

Differences in perception: Chavez Chapter 5

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- Chavez: *Shadowed Lives*: Chapter 5, Suburban Shantytown and Refuge, pp. 87-103
 - Describes the Green Valley camp
 - and what led to its destruction by “Health Services abatement”
- The *geographic pattern or process* that led to this increased contact between groups with different cultures:
 - original settlement was in hidden pocket in rural landscape
 - expensive suburban residential developments were built in former farming country
 - surrounding Green Valley and bringing “permanent” Anglos in contact with the settlement of “transient” workers from Mexico
 - actually only about half undocumented (p. 98)
 - wealthy suburbanites were offended by seeing poor migrant workers
 - problems only arose when they started standing on main roads waiting to be picked up for temporary work
 - who picked them up?
 - who did they work for, doing what?
- Chavez makes a key point: it often *does not matter whether the claims about the other are actually true* or not (he implies that some or most are not true)
 - what matters is the message that they convey
 - remember that people respond to the meanings or interpretations of things, as much or more than the things themselves
 - so what are the “meanings” that south San Diego Anglos place on workers from Mexico?
 - and why are those meanings widely accepted?
 - Steckley: “useful knowledge”
 - “useful” ideas have significant secondary functions
 - primary function: the face value, meaning content of the idea
 - secondary function: what holding that idea “does” for you; how it benefits you
 - helping to clarify or support some other point
 - helping to justify an attitude or behavior
 - helping to make money, get grants, get elected, etc.
 - Steckley: easy to believe if you know nothing about them
 - othering
 - cultural hegemony
- Ideas that Anglos have about migrant workers (mentioned before, as well)
 - they ask young students for money on their way to elementary school
 - spread diseases like malaria (well...)
 - roam the neighborhood looking for houses to rob
 - burglaries
 - rapes

- Note a result of “othering”: the “others” are seen as having defining traits in common beyond those that were initially used to classify them
 - some people speak Spanish and are dark-complexioned, therefore are “Mexican”
 - then, crimes that are committed by one “Mexican” are assumed to be characteristic of the entire category of “Mexicans”
 - contrast this with categories of people that are not “othered”, like citizens or middle-class whites
 - a crime committed by a citizen is not seen as indicating a characteristic of all citizens
 - a crime committed by a middle-class white is not seen as indicating a characteristic of all middle-class whites
 - a crime committed by an African-American...
- More ideas that Anglos have about migrants:
 - drain on property values
 - cause fires
 - defecate on trails, in drains on people’s property
 - use faucets to bathe
 - women are afraid to walk at night (even though there have been no incidents)
 - steal from the liquor store
 - “loiter” by stores, driving away customers
 - break the liquor store windows in retaliation for being run out
- Maybe more to the point:
 - they are here illegally
 - they’re not obeying our laws by coming across the border; flouting the law
 - note the (apparently) different cultural constructions of the law
 - to Anglos, breaking the law is in itself objectionable, apart from what the law prohibits
 - well, at least when that is a “useful” viewpoint
 - those same Anglos probably break other laws, such as the one requiring them to report mail-order and internet purchases and pay sales tax on them
 - because that law seems seems illegitimate to them
 - to Mexican undocumented immigrants, the laws prohibiting crossing the border to work are irrelevant, illegitimate impediments
 - “we came here honorably” (p 115)
 - so maybe the difference is in which laws are considered legitimate, rather than the overall construction of behavior concerning laws
 - they stand on the roadside soliciting work illegally
 - in dirty, rumpled clothes
 - looking out of place in the clean, new suburbs
 - disrupting suburbanites’ image of what life in the expensive homes they just purchased should be like
 - they camp illegally
 - excessively noisy, drunk, fights, defecate in public, trespass
 - they are transient, come and go
 - as though that were in itself morally problematic

- like the Romani
- transience represents a willful refusal to join the existing social system
 - of course, they would be deported if they tried...
 - not to mention unwelcome
 - ironic, given that builders, gardeners, cleaners, hotel workers, etc. are essential to that social system
- So what do these specific ideas add up to? What meaning or interpretation do these Anglos place on poor workers who appear to be from Mexico?
 - they are willfully criminal (having crossed the border and violating many laws here)
 - thus morally inferior
 - they refuse to comply with our cultural norms of housing, dress, hygiene, fire safety
 - I would add: language
 - they refuse to look busy during the day – thus are morally suspect
 - they don't fit with our image of the American Dream (p. 88)
 - they refuse to integrate (are transient)
 - So: Anglos see them as disrespecting Anglo culture, threatening it
 - in that Anglo culture is no longer universal in their experience
 - more and more people are not following the rules of Anglo culture
 - which makes the rules seem less powerful and binding
 - So solving the stated immediate problems (providing bathrooms and safe fire pits, for example) would completely miss the point
 - the migrants' very existence as people who are different is the problem
 - they must either change their ways to match ours, or leave
 - or the Anglos must change their interpretation of the meaning of the migrants
 - to one that does not have hostility as the natural response