

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?
 - this is a microcosm of globalization
 - considering the pattern of movements of people that brought groups into contact may be useful in your second presentations
 - it can help to explain why people feel as they do, and what assumptions and values are involved in frictions between the groups
 - part of a diaspora? stranded minority? borderland cultures? not all patterns will fit into an existing, named category
- 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 meanings does one group read into the Other?
 - what are the “meanings” that south San Diego Anglos place on workers from Mexico?
 - and why are those meanings widely known and accepted?
 - Steckley: “useful knowledge”
 - “useful” ideas have two kinds of 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.
 - ideas that benefit you are easier to believe; we tend to be less critical of them

- Steckley: easy to believe almost anything about the Other if you have little or no personal experience to check them against
 - so isolation between groups facilitates othering
 - 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
 - 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
- Note how “othering” works here
 - “othering” defines a category of people, based on a few obvious features
 - some people speak Spanish and are dark-complexioned, therefore are “Mexican”
 - once people are categorized, it is easy to attribute other features to the category as a whole
 - that is, features of one member of the category are easily thought to be features of the category in general, that is, of most or all members of the category
 - a crime committed by a “Mexican” suggests that “Mexicans” tend to be criminals
 - 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...
 - of course, the details depend on whose point of view we are looking at
 - immigrants who “other” Anglos generalize about them, too
 - they might well think that a crime by one Anglo means that Anglos in general are corrupt or criminal
- What is the real, underlying conflict?
 - Anglos see immigrants as doing many things that they don't like
 - but maybe the most significant is that they are here illegally
 - they are flouting immigration laws and other laws
 - Anglos read their mere presence as meaning that they are disrespecting and ignoring Anglo law and culture

- note the (apparently) different cultural constructions of the law
 - to Anglos, breaking the law is in itself morally wrong
 - 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 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
 - again, Anglos interpret this as disrespecting and ignoring Anglo cultural norms
- they camp illegally
- excessively noisy, drunk, fights, defecate in public, trespass
- they are transient, come and go
 - as though that were in itself immoral
 - there IS some logic here: transients do not commit to the long-term success of the community
 - but many, like migrant workers, do contribute even though they are not planning to stay for the long-term benefits
 - 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 incorporate (are transient)
- So: Anglos see them as disrespecting Anglo culture, and threatening it
 - in that they make Anglo culture not universal, natural, and unquestioned, but in a sense optional
 - 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) completely misses the point
 - the migrants' very existence as people who live within Anglo society but do not live by Anglo culture is the problem
 - From the Anglo point of view, they must either change their ways to match ours, or leave
 - or the Anglos must change their interpretation of the meaning of the migrants
 - from “people who disrespect, flout, and endanger our culture”
 - and thus naturally must be opposed
 - to some other interpretation of what their difference means
 - that would not require changing or expelling them
 - what alternative interpretations of migrant culture and behavior might do that?