradition is committed to a brand of political philosophy that begins from “lived-experience,” or what I would call activist-philosophy, then one key area *American* philosophers have overlooked is the Latino/a experience. The Latino/a experience has a rich history of organic and politically successful organizing efforts, ranging from the struggles of the United Farm Workers union (UFW) to the recent Immigrant Rights Movement. The second part of the argument states that if *American* philosophers do not recognize the contributions of the Latino/a community as part of the *American* tradition,

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<sup>1</sup> For some recent examples, see Pratt 2011 and Kagg 2011.

then the *American* philosophical tradition will find itself conceding much ground to the proponents of the “Latino Threat Narrative.” The *Latino Threat Narrative* is a phrase originally coined by anthropologist Leo Chávez to denote an ideologically conservative view of the Latino/a community as inherently anti-*American* and a perpetual threat to the *American* nation. Following Leo Chávez, I argue that the only way to combat the *Latino Threat Narrative* is by constructing a “Latino Contribution Narrative;” in other words, by recognizing that Latino/as are not just in *America*, but also are a formative part of its existence. If the *American* philosophical tradition wishes to combat the *Latino Threat Narrative*, then I argue that their current renaissance should take steps to make the *Latino Contribution Narrative* central to their efforts.

### ***An American Story, Sí o No?***

Conservative estimates place the number of people who demonstrated in support of immigrant rights during the various marches in the spring of 2006 at well over 3 million (Bada *et al.* V). The now infamous 2005 Sensenbrenner Bill was the spark that set off these demonstrations. Chief among some of its more draconian measures, the Sensenbrenner Bill would have made felons out of undocumented immigrants (currently unlawful presences is only a misdemeanor offence) and it would criminalize the humanitarian act of feeding, clothing, or giving shelter to undocumented immigrants (United States. Cong, Section 202 and 205).

My family and I took part in these demonstrations and they marked the first time my parents had ever engaged in a political action. My parents found it necessary to take part in these demonstrations because at one point in their lives they were both undocumented immigrants, and in fact, they met as undocumented immigrants while

taking evening English classes in downtown San Diego. Even though their status was “unlawful,” they eventually married and had three children (my two sisters, Lorena and Sandra, and myself). Thanks to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), my parents were able to fix their legal status and become legal permanent residents (LPRs) of the United States by 1989. In the spring of 2006, my parents were still only LPRs, which meant they would not be able to vote in the 2006 mid-term elections. Regardless, their experience as undocumented immigrants had deeply shaped their lives, as well as the lives of my sisters and myself—even though the three of us were natural-born citizens<sup>2</sup>—and it was out of this shared experience that my family and I viewed this bill as morally wrong and we took to the streets of San Ysidro, California with thousands of other demonstrators.

Fortunately, the Sensenbrenner Bill was eventually defeated in the Senate, but as a consequence of their participation in these demonstrations and the looming threat of new Sensenbrenner-type Bills on the horizon, both my parents finally applied for and became U.S. citizens. Upon taking the oath of citizenship, the first thing my parents did was to register to vote and in the 2008 they voted for the first time—both voting for Barack Obama. In a nutshell, this is my family’s *American* story. This is how my family went from simply being in *America* to becoming an active part of it, and this is not a unique story. The organizing efforts of the Latino/a community have played a central role in many of the recent social movements within the United States that have inspired or translated into significant political change.

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<sup>2</sup> For more personal, but still philosophical, accounts of how the unlawful immigration status of parents not only shapes their own sense of self, but also that of their citizen children, see Mendoza 2009 and Sánchez 2011.

Arguably, the primary example of such a movement is the establishment and successes of the United Farm Workers union (UFW). The UFW was initially a community-based movement to unionize farm workers, but it quickly became much more than a union drive. The UFW not only found a way to organize farm workers (a feat that many seasoned union organizers had thought impossible<sup>3</sup>), but it also found innovative ways to make a major impact on public policy. Labor historian, Randy Shaw, had the following to say about the UFW's larger impact on *American* society:

One would be hard pressed to think of a progressive organization of the 1960s that produced more activists who went on to full-time careers working for social change or that had such a significant impact on America's social justice struggles. If there were a post-World War II Hall of Fame for activists in America, UFW veterans would dominate the inductees (Shaw 2008, 5).

To support this claim, Shaw points out the various connections, both in personnel and organizing methods, between the UFW and many of the recent campaigns for social justice. Specifically, Shaw makes explicit the connection between the UFW and 2006 demonstrations for immigrant rights (Shaw 2008, 193-248). This connection is best crystallized in the slogan the Immigrant Rights Movement has adopted in demanding comprehensive immigration reform: "Sí Se Puede!"

The slogan "Sí Se Puede!" had its origin in a 1972 UFW campaign to recall Arizona governor Jack Williams. This campaign to oust Williams was sparked by the passage of legislation barring farm worker boycotts and strikes during harvest season. At the time many people thought this was an un-winnable campaign. As the story goes, César Chávez was consistently being told in Spanish: "no se puede, no se puede,"

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<sup>3</sup> For example Saul Alinsky, who also thought some of César Chávez's organizational tactics were "embarrassing" Shaw 2008, 85.

roughly translated: “this cannot be done, it cannot be done.” Dolores Huerta, an equally key figure in the UFW, responded that the campaign to oust governor Williams could be won by declaring in Spanish: “Sí Se Puede!” César Chávez was moved by Huerta’s conviction and her declaration was adopted as the rallying cry for the campaign and has since been the rallying cry for many other campaigns—including Barack Obama’s presidential campaign, where the slogan was translated into English: “Yes we can!” (Shaw 2008, 92).

### ***The “Latino Threat Narrative”***

The UFW style of organizing is unique in that it draws from various Latin American influences, specifically Mexican Catholicism, yet it remains committed to resolving particularly *American* problems from within the *American* context. Today the UFW is unquestionably a high point in the Latino/a experience, but the question remains open: Can it be considered a part of the *American* experience? My view is that most would not regard the UFW as part of the *American* experience because they understand there to be a significant difference between the *American* community and the Latino/a community. This difference can be expressed in many ways, but recently it has tended to manifest itself in a very pernicious manner. Anthropologist Leo Chávez has dubbed the pernicious differentiation between the Latino/a community and the *American* community as the *Latino Threat Narrative*. According to this narrative Latino/as are:

...unable or unwilling to integrate into the social and cultural life of the United States...they do not learn English, and they seal themselves off from the larger society, reproducing cultural beliefs and behaviors antithetical to a modern life, such as pathologically high fertility levels that reduce the demographic presence of white Americans. Latinos are represented as an unchanging people, standing outside the currents of history, merely waiting for the opportunity to revolt and to reconquer land that was once theirs. They live to destroy social institutions such as

medical care and education. They dilute the privileges and rights of citizenship for legitimate members of society (Chávez, 177).

In short, this narrative presents the Latino/a community as not just un-American, but as inherently anti-American. For people who hold this view, the Latino/a community is one of the primary sources of America's social disintegration and movements like the UFW (and the current Immigrants Rights Movement) only contribute to this disintegration.

This narrative has many popular sources and is articulated in various places, but the person who has given this narrative the most academic credibility is the late Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington. Huntington's work, from the early 1990's until his death in 2008, focused on the issue of culture (i.e., civilization) and how immigration, in particular Mexican immigration, was having a degenerative affect on the national culture of the United States. In his second major book on this issue, *Who Are We*, Huntington made the case that from its foundation the United States has been an Anglo-Protestant nation, and therefore the fundamental political principles of American society are inextricably linked to Anglo-Protestant culture (Huntington, 62). With this as his starting premise, Huntington eventually concludes that, in the twenty-first century, the biggest threat to America is immigration from Latin America and in particular Mexico. He writes:

The continuation of high levels of Mexican and Hispanic immigration plus the low rates of assimilation of these immigrants into American society and culture could eventually change America into a country of two languages, two cultures, and two peoples. This will not only transform America. It will also have deep consequences for Hispanics, who will be in America but not of it... There is no *Americano* dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican-Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English (Huntington, 256, my italics).

In this essay I do not wish to go into all the reasons for why I think Huntington is mistaken. For my purposes, it is sufficient to point to the most explicit and perniciously negative response to the question: Are the experiences of the Latino/a community, for example the experience of the UFW and the Immigrant Rights Movement, a healthy part of the *American* experience? In this essay I'm actually more interested in the muted response given to this question from those who, while not necessarily disparaging of the Latino/a community, nevertheless fail to recognize their positive contributions to *American* society...and maybe even to *American* philosophy. To be more specific, I argue that even though most thinkers participating in the recent renaissance of *American* philosophy do not subscribe to the pernicious views of Huntington, in omitting the contributions made by the Latino/a community they allow the pernicious views to persist when they fail to recognize the contributions that Latino/as and the Latino/a experience have made to *America*.

### ***The Philosopher President and the Latino Organizer***

As already alluded to above, this essay did not arise as a response to Huntington. It actually arose as a response to Bart Schultz's article entitled "Obama's Political Philosophy: Pragmatism, Politics, and the University of Chicago." I have a lot of respect for Schultz's article because it presents a defense of community-organizers and their impact on public policy. It also provides a positive account of how community organizing can shape a person's political philosophy, and in this case the political philosophy of the President of the United States. Schultz's article was also a very timely piece, written at a time when community-organizers were the butt of many jokes and were the focus of nationwide smear campaigns (see the 2008 Republican National

Convention and 2009 “sting” operations that targeted the community-organizers of ACORN). In short, Schultz provides in this article an excellent defense of a brand of philosophy that I myself associate with: activist-philosophy.

In the article itself, Schultz’s highlights the connections between President Barack Obama’s experience as an community-organizer and “...the tradition of political reform that has long marked the University of Chicago...stretching from the 1890’s to today, from John Dewey and Jane Adams, through Charles and Robert Merriam, Paul Douglas, Saul Alinsky[...etc]” (Schultz, 2-3). Schultz’s overall thesis is twofold: President Obama’s community-organizing is directly connected to the *American* philosophical tradition and political philosophy grounded in community organizing has always been a distinguishing feature of *American* political philosophy. The conclusion Schultz reaches is that, if President Obama were to be considered a philosopher, much to the chagrin of his detractors in the “Birther Movement,”<sup>4</sup> President Obama would unquestionably be an *American* political philosopher.

I do not wish to challenge Schultz’s conclusion—in fact it seems to be sound from my point of view—but what concerns me is that Schultz’s makes no reference in his article to the influence the UFW had on President Obama’s political philosophy. There are three possible reasons for such an omission. The first could be that the UFW did not directly influence President Obama’s community organizing and therefore did not influence his political philosophy. The second could be that the UFW, while composed of great activists, did not have anything of philosophical interest to offer and therefore

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<sup>4</sup> This group favors repealing birthright citizenship in the United States and is notorious for questioning President Barack Obama’s citizenship. See <<http://www.birthers.org/>> (consulted June 2011).

did not merit mention in an article devoted to political philosophy. The third could be that the UFW, while being a significant part of the Latino/a experience, is not part of the *American* experience. In the remainder of this essay I wish to challenge the first two reasons, but will conclude the essay by suggesting that *American* philosophers ought to take it upon themselves to challenge the third.

With respect to the first possible reason, there is strong evidence of there being connections between the UFW and President Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. These connections are well documented by Shaw who, in various articles, makes the persuasive case that Obama's campaign not only borrowed the UFW's famous rallying cry of "Sí Se Puede" (Yes, we can!), but also reaped the benefits of prior UFW electoral outreach programs, which ranged from Robert Kennedy's 1968 California Democratic primary bid; to ballot measure campaigns in various states; to its influence on the recent Immigrant Rights Movement (Shaw 2009). For decades the UFW has been mobilizing and registering thousands of Latino/a voters, like my parents, and in 2008 this work made a difference in various swing states, helping Obama the presidency.

The adoption of the UFW's slogan as well as reaping the benefits of past outreach campaigns would alone be sufficient to merit mention of the UFW in Schultz's article, but there are also more direct connections between the two. The Obama campaign also adopted tactics and personnel from the UFW. As Shaw notes:

"...voter registration drives, mass petition campaigns, intensive door-to-door and street outreach, public visibility events, and election day get out the vote efforts. If these tactics sound familiar, it may be because former UFW Organizing director Marshall Gans...went on in 2007 to develop the "Camp Obama" organizing strategies for Barack Obama's presidential campaign...Forty years ago, César Chávez and the UFW began working to increase Latino voting. The UFW's successful model remained isolated for decades while national campaigns relied on massive television and

radio advertising unlikely to meaningfully boost Latino turnout. Finally Barack Obama implemented the UFW outreach model to guide his entire national field campaign, a decision that has made him our next president...” (Shaw 2008).

In short, there seems to be enough evidence to say that President Obama’s most important community organizing effort, his presidential election campaign, owes a significant debt of gratitude to the UFW. This counters the first possible reason for why Schultz’s would not include mention of the UFW in his article.

The second possible reason for why the UFW might not have merited mention in Schultz’s essay. It could be said that the UFW is great at translating community organizing into political action, and might have even played an instrumental role in President Obama’s election, but César Chávez and the rest of the UFW organizers do not provide us with much, if any, philosophical insight. On the surface this would be a rather odd objection for *American* philosophers to make, seeing as one of their central projects of recovery, Jane Addams and Hull House,<sup>5</sup> in many ways parallels César Chávez and the UFW. Nonetheless, it is an objection worth considering.

A direct response to this objection is found in José-Antonio Orosco’s book, *César Chávez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence*. In that book, Orosco rebuts the claim that there was nothing philosophical about César Chávez’s work. According to Orosco, when activists come to be portrayed as philosophers (i.e., activist-philosophers) it is because they can be credited with having articulated their own, or significantly refined prior, philosophical concepts, such as power, non-violence, and justice. With this as the

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<sup>5</sup> For a small sample of the recent re-appropriation of Jane Addams as an *American* political philosopher, see Macullan 2001, Fischer 2004, Fischer *et al* 2009, and Hamington 2004, 2009, & 2010.

measure, Orosco goes on to defend the claim that César Chávez should be considered a philosopher because he:

...developed original views on nonviolent theory and practice that are significantly distinct from the works of Gandhi and King and may, in some ways, be more appropriate for guiding us on to how to conceive of, and struggle for, social justice in United States...[Chávez ] was a sophisticated thinker of non-violence and American society and sought to understand the conditions for bringing about change in the United States (Orosco, 5).

If César Chávez does indeed provide a distinctive, organic, and timely model of non-violent theory, then this would counters the charge that there is nothing of philosophical importance that the UFW can offer the *American* tradition. In short, what could be more *American*, and more needed in *American* political philosophy today, than a theory of non-violence distilled from the organizing struggles of California's central valley? While this is far from a definitive proof, Orosco's book is at the very least a model for how the philosophy of the organizing experiences of the Latino/a community can be distilled.

The third possible reason for the omission of the UFW in Schultz's essay is that the Latino/a community was not on his radar. It might never have occurred to Schultz's that Latino/a community-organizing might be a part of the *American* tradition. This is a blind spot that I hope the *American* philosophical tradition will begin to redress as they continue with their current renaissance. While it is important to recover lost figures of yesteryears, it is equally important not to bury the living contributions of the new *Americans*. In my concluding section I would like to say more about this and make a case as to why *American* philosophers should take it upon themselves to begin promoting the "Latino contribution narrative."

## **Conclusion: Toward a “Latino Contribution Narrative”**

In his book, *The Latino Threat*, Leo Chávez makes the persuasive argument that Latino/as are not assimilating into *American* society...they are integrating. Leo Chávez stresses the difference between assimilating and intergrading because for him the former connotes a sense of homogenization and adapting to something static, while the later connotes a sense of interchange and mutual influencing. This is what Leo Chávez has in mind when he claims that, while not necessarily homogenizing into the mainstream, Latinos are making important contributions to *America’s* ever-changing culture and society (Chávez, 179). For Leo Chávez, the problem is that “...the *Latino Threat Narrative* views Latinos as a destructive force rather than a creative one, [and therefore] Latino contributions to U.S. culture are obscured or given negative, even paranoid, meanings” (Chávez, 180, my italics).

As we see in the quote above, the *Latino Threat Narrative* has two parts. On the one hand, the contributions of Latino/as are viewed as destructive, and on the other they are hidden from view. Therefore, in order to combat the *Latino Threat Narrative*, an effort needs to be made not just to avoid *mis*-recognizing the contributions of Latino/as, for example the way that people like Huntington have done, but the positive contributions that Latino/as have made to *American* society must also be recognized. Leo Chávez refers to this effort of recognition as the *Latino Contribution Narrative* (Chávez, 181-4). So while Schultz’s does not in his essay subscribe to the views of Huntington, by omitting the UFW’s influence on president Obama’s political philosophy Schultz leaves the pernicious distinction upon which the *Latino Threat Narrative* is founded untouched and misses out on an opportunity to help deploy the *Latino Contribution Narrative*.

It might be asked why an *American* philosopher should help promote the *Latino Contribution Narrative*? My response is that if *American* philosophers fail to make this a top priority, they run the risk of becoming irrelevant to the *America* of today and of tomorrow. Latino/as already comprise a significant percentage of the *American* population and their share of this percentage is rapidly increasing. *American* philosophers therefore need to be open to the fact that these demographic shifts in *American* society will have an affect on what comes to be considered *American* philosophy. This does not mean that the principles of pluralism and transaction need to be abandoned; in fact, what it means is that these principles need to be more closely adhered to. Not acknowledging this demographic shift and circumscribing *American* philosophy to a group of thinkers who wrote at the turn of the twentieth century presents a static and not dynamic view of *American* philosophy. It presents a view of *American* philosophy where Latino/as must assimilate, not integrate, if they wish to be part of the philosophical tradition.

What I am proposing instead is a more interactive model of *American* philosophy. A model that I think is more consistent with its principles of pluralism and transaction. It is this model, and not a static model, of *American* philosophy that has a chance to be successful and to be more in tune with the *America* of today and tomorrow. If this model is not adopted then not only will the current renaissance of *American* philosophy be doomed to fail, but the philosophical work of Latino/as will, as Huntington prophesized, find itself in *America*, but not of its philosophical tradition.

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