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# Contextualizing Radical Planning: The 1970s Chicano Takeover in Crystal City, Texas

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In 1970, radical Chicano activists swept into office in Crystal City, Texas, taking control of almost all of the institutions of local government in the small South Texas town. Part of a sophisticated political project by Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) activists, including José Angel Gutiérrez and María Luz Gutiérrez, the Crystal City victory drew on decades of local activism, connections with progressive labor unions in Texas and the Midwest and resources from federal civil rights programs and the Ford Foundation. Theories of internal colonization and cultural nationalism guided a strategy of grassroots mobilization and third-party political organizing. This approach initially showed great promise, allowing the activists to consolidate power locally in the face of intense opposition while expanding their political reach. Candidates running under the umbrella of the newly formed *La Raza Unida* party went on to win office in other nearby cities and counties, but ran unsuccessfully for state offices. While in power, the Chicano activists were able to desegregate the school curriculum and staff, bring large numbers of previously disenfranchised citizens into the political process and institute policies of community control of economic assets, including an attempt to municipalize nearby natural gas fields. By 1978, however, the Crystal City experiment was over, politically outflanked by opponents and crumbling internally from dissension and accusations of improper behavior.

Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing through the 1970s there was a broad national phenomenon of activists moving from anti-war, civil rights and pro-poor organizing into local government, successfully winning control of numerous cities and counties across the United States. Although activists of all backgrounds made this transition, they relied upon different theoretical frameworks, followed different trajectories and faced very different barriers and opposition. An unusual moment of overlap between radical black and Chicano activists on the one hand, and moderate, largely white and New Left progressives on the other hand, came through the Conference on Alternative State and Local Public Policies (CASLPP). The radicals provided a broad and comprehensive vision of a utopian future grounded in grassroots activism and the use of confrontation to gain control of the institutions of local government. The moderate progressives who predominated in CASLPP brought a pragmatic approach of compromise and coalition-building grounded in respect for the structures of local administration. The oral histories and archival collections located in the Cornell Progressive

Cities and Neighborhoods Collection, Wayne State's Walter Reuther Library and university and city archives across Texas provide tantalizing glimpses into this rich historical moment of progressive local public administration.

The dramatic events in Crystal City remain one of the central moments in the history of radical Chicano activism. Although the *Movimiento* at various times had close ties with organized labor, African-American civil rights groups, liberation theologians, student New Left organizers and others, its history reflects the exceptional and ambiguous place of Chicanos in the U.S. The Gutiérrez organization in South Texas was the only one of the four main arms of the national Chicano *Movimiento* to make such a clear transition from mass mobilization into electoral politics. The *Movimiento* was never unified and cohesive, and at the end of the 1960s it was seen as centered around four charismatic men, each with a different organizing style: César Chávez's labor organizing in California; Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzales's youth and cultural nationalist organizing in Colorado; Reies López Tijerina's land rights activism in New Mexico; and José Angel Gutiérrez's electoral mobilization in South Texas. Tensions between these figures over strategy, prestige and identity politics contributed to the movement's fragmentation in the late 1970s, and in more recent years, feminist and queer scholarship within Chicano studies has brought into question the privileging of these men in the history of the *Movimiento*.

**Lessons of the 1960s** The successful takeover in 1970 was made possible by lessons learned in the decade before. In 1963 a slate of five Chicano candidates won election to the city council after an energetic poll tax and voter registration campaign led by the local chapter of the Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations (PASSO) and with help from the Teamsters. The fragile coalition fell apart, however, in the face of concerted resistance by Anglo citizens angry at the takeover who used economic pressure to punish the elected Chicanos. By 1965, a racially mixed and politically reactionary coalition was able to defeat the PASSO candidates. Despite the ephemeral results, the 1963 elections proved that it was possible to overcome the structural barriers to electing a slate of radical Chicanos in Crystal City.

In 1969, escalating anger among Mexican-American high school students and their families provided the political opening that led to the 1970 takeover. Although the student population was overwhelmingly Mexican-American, the student organizations were dominated by Anglos. Furthermore, dropout rates for Mexican-American students were many times that of Anglos. In 1969, anger crystallized over the highly symbolic and openly racist selection of cheerleaders and a homecoming queen. Mexican-American students walked out. Gutiérrez organizers and others from MAYO helped to provide focus to and support for the student protests, creating structures and accessing outside support to counter attempts at co-optation and demobilization by the Anglo elite.

## Becoming a Movement

As Calvin Trillin wrote in the *New Yorker*, “The boycott became a movement” that year. Carefully building support family by family, using children to radicalize parents and parents to support their children, the organizers focused anger about the school inequities into the electoral arena. In order to avoid a repeat of the 1965 losses, organizers formed a third party, *La Raza Unida* (“The People United”), which could provide structure and ongoing mobilization to support the candidates. A combination of class- and ethnic-based organizing was used to bring a majority of voters firmly within *La Raza Unida*’s umbrella, leaving its opponents isolated. The central innovation demonstrated by the Crystal City *La Raza Unida* was the combination of a focus on individual mobilization and voter discipline with a radical structural critique of society.

This structural critique was grounded in the ideas of internal colonialism and cultural nationalism, with the school system seen as a central instrument for maintaining the colonial relationship. When *La Raza Unida* candidates won a majority of seats on the school board and elected José Angel Gutiérrez chair of the board, they were able to bring aggressively decolonizing policies and practices, rather than gently reforming ones, to the monocultural curriculum and school staff. The substantive gains made in the school system became *La Raza Unida*’s most significant accomplishment. In 1976, David Gelber noted in *Working Papers* that “since Raza took over the school system, the drop-out rate for *third graders* has declined from 37.4 percent to 2.4 percent” (emphasis in original).

A focus on cultural nationalism permeated much of the Chicano *Movimiento*. Articulated in foundational texts such as *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (1969) and Rudolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s epic poem *Yo Soy Joaquín* (1968), Chicano cultural nationalism drew together ideas of identity, territorial control and class consciousness. For the Crystal City activists, seizing local political power was more than a way to redress local inequities—it was to be the first step in a long-term project of retaking *Aztlán*, the mythical Aztec homeland located in the U.S. Southwest. The idea of *Aztlán* overlaid language, territory, history and myth in order to reframe the identity of the Mexican-American as not subaltern or defeated, but proud *mestizo* inheritors of the land acquired by the U.S. in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Beginning with “I am Joaquín, lost in a world of confusion, / caught up in the whirl of a gringo society,” Gonzales’s poem ends with “My blood is pure. / I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.” This stirring call for a militant Chicano identity was taken both figuratively and literally by activists; *Aztlán* was a radical utopian vision connecting social change, territorial control and ethnic identity.

By the mid-1970s, the faultlines that would lead to the fragmentation and failure of *La Raza Unida*’s governance in Crystal City were already apparent. The title of

David Gelber's 1976 requiem for Crystal City in *Working Papers*, "Crystal City's Cracked Promise," suggests the intense disappointment felt by participants and observers as the radical regime devolved into accusations of nepotism, profiteering and worse. Coupled with severe external pressures, including investigations by the Texas Rangers, bitter feuds with Democratic Party officials and a disastrous showing in the 1978 gubernatorial election, *La Raza Unida* and the Crystal City experiment in radical Chicano progressive local governance fell apart. In 1979 the Gutierrezes went into self-imposed exile in the Pacific Northwest, not returning to Texas until 1986.

### **Lessons from Crystal City**

There were important theoretical, stylistic and strategic differences between the radical *Cristaleros* and the more moderate progressives in cities like Madison and Berkeley. The Crystal City activists based their approach on the radical systemic critique of internal colonization and cultural nationalism, and were willing to create dramatic confrontations and disruptions in the process of governance. They made little pretense of trying to appeal to the average middle-American, and rather than seeking alliances with sympathetic politicians, they excoriated them as sellouts and worse. Most progressive city administrations were much more moderate and pragmatic, matching a limited structural critique of inequality and disempowerment with mechanisms available to state and local governments. A focus on public ownership and control was in line with historical examples in the U.S. as well as international examples from Canada and Europe. Although many progressive activists held deep critiques of the underlying basis of modern American capitalism and long-term goals to bring about systemic change, the core elements of their practice were real world compromises and alliance-building with mainstream politicians.

Although the radical Chicanos in Crystal City had a far deeper structural critique, they were equally limited by the tools and mechanisms of local government. Fundamentally, dilemmas posed by cultural nationalism and internal colonization could not be resolved from within the institutions of public administration in a small South Texas town. Just as with radical Black Power activists in Oakland and elsewhere, the highly symbolic capture of territorial and institutional control was central to the project. And to the extent that local government had long been used as mechanisms of repression and emasculation, seizing control of these arms of the state provided a tremendous sense of empowerment. But unlike the white progressive activists, who were generally able to work effectively on the edges of local Democratic Party structures, the ongoing involvement of the local Democratic Party in maintaining structures of racial oppression led to the building of a third party base. This third party approach was meant to be the bridge between the radical critique and the implementation of a radical agenda, but the external structural barriers, combined with internal dissent, were impossible to overcome.

The brief overlap between the radical Chicanos in Crystal City and the progressives in the CASLPP suggests to me a “could have been” of local progressive politics in the U.S. rife with missed opportunities and the hints of a different future. The moderate progressives never acquired the grassroots sophistication of the Chicano *Movimiento*, while the *Movimiento* activists never gained the comfort the moderates had with compromise, coalition-building and working within the institutions of government. In an alternate reality, the moderate activists would have learned the importance of sustained grassroots organizing and strategies for achieving this from the radical Chicanos, perhaps acquiring the tools to counter opposition from right-wing and business interests. The radical Chicanos, on the other hand, would have been able to connect their powerful utopian vision with mechanisms grounded in institutional realities. While the gains each group made were very real and should not be dismissed, the limitations of each meant that the real gains were more symbolic than substantive. And though both groups proved that change was possible, they failed to implement those changes on a national or regional scale.

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