

“Convolutéd Iconography Notwithstanding”: Competing Interpretations of Flag Use during the Immigration Law Protests of 2006

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Abstract. Protests against proposed immigration laws arose in cities across the United States during the spring of 2006. Many of the attendees were Latino, and waved flags. At first, flags of Mexico and other Latin American countries were displayed. Following negative reactions in the media, protest organizers asked rallygoers to fly the U.S. flag alongside or instead of the flags of Latin American countries. This article traces the history of flag-flying at these immigration protests, analyzes the motives of those displaying flags, and discusses the reaction to the display of Latin American flags. The disputed meanings imputed to the use of flags by the protesters and those who objected to the use of the flags is discussed in terms of symbolic conflict.

(N.B. Translations from the Spanish are via *Google Translate*, cross-checked against *DeepL Translator* for accuracy).

Introduction

In the spring of 2006, massive protests arose in cities around the United States to oppose a bill that would attempt to slow unauthorized immigration through measures that critics thought were too harsh in their penalties. The protests witnessed a largely unprecedented mobilization of unauthorized immi-

grants for political purposes. Of interest to vexillology, many of the protesters flew the flags of Mexico and other Latin American countries either alone or alongside the U.S. flag.

Reaction to the rallies often included vehement denunciation of the use of non-American flags. In response, protest organizers asked marchers to bring only U.S. flags. In this paper, we will examine the flag-related events of 2006, the rhetoric surrounding them, and stated motivations of flag-wavers. The controversy will be examined as a “visual argument” that is a mode of symbolic conflict.

Immigration Through History and Legislative Responses

Immigration to the United States has always been a contentious issue. Although laws governing naturalization were first passed in 1790,¹ it was not until the Page Act of 1875 that it was made a crime for certain persons born abroad to enter the country with the intention of living here.² The most recent comprehensive law regarding immigration was passed in 1986; it provided amnesty to those who had previously settled in the U.S. without authorization, and criminalized hiring of unauthorized immigrants.³ Subsequent laws have modified the penalties and enforcement mechanisms but the basic law remains unchanged.

Although the 1986 act was intended to stabilize immigration numbers by making it difficult for unauthorized immigrants to work, by 2005 it was estimated that 10,300,000 unauthorized aliens were living in the U.S.⁴ The rate of entrance of unauthorized immigrants—estimated at between 700,000 and 800,000 annually—nearly matched the rate of authorized immigrants, which was around 950,000 in 2004.⁵ For both categories of immigration, Mexicans were the largest nationality represented. Among unauthorized immigrants in 2004, 57% came from Mexico and another 24% from other Latin American nations.⁶ Among authorized immigrants, 19% were Mexican and 17% from other Latin American countries (Figure 1).⁷

Other efforts to discourage unauthorized immigration occurred at the state level. One such undertaking was Proposition 187, a 1994 ballot initiative in California that limited the provision of government services such as health care and education to unauthorized immigrants. Despite pro-

ORIGINS OF IMMIGRANTS, 2005

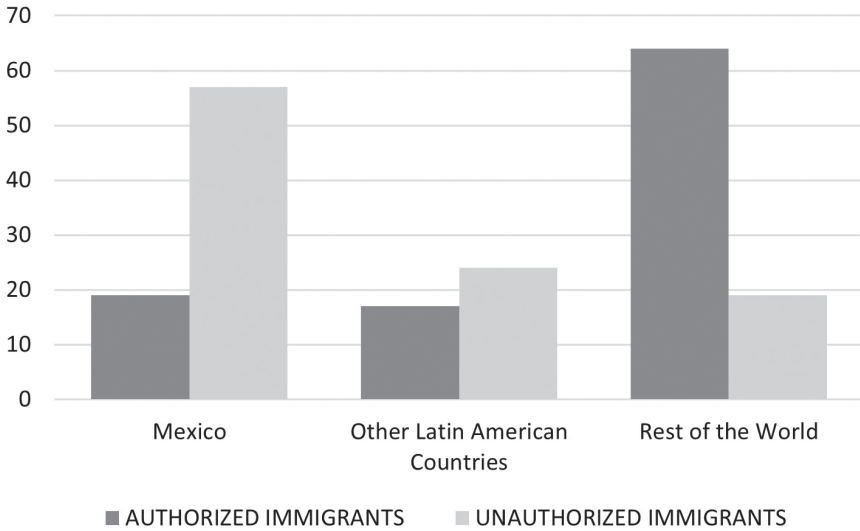


Figure 1. *Origins of immigrants in 2005 in percentage. Data from Ruth Ellen Wasem, “Unauthorized Aliens in the United States: Estimates Since 1986”, CRS Report for Congress. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005)*

tests—including some where the Mexican flag was displayed alongside the American—the initiative was passed.⁸ Many advocates of Proposition 187 reported that voters told them the display of the Mexican flag persuaded undecided voters to opt for the proposition.⁹

Citing a need to “restore the integrity of our nation’s borders and re-establish respect for our laws”, in December 2005 U.S. Representative James Sensenbrenner introduced the proposed “Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act”, also called House Resolution 4437.¹⁰ Among other provisions, H.R. 4437 would make living in the U.S. without authorization a federal crime, rather than a civil infraction, with local law enforcement agencies required to turn over unauthorized immigrants to federal agents for deportation, heavy fines for employers hiring unauthorized immigrants, and a prohibition on offering aid to help a person stay in the U.S. without authorization.¹¹ It passed the House of Representatives on 16 December 2005, and was scheduled for debate in the Senate during the spring of 2006.

The Initial Protests Against H.R. 4437

Within weeks of its passage, protests against H.R. 4437 were organized. Although people of all ethnicities participated, the protests were primarily attended by Latinos. Their opposition to the bill stemmed not only from practical concerns about the possible disruption of their families and communities by prosecution, but also from what they perceived as the bill's implicit rejection of unauthorized immigrants as unwelcome in American society.¹² Among the signs waved at protests were "We are America" and "We are not the problem, we are part of the solution".¹³ The protests, some of them among the largest in U.S. history, were notable for the fact that many unauthorized immigrants made themselves publicly visible, and thus risked involvement with law enforcement officers. René Galindo noted that the protests marked the first time that unauthorized immigrants became a visible presence among the political factions in the United States.¹⁴

The protests were initiated when a group of 600 Latino immigration rights activists met in February 2006 to develop ways to rouse public opinion against H.R. 4437, following calls from leaders in the Roman Catholic Church to oppose the bill.¹⁵ Word spread through churches, labor unions, groups called "hometown associations" which serve to facilitate immigrants' sending of aid to their native villages, and Spanish-language radio stations. The syndicated nature of some popular radio shows helped spread an idea that originated in southern California across the country.¹⁶

Flags in the Protests of March 2006 and Reactions to Their Use

Although it was preceded by smaller actions around the country, the first large rally took place on 10 March in Chicago (see Figure 2). Up to 100,000 marchers filled the downtown area. In this case, radio host Rafael "Pistolero" Pulido, who had been encouraging his listeners to attend, had urged protesters to wear white clothes and bring American flags to symbolize their patriotism,¹⁷ and the *Chicago Tribune* reported that of the flags seen in the protest, almost all were American flags.¹⁸ Other observers such as Ruben Navarette, however, noted "thousands of people waving Mexican flags".¹⁹



Figure 2. Mexican and U.S. flags are waved at a rally in Chicago on 10 March 2006. (Alamy/Brian Kersey)



Figure 3. Protesters wave the Mexican flag at a march in Las Vegas, Nevada on 28 March 2006. (Shutterstock/Greg Randles)



Figure 4. Protesters in New York display flags of many nations on 1 April 2006. (Alamy/Bruce Cotler)

Other smaller protests around the country followed (see Figures 3, 4, and 5), as did reaction in the media. In the English language media, there was a widespread perception that protesters using Mexican and other flags “doesn’t help their cause”, as Fred Barnes said on Fox News.²⁰ The most extreme opinions echoed Michelle Malkin, who claimed it represented the threat of a “Reconquista” or a retaking of the southwestern states from U.S. control.²¹ Fox News pundit Brit Hume called it a “repellent spectacle”.²² However, most were similar to the everyday Anglos writing letters to the editor who made comments such as “if they love Mexico so much they have to fly the Mexican flag and hate the way our government does things, then they should go back to the country they love and let us live in our beloved country happily”.²³

From the far left, a different critique was expressed. Harald Bauder noted that the use of flags of any kind reinforced ideas of nationalism, which threatened to overshadow the realities of “class struggle, which exists at international and global scales”.²⁴

Some Latino media figures also expressed reservations about using the Mexican flag. Ruben Navarette wrote, “I’m getting fed up with flamboyant, self-satisfying street protests ... thousands of people waving Mexican flags—granted, along with a good number of American flags—who seemed



Figure 5. A young boy in Salem, Oregon, is surrounded by a mixture of U.S. and Mexican flags on 9 April 2006. (Alamy/Richard Clement)

completely unaware that they were killing their own cause”.²⁵

Spanish-speaking opinion was mixed as well. Immigrants who had been authorized to come to the U.S. offered a sense of patriotism toward the American flag: “I kept thinking about all the paperwork that I had to do, and the time and money that I had to invest, until I could legalize my stay and, later, become a citizen of the United States. Of course, the oath to the flag and individual patriotism were present all the time and, even when the affection for the land that saw us born lasts, our loyalty and demonstrations of fidelity towards the new homeland that we wanted to adopt will never be erased from our minds”.²⁶

Even among the populace sympathetic to the protesters, there was a general sense that the use of Mexican and other flags was unwise politically. Juan José Garcia felt that those waving Mexican flags had failed to learn the lessons of the Proposition 187 campaign, and “offended many decent citizens who felt attacked and humiliated by the foreign, especially Mexican, flags celebrating the great awakening”.²⁷

Another protest occurred among high school students in a number of California schools on 24 March. Thousands left school, waving Mexican flags and carrying red, white, and green balloons, while chanting “Viva Mexico!”²⁸

The next day half a million protesters filled the streets of Los Angeles. In preparation for this rally, organizers sought to ward off criticism about Mexican flags that had arisen. In the publicity leading up the march, some organizers encouraged attendees to wear white and bring U.S. flags, while others said that if a flag of a home country was to be brought it should be carried alongside a U.S. flag.

In making the case to fly only U.S. flags, concern was expressed about alienating non-immigrant Americans. Fabián Núñez, speaker of the California Assembly, noted that the 1994 experience of the Proposition 187 campaign showed that the display of Mexican flags made the protesters' loyalty to the U.S. appear "questionable".²⁹ Jorge Delgado, in an opinion piece in the Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinión*, offered that carrying the flags of countries other than the U.S. demonstrated a "lack of respect" to the nation whose lawmakers they were trying to persuade.³⁰ The same critique was noted by political consultants of both parties. Republican Wayne Johnson commented that "Marchers who carried American flags got it right. They were saying 'We embrace the American dream'", while Democrat Darry Sragow noted that "The Mexican flag visually says, 'I'm not one of you. I'm from *there*'".³¹

Because of the visual appeal of flags, they made a subject for many political cartoons, such as those in Figures 6, 7, and 8.



Figure 6. Political cartoon by Mike Shelton, Orange County Register.



Figure 7. Political cartoon by Alan J. Nash, Gering Courier/North Platte Bulletin.



Figure 8. Political cartoon by Wayne Stroot, Hastings Tribune.

Flag Use as “Visual Argument”

For vexillologists, the most interesting part of this story may be how easily different parties attribute meaning to the flag use of others. As we will observe, had critics of those waving foreign flags been attentive and given credence to their voices, they would have found that the use of those flags alongside American flags was an act intended to symbolize a desire for what the immigrants considered American-style assimilation; that is, contributing to the nation economically and politically while retaining pride in one’s background and cultural traditions. However, the strong reactions against the use of non-American flags indicates that among certain non-immigrants, there was an opposite interpretation: that the immigrants were rejecting assimilation and rather seeking to impose Mexican culture upon the United States.

Richard Pineda and Stacey Sowards call these varying interpretations of flag use a “visual argument”: “Flag wavers assert that they are both Mexican (or of another nationality) and American. To critics, however, waving another country’s flag demonstrates that the waver is not American”.³² They posit that the change in flag use from the strong presence of non-American flags in early protests to the predominant display of U.S. flags in later protests demonstrates the “adaptive process of rebuttal”.³³

“Visual Argument” Reflective of Symbolic Conflict

It is possible to extend the analysis of Pineda and Sowards. Arguments, of course, arise from conflict.³⁴ To note that symbols such as flags are used to make visual arguments is valid but touches merely upon the mode of conflict rather than its nature. At the root of the varying interpretations of the meaning of the Mexican flag within the immigration-law protests of 2006 is a phenomenon known as symbolic conflict. Symbolic conflict, an idea developed by the anthropologist Simon Harrison, has been used in vexillology before, such as in work on the flags of slave risings or the shift in meaning when older flags are used to symbolize newly emergent political causes.³⁵

Harrison observes that within any society there is a limited supply of “symbolic capital”—that is, “honor, prestige, and distinction” associated with different forms of cultural expression.³⁶ Examples include the different esteem in

which classical music and formal speech are held generally, compared to pop music and slang. These forms of cultural expression are symbolic of different groups and members of the groups will employ the manipulation of symbols alongside other forms of competition (such as politics) to “affect the distribution of symbolic capital”.³⁷ “Visual arguments” using symbols are proxies for larger struggles for status and recognition.

In Harrison’s schema of symbolic conflict, there are four idealized types of contest of symbols. In valuation contests, “the issue at stake is the ranking of symbols... according to some criterion of worth such as prestige, legitimacy, or sacredness”; among the tactics used can be the attempt to diminish the value of rival symbols.³⁸ In a proprietary contest, groups “claim... proprietary rights in their distinguishing symbols, and treat attempts by other groups to copy them as hostile acts”.³⁹ Innovation contents involve the creation of new symbolic forms, while in expansionary contents “a group tries to displace its competitors’ symbols of identity with its own symbols”.⁴⁰ The four types of symbolic contest are ideals, and in any given conflict multiple approaches and tactics may be used in combination.

The fight over flag use in 2006 was primarily a valuation contest. Immigrant groups, by and large, used the flags of their home countries to stake a claim that Mexican ethnicity was similar to other ethnicities among white Americans, such as Irish or Italian. Namely, it was a source of pride and good feeling that in no way interfered with loyalty to the United States. The anti-immigration voices countered that claim by offering an interpretation of the Mexican flag that de-legitimized it. Rather than accepting Mexican ethnicity as similar to Irish or Italian, those speakers asserted—without reference to the stated motives of Mexican flag flyers—that the flag symbolized an intent to disavow loyalty to the United States.

The Nationalistic Case Against Flying non-U.S. Flags

As seen from earlier quotes, critics of the protesters’ use of flags considered them to be subversive; the use of a Mexican flag was, in their eyes, a sign that the flag-waver was not interested in assimilating into American society. Without referring to the meaning flag-wavers assigned to their own use of symbols, they assumed a different meaning and asserted it.

There is a long history of associating the U.S. flag with nationalistic sentiment. As Scot Guenter has explored, there was a deliberate movement in the late 19th century to inculcate in American children behaviors and attitudes that demonstrate reverence for the flag. This “cult of the flag” was designed to, in the words of one advocate, “indoctrinate children” with “fidelity” to the nation and its institutions.⁴¹ A striking attribute of American nationalism is, as Wilbur Zelinsky notes, “a faith in the *unique* virtues and transcendent mission of the Republic”.⁴² That sense of uniqueness is partially demonstrated in American flag etiquette, which many Americans learned in school or in youth organizations such as Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. A key principle embodied in documents such as the United States Flag Code (a non-binding yet widely accepted Congressional resolution regarding display of the flag) is that the U.S. flag is never to be displayed in a position other than that of the most prominent and honored, and that display of other flags must be accompanied by the U.S. flag.⁴³ The connection between the flag and U.S.-style nationalism of unique greatness is so prevalent in American culture that children as young as kindergarten are able to recognize the U.S. flag as the “best” of all flags.⁴⁴

The neglect of nationalistic flag-flying practices—either deliberately or through misunderstanding—was tied by immigration opponents into a long-standing concern about the assimilation of immigrants into American society. As far back as Thomas Jefferson, there have been concerns that an influx of immigrants who do not share the political values of the dominant culture may make the nation “more turbulent, less happy, less strong” than if the immigrants had been excluded.⁴⁵ These concerns have led to a naturalization law that requires new citizens to “abjure” allegiance to other governments.⁴⁶

In the years before 2006, a number of commentators had been concerned that Latino immigration specifically would undermine the cohesiveness of American society. Prominent among them was Samuel P. Huntington, a political scientist on the faculty of Harvard University. In 2004 he published *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, which received wide notice in the media.⁴⁷ He argued that Latino immigration was different from earlier waves of immigration, for reasons including its scope (much larger in percentage of the population than any individual ethnic group in earlier waves of immigration), its concentration geographically, the large number who came without authorization and thus were reluctant to engage

with the government, and the geographic continuity between the U.S. and the countries of origin.

Huntington argued that Latino immigration threatened to create a separate society within the U.S. in which Latin American mores would prevail. In part, he was recalling an argument from his 1996 work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, in which he asserted that Latin America “has a distinct identity which differentiates it from the West” and that “cleft countries that territorially bestride the fault lines between civilizations face particular problems maintaining their unity”.⁴⁸

Within a culture that elevated the national flag to position of prominence and accepted its use as a confirmation that the flag-flier believed in the unique greatness of the United States, it was easy to argue that those who chose not to fly it were deliberately subversive. In this phase of the symbolic conflict, the anti-immigration forces had large reserves of cultural habit and unspoken understandings to draw upon. Without explicitly stating these tenets, the opponents of the protesters could make the mere assertion that use of a flag other than the U.S. flag undermined claims to American belonging—and a large body of observers would find themselves agreeing.

Changes in Flag Use during the April and May Protests

More large rallies occurred on 10 April in Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, and Washington, D.C. (see figures 9 and 10). Marchers were explicitly asked to bring only U.S. flags. Juan Carlos Ruiz, an organizer, noted “you’re going to see a sea of people wearing white shirts... carrying the American flag, honoring this country because this is the country we want to belong to. That doesn’t mean we are renouncing that love we have for our countries. All that shows is that we want to be here, we are committed and pledge to the values and the symbols of this country”.⁴⁹

In many cities, the rallies included a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.⁵⁰ Reports of the rallies showed that some Mexican flags did appear in Los Angeles but the dominant image was of American flags.⁵¹ But in Phoenix, only the U.S. flag was seen.⁵² An analysis of images from across the nation by Mike Pesca of National Public Radio showed that U.S. flags outnumbered flags of other nations by about 20 to 1. In contrast, the New York rally organizers gave



Figure 9. Protesters in Dallas display U.S. flags exclusively at a rally on 10 April 2006. (Alamy/Jacky Chapman)



Figure 10. The flags of El Salvador and the U.S. on display at a rally in Washington, D.C., on 10 April 2006. (Alamy/David Fleurant)

no instructions about flags, and Pesca found that U.S. flags only outnumbered other flags at a ratio of 4 to 3.⁵³

Fox News correspondent William La Jeunesse noted the change in flag-waving behaviors but did say that “Nine out of 10 people, however, still speak Spanish here exclusively, leaving opponents to call the demonstration a charade.”⁵⁴

The last of the major rallies occurred on 1 May; organizers also called for unauthorized immigrants to boycott businesses and take a day off work. Called “A Day without Immigrants”, the protest was intended to highlight the many contributions to commerce and society made by unauthorized immigrants. However, the call proved divisive, as many immigration advocates feared a negative backlash at a sensitive time, when the Senate was considering an alternative to H.R. 4437 that would provide many of the reforms to immigration law that had been demanded in earlier protests.⁵⁵

The 1 May rallies turned out over 250,000 people in Los Angeles and caused the shutdown of many factories, landscaping businesses, restaurants, and other businesses that rely on Latino workers (see figures 11 and 12).⁵⁶ Rallies in other cities also proved to have lower turnout than those in April (see figure 13).⁵⁷

The L.A. rally included a gigantic U.S. flag carried by hundreds of protesters, and again saw U.S. handheld flags outnumbering other flags.⁵⁸



Figure 11. Protesters wearing white and waving American flags far outnumber those waving Mexican or other flags at a rally in Los Angeles on 1 May 2006. (Shutterstock/Joseph Sohm)



Figure 12. Protesters display a preponderance of American flags along with those of Mexico and Guatemala at a rally in Los Angeles on 1 May 2006. (Shutterstock/Joseph Sohm)



Figure 13. Protestors wave Honduran and U.S. flags at a rally in Miami on 1 May 2006. (Alamy/Abaca Press)

Immediate and Medium-Term Effects of the Protests

In the end, the Senate never even brought up H.R. 4437 for consideration. Similarly, legislation that originated in the Senate that would have addressed immigration concerns in a way more amenable to protestors’ demands was not considered by the House. There has not, to date, been any comprehensive immigration reform legislation passed at the federal level. At least some political observers felt that “the Senate was never likely to embrace” H.R. 4437, raising the question of the necessity of the protests.⁵⁹

Political scientists do, however, point to the marches of 2006 as a time when immigrants, especially Latinos, achieved newfound prominence as a political bloc. Their allies who held the franchise would go on to provide the “swing vote” in closely contested elections over the next decade, especially when immigration reform was among the issues being debated.⁶⁰ However, as Voss, Bloemraad, and Lee observe, there is also evidence that the protests “generated, in the medium term, increased hostility as residents suddenly became aware of significant numbers of migrants in their midst.”⁶¹

Whether the flag flying was a shrewd political move or not, there was one group that definitely benefited: street vendors. An early April rally in Costa Mesa, California, saw handheld Mexican flags selling for three dollars (about \$4.30 in 2022 dollars); they outsold American flags because the rally organizers were giving away American flags to attendees.⁶² The 10 April Los Angeles rally found flag sellers in street carts, vending U.S. and Mexican flags for two dollars, alongside sausages, tamales, and popsicles.⁶³ In New York on 10 April, hand-held flags of almost every country were selling for two dollars apiece; one vendor reported selling out of France, India, and El Salvador, to his surprise.⁶⁴

Stated Motivations of Flag-Waving Protesters

While the politics of this affair are necessarily quite interesting, as vexillologists we should turn our attention to another matter: what did the flags mean to those who flew them, and to those who saw them? We have seen that many non-immigrants who witnessed Mexican and other flags flying interpreted them as a “sign of allegiance” to Mexico or another country and thus a rejection of assimilation into the U.S.⁶⁵ The rally organizers who encouraged attendees to eschew Mexican and other flags were keenly aware that such per-

ceptions existed. Assuming that the marchers wished to gain favor for their position (as opposed to deliberately antagonizing opponents), it seems they would not have chosen to fly non-American flags without some strong reason to do so. We can examine their own testimony to investigate their motivations, as well as explore the work of scholars who have considered the phenomenon.

The great majority of testimony regarding the use of Mexican and other flags in the protests expresses a desire to act like other Americans descended from immigrants. “There are many people who can understand a parade with Irish flags in New York, but who are scared to see Mexican flags on the streets of Los Angeles, even if they are very similar”.⁶⁶ Chon Noriega, director of the Center for Research and Chicano Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), explained, “In a general sense, it is a reference point; for some people it is a symbol of their origin or that of their parents, and they want to honor it; for others, it is part of their identity and in that sense they ask that it be respected”.⁶⁷ Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights, added that the use of the flag was a way to publicly affirm their ethnic solidarity: “Their identity has not always been respected. It’s a wonderful time for them to say, ‘I’m proud to be Mexican.’”⁶⁸

Others detected a whiff of hypocrisy among their critics: “The act of carrying the Mexican flag is considered ‘repellent’ and not so those who carried the Irish, Italian, or Israeli flags.... All these legislators are proud of their Irish, Italian, Polish, etc. origin; Why not feel proud of our Mexican-American, Peruvian-American, Argentine-American, etc. origins?... So should we call all these people who still preserve their traditions an unassimilated population since they do not carry out activities considered ‘American’? That’s the beautiful thing about this country that is an amalgamation of different cultures where one can see Italian-Americans dancing salsa or a Mexican-American making ‘sushi’ in a Japanese restaurant. ‘American culture’ or ‘American identity’ is that mix of many cultures from many countries”.⁶⁹

However, there were some other reasons cited to use Mexican flags. Some chalked up their use to a heightened emotionalism roused by march organizers, who called upon a sense of Latino ethnicity to mobilize marchers. “They also use certain cultural elements such as the Mexican flags, its colors, the use of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the brotherhood, etc. They articulate things quite well and touch on the anger of the people”.⁷⁰

Other marchers refused to put down the flags of their home countries, seeing them as symbols of resistance to prejudice. After anti-immigrant protesters burned a Mexican flag in San Diego, a marcher retorted, “Racist and anti-immigrant groups are very angry at the large number of marches and protesters, it doesn’t surprise me that these events occur” and added, “we are not going to lower ourselves to those levels, we will continue to march with our flag of the country of origin and the American flag”.⁷¹

Some even questioned the political tactics of march organizers: “Why do Hispanics want us to use the gringo flag?... How can we use the flag of the country that stole our own land and where we are currently treated like criminals and delinquents? Our flag is something that unites us with the boys and girls of the barrio, the mothers and grandmothers of our neighborhoods. To the students who wear it with pride during street demonstrations, to all our peoples who identify with it. That is why we carry our flag with pride. The flag represents unity, independence, history and the most esteemed values of the Mexican nation”.⁷²

Aside from the last statement, however, none of the witnesses testify to any desire to disclaim their identity as Americans. Mexican or other ethnic identity is not opposed to American identity; rather, it is perceived as an additional source of pride and strength.

Evaluation of Flag Use vis-à-vis the Question of Assimilation

To some pundits, the use of Mexican and other flags by the protesters actually highlighted some of the misunderstandings around assimilation that critics of the Mexican flag were promoting. Clarence Page, a nationally syndicated columnist, noted that “Americans are so simultaneously proud, yet oddly unsettled, by their own diversity that I understand why many immigrants are confused by the flag fuss. In ethnic mixing bowls like Chicago... foreign flags wave proudly on special days—from St. Patrick’s Day in the spring to Columbus Day in the fall... It seems to be an unwritten but strictly observed rule in this country of immigrants that you are allowed to show your ancestral homeland’s flag one day a year. ... Flags or no flags, the illegal immigrants attending the rallies are showing by their sheer numbers that they are eager to be players in America’s political system... Those who worry about whether the

new Hispanic immigrants really want to be American should rest easy because the newcomers appear to be following the patterns of past immigrant groups. If some of the older immigrants are slow to learn English and American ways, their children seem eager to embrace both”.⁷³

On the other hand, Gregory Rodriguez of the New America Foundation think tank accepted the notion of using a Mexican flag as contrary to a fully-assimilated identity, but chalked that up to the “virtually continuous” process of immigration from Mexico, which had been going on for more than 100 years. The resulting population had “varying levels of acculturation and integration.... Although this dynamic hasn’t prevented assimilation, it has sown confusion and competition in the formulation of political and cultural identities. Witness the competing presence of U.S. and Mexican flags at last week’s demonstration. But convoluted iconography notwithstanding, the massive declaration of the desire to become an accepted part of American society puts an exclamation point on what has been shaping immigrant culture in the U.S. for the last decade. Last week, immigrants and their children were telling us that they are no longer willing to be seen as homing pigeons who return to their homelands after a season of work”.⁷⁴

A Failed Analogy Between Mexican Flags and Other Ethnic Flags

Although the protesters made frequent reference to their use of Mexican and other flags as being similar to the use of Italian or Irish flags by descendants of immigrants from those countries, the analogy clearly failed to be persuasive. As Page and Rodriguez alluded, there was a widespread perception that Latino immigrants were in a different situation than the descendants of European immigrants who had come in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One obvious difference is the skin color of many of the protesters, which certainly may have had some influence on the debate. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that it is well-attested that during the years of peak European immigration, ethnic groups such as Italians, while considered as white for legal purposes, were socially regarded as “racially inferior to other whites on the basis of notions of stock, heredity, blood, and selectively chosen physical characteristics”.⁷⁵

Another explanation for the difference is that the Latino immigrants were in a different phase of the process of assimilation. Although many Latino citizens were descended from those who had lived in the United States for generations (or even had been living in northern Mexico when it was ceded to the U.S. in 1848), a very large number of Latino immigrants had come within a few decades of 2006, as Rodriguez observed. By contrast, most Irish- or Italian-Americans were descended from those who came to the U.S. around a century or more before.

During the 20th century, white ethnics had to a great extent assimilated into a general “European-American” culture.⁷⁶ This was partially through the process of “Americanization” that involved flag rituals. Immigrants were taught flag etiquette and the Pledge of Allegiance, learning to embody American nationalism through reverence for the flag.⁷⁷ By 2006 “cultural experience... inevitably eroded” and ethnic identity was of “low salience” to most descendants of immigrants.⁷⁸ As such, those ethnic identities are “unlikely to generate conflict with people of other backgrounds” and are “detached from application to the interethnic contacts of the ordinary social world”.⁷⁹ People whose ethnic identity says very little about their place in society may freely wave flags of their ancestral countries without bringing their nationalistic credibility into question.

Latino immigrants, on the other hand, may be analogized to the white ethnic Americans of the early 20th century. There was great concern from, among others, Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, that these “hyphenated Americans” were divided in their loyalties. Roosevelt demanded an abandonment of visible displays of national emblems from the immigrants’ countries of origin: “We must have in this country but one flag, the American flag, and for the speech of the people but one language, the English language”.⁸⁰

The perception among critics of the protesters pushed back against their claim of being like Irish-Americans or Italian-Americans. Rather, in this phase of the symbolic conflict, there were notions of separate varieties of ethnicity. Those whose ethnicity was “eroded” and whose apparent fidelity to American nationalism thus was unquestioned were free to fly their ancestral flags—but, as Page noted, only under particular circumstances. Those whose ethnicity was perceived as not yet assimilated risked their flag display being seen as undermining claims of loyalty.

One other way in which the analogy was unpersuasive was that the situation of flag use by the marchers in 2006 was in an overtly political protest, while the flags used by Italian Americans or Irish Americans were in celebratory, communal festivities. To an observer with an opinion about immigration law, the understanding of the flag's presence in the United States could have been colored by feelings about the political question. In contrast, St. Patrick's Day celebrations tended to be non-partisan and eschew divisive questions.

Nationalistic Interpretation Wins in 2006

Symbolic conflict, as with any conflict, is not always decided upon the merits of each party. In the case of anti-immigrant speakers, they had within their arsenal a deep-seated cultural reverence for the American flag. By placing Mexican and other flags *in opposition* to the U.S. flag, rather than as *complementary* to it, they gained a rhetorical advantage because non-immigrant viewers who were unfamiliar with immigrant use of Mexican flags were familiar with tropes about loyalty to the Stars and Stripes. Because flags are polysemic—they carry multiple meanings, depending on the viewer, the context, and cultural understandings—the assimilationist motives of the marchers were not obvious, and their symbolic efforts to give the Mexican flag the same status as the Irish or Italian flag were vulnerable to counter-assertions about its meaning.

The anti-immigration voices harnessed almost unconscious reverence for the U.S. flag to plant doubts about the meaning of the Mexican flag; thus, in this valuation contest, the struggle to elevate Latin American flags faced off against an effort to delegitimize them as symbols of assimilated American immigrants. In large part, this delegitimization tactic worked, as rally organizers discouraged the use of Mexican and other flags to assert their symbolic claims.

Conclusion

The mass protests over H.R. 4437, and immigration law in general, were a prime example of mass symbolic conflict. Framed as a “visual argument”, we can see that the flags served as symbols of claims and counterclaims to a certain American identity. Unauthorized immigrants used flags largely with the intention of indicating their intention to assimilate as had European immigrants—keeping cultural traditions of their homelands while embracing American civic and workplace duties. However, their opponents assigned delegitimizing meanings to the use of Latin American flags, claiming they represented subversion of American authority. In the end, the symbolic conflict was, for a time, resolved against those who used Mexican and other flags; fearful that the delegitimization tactic would work against their cause, the organizers of the protests tamped down on the use of non-American flags and emphasized displays of patriotism during their rallies.

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