

Civil Rights for All: Multiracial Identities and the Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States

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Abstract. The Civil Right Movement (CRM) in the United States has profoundly reshaped the racial politics, reconfigured the racial dynamics, and inspired extensive historiographical scholarship on African American grassroots political activism in the post-neoliberal era. However, the movement's multiracial dimensions have remained relatively underexplored. The essay employs a subaltern approach, centring on grassroots political activism against the deprivation of labour, cultural and political rights of Mexican Americans and Indigenous Americans within the CRM. This highlights the influence of the foundational philosophy of the African American CRM while also underscoring the movements' remodelling based on differing pursuits of each racial group. By integrating with a comparative analysis of the contemporary CRM efforts among these marginalized groups, the essay highlights how these movements inherit the original CRM's political philosophy while adapting their new purposes and actions. This adaptation is framed within the broader context of political polarization, the entrenchment of racial inequality, and the rise of "symbolic racism," reflecting the enduring legacy of the original CRM. Given the essay's unipolar focus on race in analysing the grassroots activism of these racial groups, incorporating a nuanced examination of gender and class within the historiographical framework would offer a more detailed differentiation of the social-cultural challenges faced by subgroups within these communities. Such an approach would make a judicious contribution to the future scholarship on the CRM.

Keywords: Race, Civil Right Movement, grassroots activism, United States.

1. Introduction

As one of the most significant movements in the historiography of postwar American race relations, the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) has profoundly reshaped the landscape of racial dynamics and highlighted the intersectionality between race, gender and politics entrenched in American society. For historians specialized in racial history of contemporary America, the CRM's ramifications were far-reaching in inciting extensive historiographical debate on the ascendance of race politics and the pursuit of racial equality, alongside the burgeoning forms of collective remembrance. Waves of autobiographical accounts and documentaries have emerged, coupled with massive annual commemorative movements during Black History Month. These representations of public participation, intertwined with the contemporary American political contestation, rendering the remembrance not only social, ethnical, but also political.

However, the CRM's integration into American collective memory and historical scholarship has occurred through channels that are simultaneously potent, perilous, and intensely contested [1]. Despite plethora of historiographical analysis has been published to explore the grassroots political participation of various ethnic groups within the CRM, the mainstream historical narratives have disproportionately centred on African American experiences. This is attributable to the extensive preexisting historiographical scholarship on African American civil right both preceding and succeeding the CRM. For instance, historian Clayborne Carson offers an intricate and meticulous analysis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)'s rise from what he characterizes as a 'barren' political climate marked by "repression, divisiveness and self-absorption". Carson's conclusions are grounded in substantial primary sources, including comprehensive surveys of Black college students and interviews [2]. In contrast, the relatively inaccessibility of primary sources on other ethnic groups have stifled scholars from generating resourceful contributions to the subjects. The skewed scholarly focus has resulted in an inadequate comprehension of the CRM's

broader historical significance and has fostered an overly subjective deduction and interpretation. As Martin Luther King Jr. articulated, the CRM transcends the traditional paradigm that focuses solely on African American struggle against an egregious political system. The movement “exposes evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of American society”, such as disproportionate welfare treatment allocated in different ethnicities, mass incarceration, income disparities, and educational inequalities arising from the urban concentration of educational resources. For instance, in 1972, the median household income for Hispanic is \$42,650, which was 29.9% less than the median income of non-Hispanic white households (\$60,830). More strikingly, by 1987, nearly two decades after the CRM, the median household income for Indigenous American remained significantly lowered at \$39,320 [3]. Therefore, an inclusion of systematic historiographical analysis of marginalized ethnic groups is imperative to facilitate a more judicious evaluation on the CRM’s legacy and to utilize a more historically deliberate and subaltern perspective to elucidate racial, social and political polarisation in the post-neoliberal era.

This essay attempts to adopt a subaltern perspective to scrutinize the grassroots CRM efforts undertaken by Mexican Americans and Indigenous American communities. Additionally, the essay aims to provide a thorough analysis of the CRM’s limitations, drawing upon existing subaltern scholarship to examine the persistent economic disparities and latent discrimination that furthered racial antagonism in the post-CRM era. Lastly, by incorporating the historical narratives of contemporary CRMs, this essay seeks to offer a comparative historiographical analysis of race politics during and after the CRM. This approach reveals the multiracial identities inveterate in the CRM’s philosophy, thereby contributing to a more nuanced, inclusive understanding of the movement’s legacy.

2. Mexican Americans in the CRM: Labour and Cultural Rights are Civil Rights

Surging to 9.1 million, the Hispanic population in the United States experienced a steady increase in the 1970s, predominantly within a relatively confined geographical region of California counties [4]. This is primarily due to the Mexican immigration driven by occupational and economic incentives since 1920s. A comprehensive analysis of immigration statistics from that decade reveals that Mexicans constituted 11.2% of the total immigration population [5]. Consequently, in 1930, Roy Harris, a professor of economics at Vanderbilt University, conducted an extensive study on the Mexican population in the United States. He presented his findings to the House of Representatives, advocating for the establishment of an immigration quota for Western Hemisphere countries, particularly Mexico, limiting annual immigration to 2,500 individuals [6]. Harris exhibited a profound insight in his conclusion by extending his consideration beyond the mere functional employment of Mexican labour. Furthermore, he presciently anticipated that the influx of Mexican labour would precipitate a potential racial crisis in the Western States in both sociopolitical and cultural dimensions, which was comparable to the institution of slavery.

In retrospect of Harris’s argument, Natalia Molina identifies two additional significant factors contributing to the racialization and regulation of Mexican labour beyond its sheer numbers. First, the widespread penetration of Mexican labourers into American workforce, spanning from Chicago to Pittsburgh, and second, a preconceived racial stereotype that depicts Mexican labours as social burdens and inherently heinous criminals, thereby rendering them unfit for self-governing [5]. Therefore, a paradoxical historical phenomenon emerged wherein the largest group of immigrants in the Southwestern States was simultaneously infringed from political participation and stripped of cultural independence through forced assimilation. “The *Wetback* Problem” in Southwestern States, paralleled with “The Negro Problem” in Southern states, symbolized two significant racialized, stereotypical ideologies to address unprecedented level of racial integration in early 20th century America.

The ingrained discriminatory experiences and maltreatment of Mexican labours laid the groundwork for the challenges confronted during the Chicano Movement in late 1960s. In 1962, Caesar Chavez, a seminal figure in the movement, co-founded the United Farm Workers (UFW) with Dolores Huerta, aiming to advocate for improved wages and working conditions for Mexican farmworkers. A critical historiographical focus on the UFW involves examining the integration of labour activism with the non-violent philosophy of the CRM, and the creation of a distinctive form of postmodern organizational activism. The origin of Mexican labour activism in the UFW is rooted, as Nelson Lichtenstein posits, in a “commonplace aspiration” among unionists to utilize the union as the vehicle for broader social movements [7]. Within the union, various rudimentary forms of political participation—such as corporate campaigns, consumer boycotts, and community organization—were mobilized to combat unfair legislation in a progressive manner, thereby fostering extensive social group participation from clergy members to students. These non-violent resistances were critical in the major grape boycott, in which Chavez and other Mexican grape growers successfully negotiated a collective bargaining agreement with the state in 1970, significantly improving the living conditions and wages of the grape workers. This protest notably associated middle-class families with the poor farmers in the waves of resistance of consuming grapes, transcending class and racial boundaries within the broader narrative of the Mexican American CRM [8].

The movement also encompasses broader cultural-political implications in preserving Mexican cultural identity and highlighting social and racial inequalities in Chicano community. As Chavez articulated the necessity of cultural preservation, “**preservation of one’s own culture** does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.” Thus, the Chicano cultural revival epitomizes a quest for Mexican cultures to flourish and perpetuate within a culturally diverse America. It also functions as a vehicle for subaltern representation, catalysing waves of artistical representation of Mexican cultural heritage, labour issue, and racial struggle. Founded in 1965 by Chicano artist Luis Valdez, *El Teatro Campesino*, or The Farmworkers’ Theatre, audaciously applied Mexican theatrical performance as a cultural medium to visualize the plights of Mexican farmers and the racial challenges in Chicano communities, as exemplified by *The Two Faces of The Boss*. As Valdez emphasized in his interview, the performances were conceived with “political purposes” that convey an “emblematic presentation” of the lives of Mexican workers, while simultaneously addressing social issues and proposing solutions to them [9]. Murals also emerged as a crucial artistic expression of Hispanic political identity and social reform during the Chicano movement. Notably, Mario Torero’s famous masterpiece *We Are Not a Minority* symbolizes the ethnic consciousness of Mexican Americans in defiance of racial stereotype while reconnecting with their cultural heritage [10]. Both Valdez and Torero adopted art forms that were symbolically cultural in their resistance against assimilation, and political in their advocacy for initiative of Mexican American representation within the racial dynamics.

The movement, nevertheless, has its militant outlier. Edward J. Escobar accounts for the anti-Vietnam War protest demonstration that escalated into a riot in 1970, led by Mexican American activist Rosalío Muñoz under the auspices of Chicano Moratorium Committee (CMC). Escobar argues the event is emblematic of the rise of militant Mexican American protest, highlighting their stringent response to polices’ legal monopoly on coercive forces [11]. Nevertheless, the militant action should not be relegated as mere deviation into absolute violence from the non-violent philosophy championed by early CRM strategies. Instead, it should be regarded as a milestone that propelled Mexican Americans toward further political participation that facilitates legislative changes addressing the status quo of police violence, educational inequalities, and economic disparities. Only through this lens can we analyse Muñoz’s perspective on the protest as a means against war discrimination of Mexican Americans, and an illumination on how the upsurge of Mexican American grassroots political activism created a social climate against the Vietnam War, racial antagonisms, labour question and cultural erasure. The next section will explore the contemporaneous Indigenous American resistance against these social-political and cultural issues within American society. It attempts to facilitate a historical discourse on the strategies they employed

against, in comparison to Mexican Americans, more pronounced marginalization from the mainstream historical narrative.

3. Indigenous Americans in the CRM: Political Rights are Civil Rights

Indigenous Americans have a longstanding history of political resistance against the white encroachment upon their sovereignty. In contrast to Mexican Americans and African Americans, who experienced comparatively higher degree of social acceptance despite their positioning as second-class citizens, Indigenous Americans were entirely excluded from citizenship until 1924. The situation changed with the signing of Indian Citizenship Act by President Calvin Coolidge. Nevertheless, The Indian Citizenship Act should not be considered a milestone indicating a growing inclusiveness towards ethnical minorities. Rather, considering the long-term territorial encroachment and indigenous cultural erosion, it should be viewed as an implicit acknowledgement of the inability of Indigenous Americans to form a robust social-political alliances against both domestic colonization and persistent white cultural chauvinism. Therefore, politically, American citizenship symbolizes a federal infringement on the political independence of Indigenous Americans; culturally, it signifies the concept of “homeland”—the place where the sense of cultural belonging exists and perpetuates in Indigenous culture—has eroded. The loss of “homeland” has shaped a rhetoric of realist sentimentalism within the Indigenous American CRM, thereby distinguishing from the Mexican American experiences.

“We are among the poor, the powerless, the inexperienced and the inarticulate”, as Indigenous American activist Clyde Warrior revealed, the Indigenous political and cultural renaissance, along with an intensified pursuit of civil rights and economic independence, has become the primary focus of Indigenous Americans CRM [12]. As an eloquent and bellicose activist of Indianism, influenced by the “Black Power”, Warrior was proactive in emphasizing tribal self-determination and advocating for the rise of “Red Power”. In 1964, he presented his speech “Time for Indian Action”, attempting to energize Indigenous American youths to act as a potent force for transformative cultural change in society [12]. Nevertheless, Warrior, like many Indigenous activists, does not pursue an immediate cultural and political tribal independence. Instead, he seeks to mobilize grassroots Indigenous Americans to “self-help,” to raise cultural, historical, and more symbolically, political awareness of “Indianness” in the context of genocidal political history of Indigenous Americans.

A representative non-violent resistance that epitomizes Warrior’s indigenous political activism is the occupation of Alcatraz Island, which has been closed as a federal prison in 1963. The occupation was led by the organization Indians of All Tribes (IAT) on November 20, 1969. Despite the term “occupation”, the indigenous claim to Alcatraz was legally justified by The Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868, which stipulated all retired federal land would be returned to Indigenous Americans. IAT activists strategically centred their resistance on Alcatraz. Firstly, they adeptly utilized its notorious reputation as a site of cruelty and vice to dramatize the plight of indigenous American civil rights. Additionally, they carefully considered the timing of the occupation, aligning it with the fervent, turbulent antiwar protests the Vietnam War [13]. Therefore, the occupation of Alcatraz was both politically and temporally strategic, effectively highlighting the fraught and precarious historical and political existence of Indigenous Americans.

Reflecting Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy of non-violence, IAT members sought to transform Alcatraz into an Indigenous American cultural centre, facilitating an Indigenous self-education aimed at betterment, instead of previous education that emphasized assimilation and subjugation [14]. However, the Indigenous cultural renaissance serves as a façade when discussing the occupation’s significance. More crucially, the occupation represents the reclamation of “homeland”, a manifestation of the spiritual and political belongings that has long been suppressed by colonialism. The idea of “homeland” facilitated the establishment of a self-governing social system on Alcatraz. The IAT activists formed a governing council and instituted various essential services, including a clinic, kitchen, public relations department, nursery and schools; A security force, known as the

“Bureau of Caucasian Affairs”, was organized to patrol the shoreline to guard against intruders; Sioux John Trudell utilized the platform “Radio Free Alcatraz” to broadcast updates of Indigenous American civil rights [14]. This self-governed system reflects a non-violent philosophy embodying the revival of ethnical sovereignty. Moreover, it functions as a form of civil disobedience against, and a declaration of independence from, the white chauvinistic society that hindered political and social participation of Indigenous Americans. Therefore, through the “republic of Alcatraz”, the IAT activists exemplified Warrior’s “self-help”. This initiative challenged the fictionalisation and marginalisation of Indigenous Americans within the historical narrative, and, in turn, emancipated Indigenous Americans with a renewed awareness of political civil rights from the institutionalized racial stratification in the theme of federal postcolonialism.

4. New CRM in New Context and Oppression: The Multiracial Legacy of the CRM

As scholar Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo contend, a comprehensive historical understanding of the CRM requires its contextualization within the broader tapestry of preceding and subsequent events [13]. The social-political engagement and philosophies of Mexican Americans and Indigenous Americans successfully advanced their pursuit of voting rights, the alleviation of extreme poverty, and the preservation of cultural legacies. Activists within both racial groups have articulated self-determination and racial independence as primary political demands, facilitating extensive legislative changes and grassroots reforms to address political underrepresentation, cultural assimilation, and labour issues. For instance, both groups contributed to the passage of the Section 2 of Voting Rights Act of 1967, which secured the voting right of linguistic minorities in United States. Culturally, Mexican Americans led efforts to advocate for bilingual education in Southwestern states and stimulate the passage of Equal Educational Opportunities Act 1973. Similarly, Indigenous Americans stimulated the enactment of Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA), which ensures the protection and repatriation of Indigenous American human remains, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. In tackling labour issues, both groups contributed to the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970, which mandates that employers have an obligation to ensure the safety and health of their employees.

These reverential legacies exemplify the movements’ multiracial interconnections and foster a novel yet continuous historical discourse on the contemporary CRM against social and racial inequalities in post-1990 American society. The recent CRM efforts by Mexican and Indigenous Americans in post-CRM era inherit the philosophies of resistance focused on both obtaining and securing civil rights for racial minorities. However, this does not suggest that the contemporary CRM merely replicates the strategies and ideologies of the original CRM. While the original CRM effectively addressed numerous cases of overt racial discrimination, it failed to eliminate implicit, unconscious forms of discrimination that have remained inveterate throughout the history of the republic. This form of racism, known as “symbolic racism”, has become less overt, more subtle, and increasingly difficult to document [15].

Furthermore, the political polarization within modern American partisanship has exacerbated ideological schisms at the elite congressional level and intensified grievances in contemporary mass politics [16]. Race and politics have never been more intertwined, suggesting a potential for racial polarization that threatens the social climate striving to reduce racial disparities. This polarization may lead to the resurgence of explicit racial discrimination that has been illegalized by the consolidated legacies of the CRM, and an increasing likelihood of novel forms of “symbolic racism”.

Beyond political polarization, the substantial influx of immigration since the 2000s and the persistent geographical development gap have also fostered an arbitrary correlation between race and racial stereotype, another issue that the CRM has failed to address. The 2000 Census revealed a profound increase of over than 800,000 Mexican immigrants in the United States, the highest recorded in the history. The dispersion of the Mexican population has intensified, with fewer than 50%

of these immigrants choosing to remain in traditional destinations of California and Texas [17]. The overflow of immigrants has intensified competition in the labour market and exacerbated an already precarious relationship between whites and racial minorities. This tension was evident in the significant uproar ignited by President Donald Trump's proposal to build an "impassable physical barrier" along the US-Mexico border in 2016 presidential campaign. The controversy escalated to a fever with the issuance of Executive Order 13767 in 2017, which mandate the wall's construction. Trump's stance is not unprecedented; rather, it revived a traditional anti Mexican-immigrant sentiment that had driven towards American immigration policies for the entirety of modern American history. Therefore, it intentionally reinforced the association between Mexican Americans and illegality, heightening the racialized, political radicalism. Indigenous Americans, on the other hand, have confronted the dual challenges of underdevelopment and extreme poverty due to geographical constraint and centralisation of population within the reservation system. These conditions have resulted the highest poverty rate (26%) and the lowest labour force rate (61.1%) of Indigenous American communities among all racial groups [18]. This social-economic marginalization has reinforced the connection between poverty and Indigenous Americans identity within the social-political mainstream. Both the contentious "Border Wall" issue and the pervasive racial poverty serve as alarming indicators of a potential resurgence in racial marginalisation and a regression of racial equality achieved in the Mexican and Indigenous American CRM.

Therefore, although contemporary Mexican and Indigenous American CRM activists draw foundational philosophies inherited from the original CRM, their pursuits and strategies have evolved to acclimatize the new social milieu and address new forms of racial oppression. In 2006, Mexicans Americans conducted extensive grassroots mobilization across major American cities in response to the draconian immigration bill HR 4437, which aimed to expel undocumented immigrants. The activists adopted non-violent, non-cooperation strategies akin to those employed in the Chicano Movement, organizing "Day Without Immigrant" strikes that emphasized the motto "no work, no school, no shopping" [19]. However, the objectives of the movement have expanded considerably beyond those of the Chicano Movement. Rather than exclusively advocating for the political rights of legal Mexican Americans, recent CRM activists have extended their concerns to encompass the human rights and socio-political status of foreign immigrants. This reflects an altruistic perspective that transcends racial boundaries.

A similar broadening of objectives is evident in the Standing Rock Sioux's grassroot protest in Michigan in 2015 against the construction of Dakota Access Pipeline, a crude oil transportation project, on their reservation. Employing strategies reminiscent of those used during the occupation of Alcatraz, the Sioux drafted a resolution and organized demonstrations to articulate their opposition, highlighting the potential environmental devastation that "posed threat... to the survival of the Tribe" and "destroy cultural resources of The Sioux Tribe" [20]. Nevertheless, the objectives of the movement have transcended the mere conservation of Indigenous American cultural heritage, addressing the environmental racism that may further impede Indigenous Americans 'right to manage and utilize natural resources within their sovereign territories.

These contemporary CRMs signify a notable extension in the scope of perspective and multiracial engagement compared to the original CRM, while steadfastly adhere to the non-violent philosophy against both "symbolic" and explicit discrimination in the post-neoliberal era. The political-racial polarization inherent in modern partisanship may present a challenge to contemporary Mexican and Indigenous American CRM activists. However, as globalization further enhances international cultural and technological exchanges, these activists are endowed with greater opportunities to advocate for legislative reforms and participate in political discourse addressing new racial issues. By critically reassessing and reselecting methodologies employed by their predecessors, these activists perpetuate the legacy of the CRM, manifesting its multiracial identities in the ongoing struggle against federal postcolonialism in the post-neoliberal era.

5. Conclusion

Through the multifaceted historiographical analysis of grassroots political activism of Mexican Americans and Indigenous Americans during the CRM, this essay has briefly synthesized the contributions and legacies of these marginalized groups, thereby emphasizing the imperative of integrating their roles into the contemporary scholarship of the CRM. Examining these activists' approach to addressing economic disparities, cultural erasure and political underrepresentation underpinned by systematic racism reveals a non-violent philosophy inherited from the original CRM. However, it also shows the adaption to special temporal and spatial contexts and reflects a renewed awareness of racial and cultural identities of these groups. This phenomenon persists in the contemporary CRM, characterized by an expanded focus on both explicit and "symbolic" racism.

While the intersectionality of race and politics has polarized racial issues within political schism in American partisanship and given rise to symbolic racism within social-cultural landscape, this context should not be viewed merely a threat to racial politics and contemporary Mexican and Indigenous American political activism. Instead, it serves as a continual impetus that drives activists to revisit and refine their philosophies rooted in the CRM. The multiracial identities have penetrated both the CRM and its descendants, rendering the exclusion of Mexican and Indigenous American experiences from contemporary historiographical discussion both impractical and impossible. Incorporating multiracial identities into the historiographical analysis of contemporary American politics, as this essay seeks to do, will contribute to a more inclusive scholarship on American racial politics. This is especially crucial in the post-COVID-19 era, when the correlation between race and symbolic racism has become more pronounced.

Although this essay provides a thorough subaltern analysis of the grassroot Mexican and Indigenous CRM from a racial perspective, it does not offer a detailed classification of these groups in terms of gender and class. Consequently, it does not explore the connection between the CRM and other contemporaneous Rights Revolution, such as the Second Wave Feminism. A discourse on intersectionality between race, gender, class and politics would yield a more scholarly historical account of the movement, as it would encompass the sociocultural plights and discrimination of women and different social classes within the framework of racial classification. Therefore, there is a critical need to address gender and class dynamics embedded in the social norms of Mexican and Indigenous American communities in the CRM. This focus should be incorporated into future scholarship on the CRM to foster a more balanced discussion on racial justice and to develop more nuanced proposals, liberal or conservative, that contribute to both racial, interracial gender, and class equalitarianism.

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