

The Sanctuary Movement Then and Now: Latino Life in St. Louis
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Immigration Policy and Laws

Immigration policy and reform, especially concerning Latino immigrants, is currently a hot topic. Lately, deportation and a number of other threatening policies seem to be overriding reforms presented to immigrants in the past. However, the concern over attempting to control and monitor immigration is not a new issue to the United States. As far back as the U.S. Civil War, individual states started to enforce their own immigration laws. In 1875, the U.S. Supreme Court made these laws a federal issue (INS website). As soon as 1924, U.S. Border Control was created to deny access to undocumented immigrants, mainly Mexicans (Greenblatt 2008).

However, the immigration policy and laws that most obviously affect the demography and residency status of Latino immigrants today began with the policy acts of the 1960s. Along with other progressive movements enacted during this time period, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 made it possible for non-European immigrants to enter the U.S. in greater numbers. More specifically, the main alteration in this act was the change of focus to protect the unification of families and national labor needs. The act resulted in a rise of documented and undocumented immigrants.

The rise of Latino immigration to the U.S. came about for a variety of reasons. For example, in the 1980s a large number of Guatemalan and El Salvadorian immigrants sought refuge from civil wars raging in their countries. In reaction to this unexpected influx and the changing social conditions that accompanied it, the U.S. again altered legislation regarding immigration. More specifically, the U.S. Congress and Immigration and Naturalization Services enacted various strategies to control migration, including expansions in the amount of Border Patrol agents along the U.S.-Mexico border. In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform

and Control Act. The IRCA enforced sanctions on the employers of undocumented immigrants, but the act did little to curb immigration. Instead, the other elements of IRCA, which presented long-term undocumented immigrants and short-term agricultural migrants a path to citizenship, prompted about three million immigrants to attain citizenship (Sierra, Marie, Carrillo, Desippo & Correa 2000) (Haines & Rosenblum 1999).

It was 1996, however, which represented the major turning point in immigration policy. In that year, various amendments were made and the Welfare Reform Act passed, all of which made it exceedingly difficult for Latino immigrants to stay or gain citizenship in the U.S. For instance, the new policies of 1996 withdrew social services for illegal immigrants. Moreover, qualifications for deportation were lowered, as the criminal activity required for deportation was reduced to aggravated felony. In addition, Congress set a requisite amount of household income for incoming immigrants, which prohibited many Latinos of lower income levels from immigrating legally (Kretsedemas & Aparicio 2004).

Since 1996, no major immigration reforms have passed. That said, the North American Free Trade and Central American Free Trade agreements have created what Peter Andreas calls “a borderless economy with barricaded borders” (Sierra, Carrillo, Desippo, and Jones-Correa, 2000, p. 539). Although NAFTA, CAFTA, and other free-trade agreements claim to encourage Mexicans and other Latinos to stay and find work in their native countries, no evidence substantiates this. In fact, studies find a correlation between higher levels of foreign investment and higher levels of “out-migration” (Nazario, 2007).

The decrease of immigration reforms and the increase of constraints on Latino immigrants have carried into the twenty-first century. For example, in Jefferson City, Missouri, the Missouri State House of Representatives passed a bill in March 2008 barring Missouri

colleges from enrolling illegal immigrants. The bill demands that before universities and colleges receive any state money, they must verify that they did not intentionally enroll illegals. The tendency of current legislation, then, is to continuously add more constraints on immigrants, rather than offer them reforms (Logan 2008). Due to immigration policies and laws which are increasingly threatening to immigrants, the sanctuary movements have arisen to bring a human face to the immigration debate. Activists in these movements work to reveal the ways in which immigration legislation breaks apart families and denies immigrants' human rights.

The Sanctuary Movement

The Sanctuary Movement arose in the early 1980s as a reaction to the deportations of thousands of undocumented Guatemalans and Salvadorans. The INS and other agencies recognized these immigrants as "economic migrants," whereas a large group of American citizens, many of faith-based communities, disagreed with this claim. Activists claimed the undocumented Guatemalans and Salvadorans were refugees fleeing civil wars. Furthermore, activists stressed that these immigrants fell under U.S. and international requirements for refugee status.

Not only did these activists disagree with the deportation of Guatemalans and Salvadorans, but many opposed U.S. engagements in Central America and called for the U.S. government to alter its stance toward the region (Wilftang & McAdam 1991). Initially, many activists attempted to work within the legal system, but after a time they abandoned the legal route, considering it fruitless. A leading activist, Rev. John Fife, attested to activists' frustrations:

After that much involvement and with legal defense efforts, I realized they were neither effective nor moral. After a while it became apparent that this was an

exercise in futility. You recognize very quickly that nobody is going to get asylum except a tiny minority. (Golden & McConnell, 1986: 46)

As Fife explained, many activists felt they needed to change course. Hence, in November 1981 a few members of the Tucson Ecumenical Council met to organize a new strategy for their efforts on behalf of immigrants. This meeting led to the formation of the Sanctuary Movement, which aided immigrants fleeing persecution and offered immigrants sanctuary and support in evading detention and deportation. Present at this meeting was Jim Corbett, who became the first and most well-known “coyote,” or transporter of immigrants across the U.S. border. Also present was Fife, who led the Southside Presbyterian Church, the first church to offer sanctuary to a Salvadoran immigrant (Golden & McConnell 1986).

Consequently, The Sanctuary Movement grew to include hundreds of activists who worked to offer sanctuary to thousands of immigrants. Unfortunately, many participating immigrants lost their struggles and faced various forms of persecution; some even confronted death along the way to the U.S. (MacEoin 1985). The most famous countermeasure on the part of the U.S. government was an investigation termed “Operation Sojourner,” which, after five months of trials, found eight of eleven defendants guilty of at least one criminal charge. However, many immigrants survived their flights from Central America and evaded deportation, and some eventually acquired citizenship.

The New Sanctuary Movement

The New Sanctuary Movement, like the original Sanctuary Movement, arose from faith communities' concerns for the human rights of immigrants. More specifically, in March 2006, at the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahoney struck the consciousness of his faith community when he instructed it not to adhere to U.S. House Bill 4437, which criminalizes the provision of humanitarian aid to people without investigating their legal status. Mahoney's bold public action caused politicians and other U.S. citizens to reconsider the moral significance of the status and treatment of immigrants to America.

Following Mahoney's action, faith- and justice-based communities began to consider immigration a forefront issue. Communities across the country looked for ways to organize themselves to stand for the rights of immigrants. In January 2007, activists held a meeting in Washington, D.C., to form a nationwide movement. Since then, a number of immigrants and congregations have come forward to publicly take part in providing and receiving sanctuary as a manner of protesting against current immigration legislation. Thus far the largest centers of the New Sanctuary Movement are Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York ("Why Now"2007).

The Coalition of the Sanctuary Movements

The Sanctuary and New Sanctuary movements are comprised of a diverse group of participants. The main players in the coalitions have been faith- and justice-based communities, and the Latino immigrant community. In the first Sanctuary Movement, the Latino communities with the greatest number of participants were from Central America. This was due to the particular political situations discussed above. Instead of gaining political-refugee status, Salvadorans and Guatemalans were considered by the U.S. government to be economic migrants. Thousands of Central American immigrants were deported because they were considered

undocumented. In reaction to what many people considered unjust treatment, a coalition of more than 500 churches and community organizations formed to respond to the needs of these immigrant communities (Salvatierra 2007).

The New Sanctuary Movement in some ways is a broader and more inclusive movement, and in other ways it is more limited than the Sanctuary Movement. The New Sanctuary Movement is more inclusive in that its policies apply to a more diverse immigrant population. Also, the New Sanctuary Movement seeks to defend the human rights of all immigrants to the U.S. with the following intentions:

- 1) To take a united, public, moral stand for immigrant rights
- 2) To protect immigrants against hate, workplace discrimination and unjust deportation
- 3) To reveal the actual suffering of immigrant workers and families under current and proposed legislation to the religious community and the general public. (“An Invitation to Join the New Sanctuary Movement” 2007)

Moreover, in some cities, such as New York, the population of the immigrants seeking sanctuary is notably diverse; it includes Europeans, Haitians, and even Chinese (Salvatierra 2008). Since the New Sanctuary Movement intends to defend a greater variety of human rights for a greater variety of people, in these ways it is more inclusive than The Sanctuary Movement.

However, in other ways the New Sanctuary Movement is more limited, especially in regard to its coalition, than was The Sanctuary Movement, because the New Sanctuary Movement has more particular requirements for the immigrants. For example, some requirements are that immigrants must have “received an order of deportation and have a good work record; their children must be American citizens, and they must have a potential case under current law” (Salvatierra 2007:31). The increase in requirements to participate in official

sanctuary, in the New Sanctuary Movement, represents a reaction to the Patriot Act of 2001. Under this act, there is a greater risk for legal consequences in providing refuge for immigrants than there was during the 1980s. For this reason, the New Sanctuary Movement limits the number of participants and actions of the coalition.

The New Sanctuary Movement coalition differs in another way from the coalition of the Sanctuary Movement in that today's activists and immigrants must be willing to take a public stance. During the first Sanctuary Movement, without much public disclosure, thousands of Central Americans sought shelter. Due to the risk associated with seeking sanctuary under current legislation, the New Sanctuary Movement has had only five families in California come forward as sanctuary candidates. Another example of the high risk associated with going public and the consequential reticence of people to participate in the New Sanctuary Movement can be seen in the famous case of an immigrant Mexican woman who, with an American-born son, was deported after seeking sanctuary in Chicago.

Another notable characteristic of the New Sanctuary Movement is that the coalition is well-organized and generates a formal operation. In spite of this, as Nicolás A. Jiménez states, many people doubt the capability of a coalition consisting of faith-based communities to execute effective political action (Nicolás 2007). However, the New Sanctuary Movement coalition defied this stereotype when it met formally in January 2007. Representatives from 18 cities convened in Washington, D.C., to strategize about protecting immigrants from deportation. It was at this meeting that the New Sanctuary Movement was created and the network of churches and organizations giving sanctuary to the undocumented became larger and more formalized. The denominational and interdenominational faiths represented were the Unitarian Universalist, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, United Methodist, Union of Reform Judaism, Interfaith

Worker Justice Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, American Friends Service Committee, Evangelical Christian, Muslim, and Sikh. Regardless of the diversity of the coalition, all groups represented came to a consensus on the goals and strategies of the movement. Furthermore, they coordinated the Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice-California, Interfaith Worker Justice, and the New York Sanctuary Coalition. They produced highly accessible education materials, connections to their allies, and tools such as a website that provides handouts, legal forms, and media toolkits, all free of charge. As Jiménez concludes, the seemingly meek coalition of the New Sanctuary Movement is “more organized than meets the eye” (Nicólas 2007: 45).

The coalition that makes up the Sanctuary Movement not only is diverse in background, but also in experience. Many members of the coalition from the first Sanctuary Movement currently are involved in the New Sanctuary Movement fighting “the economic issues that gave rise to the wars” of the 1980s in Central America (Fraser & Paul 2004: 1). There is evidence, too, that the New Sanctuary Movement coalition is increasing in numbers of inexperienced participants, who exude a newfound enthusiasm for ending social injustice toward the Latino community abroad and in the U.S.

One fundamental cause of the increase is the Catholic Church’s stance on social justice during the last few decades. Pope John Paul II responded to economic globalization by calling for a “globalization of solidarity.” He stated, “A culture of solidarity must be promoted that is capable of inspiring timely initiatives in support of the poor and the outcast, especially refugees forced to leave their villages and lands in order to flee violence.” In *Ecclesia in America*, the papal exhortation issued after the 1997 Synod for America, he added, “The church in America must encourage an economic order dominated not only by the profit motive but also by the

pursuit of the common good, the equitable distribution of goods and the integral development of people”(Qtd. in Fraser & Paul 2004: 1). With these words, Pope John Paul II called people of faith to respond to the needs and combat injustices inflicted upon peoples, such as the community of Latinos in the U. S. and abroad. One response to the Pope’s call has been the New Sanctuary Movement.

Another motive for the increase in the New Sanctuary Movement coalition is that people are beginning to see social problems on an expanded scale. An example arrives with Ellie Stock, pastor of a Presbyterian church in St. Louis. While traveling in Central America, she noted the connections between social problems in the U.S. and Central America. This motivated her church, and her, to build relationships with the small town of La Oroya, Peru. Stock explained the motivation of the faith- and justice-based coalition to connect with the Latino community abroad: “It’s a new model for mission.” She continued: “It’s people on both sides of a partnership working on similar issues and working together to strategize and help each other address problems and create solutions. We’re giving, receiving and working together, recognizing the gifts of both”(Qtd. in Fraser & Paul 2004: 1). Stock exemplifies an increase in individuals’ understandings of human interconnectedness in a globalized world.

St. Louis’s Latino Community

A large component of the psychological and emotional effects of immigration on a Latino family stems from the reactions it receives from U.S. citizens. Obviously, not all U.S. citizens see themselves in solidarity with Latino immigrants, and Latino immigrants face a varied reception from Missourians (Brown, 2008) (Hobbs 2004). A prime location to observe the diverse behavior of Missourians toward the Latino community is in a city in southwest Missouri

called Noel. For 25 years now, there has been an influx of Latino immigrants to Noel, leading one local citizen to state, “it seems that there are more Hispanics on the streets than Americans” (Qtd. in Majors. 2008: 10). One of the big draws to that city is the poultry producer Tyson, which offers many jobs that require little English-speaking or advanced educational skills. There are some citizens of Noel who believe the undocumented portion of the city’s Latino population defies American laws and therefore should be deported. Other citizens accept and even adore the Latino community. Finally, some citizens simply are annoyed that there is a large non-English-speaking population in town. As is made evident in Noel, Missouri residents respond in various ways to Latinos. (Source? Majors?)

Whether St. Louisans feel positively or negatively about immigrant Latinos, this population is growing in the city. A 2004 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article explains the motivations of Latinos to immigrate to Missouri and to the city of St. Louis as resulting from four main reasons. The first reason is the job market. For instance, meat processing in rural Missouri offers jobs that require few professional qualifications. The second reason is that it was easiest for certain Latino immigrants to stop in the St. Louis area en route to another destination. The individuals cited under this situation did not plan to stay, but then the experience of making money in the St. Louis area and the inexpensive cost-of-living standards here motivate them to remain. A third reason the Latino immigrant population is growing in the St. Louis area is because of political changes that have occurred in the last decade. Movement for Latino immigrants, between the U.S. and Latin America has become increasingly difficult and dangerous; hence, it becomes seemingly less dangerous for immigrants to stay in the U.S. than to return to their native homes. The fourth reason why immigrants stay in St. Louis is for the sake of their children. There are many specific reasons that would benefit their children to stay. For

instance, the children of Latino immigrants, many of whom are U.S. citizens by birth, have more opportunities, such as education-related opportunities, available to them if they remain in the U.S.

In addition to these reasons, Latino immigrants stay for the sake of their children because when their children become accustomed to the U.S. culture, they may find it difficult to leave. Moreover, many Latino families report that they stay in the St. Louis area because it offers them a less dense, quieter Latino community. This contrasts with cities like Los Angeles and Chicago, in which Latinos can benefit from a larger Latino community. However, these larger cities also are detrimental to Latinos because they have more compact environments and present more problems, such as gang relations. For all of these reasons the Latino population in the St. Louis area is growing (Branch-Brioso, 2004).

Despite the growing population, the St. Louis area is not a center of much Latino political activism. There are various reasons for this. One is that the Latino population here tends to be dispersed (KnowledgePlex, Inc. 2008) (Hobbs 2004). There are not many large, condensed communities of Latinos in St. Louis, as compared to other metropolitan cities with high Latino populations. Furthermore, studies show that if individuals lack a sense of community support, they are much more reticent to participate in socio-political activities that have seemingly high risk factors (Wilftang, & McAdam 1991) (McAdam & Paulsen 1993). Hence, the dispersal of the Latino population gives the St. Louis Latino community a distinct environment and has various effects, such as reticence to participate in social activism.

Likewise, the growing Latino population of St. Louis does not participate in much social activism because public discourse on such activity gives the impression that it is dangerous. A case which had a particularly chilling effect on activism occurred in 2006, when a prominent St.

Louis Latina, Cecilia Velazquez, was deported back to Mexico despite a legal battle that lasted about five years. Coincidentally, Velazquez was arrested two days prior to a big rally that took place at the Old Courthouse of St. Louis, in which thousands of Latinos congregated to stand for Latino political affairs. As an individual, Velazquez was not in any way a threat to St. Louis society (Bell & Eun Kyung 2006). Instead, Velazquez was an upstanding St. Louis citizen, a self-made entrepreneur who paid her taxes and was dedicated to raising money for various charities. Velazquez published *Latina*, a Spanish-language newspaper, and was president of Radio CuCui, a group that brings ethnic performers and commentators to WEW-AM radio. She avoided political affairs, claiming not to be a social activist. Yet when she was deported, Velazquez felt confident that “No doubt they used me as an example” (Qtd. in Bell & Eun Kyung: 2006: 9). Many believe her deportation was meant to discourage potential immigrants from coming to and living in the U.S. without citizenship. After occurrences such as what happened to Velazquez, it is unreasonable to believe other Latinos in St. Louis, who may not have such upstanding public records as did Velazquez, will be persuaded to make their citizen status public. Hence, prospects for New Sanctuary Movement activism in St. Louis would appear dim.

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