Editorial

¡SÍ SE PUEDE! THE CARAVAN OF CITIZENSHIP

This issue inaugurates the first of our two-part special feature on "Latino/as and The Shifting Meanings of Citizenship Today." The articles are the outcome of a conference sponsored by this journal at the University of Illinois, Chicago, in late April, 2003. Collectively, they evoke the urgency of developing an agenda that effectively integrates and directly confronts the multiple needs and problems currently affecting the growing and increasingly diverse populations of Latino/as in the United States. Through their work, the authors seem to be implicitly responding, albeit to varying extents, to the underlying question that initially motivated the decision to organize a conference focusing on Latino/as and citizenship: How can we best address the unprecedented political dangers, the social and cultural difficulties, currently confronting not only Latinos but also everyone who lives in this country?

While the issues our contributors address include questions related to conceptualization, historical precedents, political mobilization, and the denunciation of new forms of control of immigrants, the solutions they propose range from social movements, political participation and organization, to the strengthening of cultural citizenship and the implementation of regional and dual citizenship.

The varying perspectives presented in these articles and the debates discussed in both this and the next issue of *Latino Studies* (which continues our focus on citizenship) bring into relief the observation once made by Sir Ivor Jennings, a highly renowned British constitutional expert: *The true test of a democracy*, he noted, [and, I would add, even more so, of a just society] *– is how it treats and responds to the plight of its least fortunate members*. Certainly, in the current context of corporate globalization and the unbridled greed it has unleashed, Sir Ivor's words provide us with both a time-tested maxim and a criterion for how to approach this contemporary dialogue, which can no longer be deferred, on the socio-political identity and meaning of citizenship in the experience of Latinos/as.

As we engage this debate in the US context – whether as scholars, activists, or concerned citizens – it is essential that we acknowledge that the impact of the current economic crisis on the rights of the "least fortunate members" is taking place in what is, unquestionably, the richest and most powerful nation in the world. Hence, a key focus of all the articles is on the social

Latino Studies 2004, 2, (1–3) © 2004 Palgrave Macmillan Ltd 1476-3435/04 $25.00
www.palgrave-journals.com/lst

justice aspect of claims to the social product and its distribution. The research and scholarship in our field of Latino Studies alone unequivocally suggests that democratic rights are definitely being eroded in the current struggle to mold a world empire out of the oldest modern democracy. This parting of the ways between political democracy and the ideal of a *"just society"* threatens to produce a bitter harvest of widening inequality, while simultaneously ensuring the unabashed abandonment of representative government in favor of oligarchic strangleholds. At this critical juncture, it is not surprising that American society is failing miserably with respect to even traditional forms of social justice. Again, the experience of Latinos and Latinas living in the United States today serves as an eloquent if, sadly, not a unique example.

One has only to learn the stories of the workers who joined the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride of 2003 – the thousands of immigrants, documented and undocumented who, along with their supporters among working people, activist and labor organizations, left their towns and cities in late September, to become part of the caravan of buses crossing the country to *marcar presencia* at the massive culminating rally for justice and rights held on October 4th, in Queens, New York. Re-enacting the efforts of the freedom riders of the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s, the poor and undocumented men and women of the early 21st century called for legalization, reunification of families, workplace rights, and civil liberties for all. In so doing, they took the risk of confronting adversity of varying intensity – including being stopped, harassed, perhaps even deported. As human beings and as workers, they demand their right to be treated with the dignity and respect that is their due.

In El Paso, Texas, the freedom riders were confronted by the border patrols and possible deportation; in Nogales, Arizona, they carried white crosses and laid wreaths for all those who never made it across the desert alive; in Chicago, Illinois, they faced members of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan, who held their own small but vocal counter-rally across the street from the plaza where the immigrants had gathered for a pre-departure assembly. Waving full-sized flags with swastikas or white supremacy symbols, and wearing all-black uniforms reminiscent of the German SS of the 1940s, many of these opponents of the rightless (some looking no older than 15 years) held up large anti-immigrant posters insulting Latinos and Mexicanos, even as others extended their arms and fists in unison, repeatedly shouting "Jim Crow."

Despite the intimidation, the counter-demonstrations, the fear and exhaustion, the freedom riders met and rallied again and again with their supporters in both large gatherings and small, in various towns and cities across the nation. In speeches by local leaders, union officials, and politicians, they left no doubt that US civil society (citizens and legal residents) is both relying on and benefiting from the presence of the undocumented recent immigrants, whose exploitative wages ensure that the price of food, basic staples, and services remains affordable for the middle classes of this country.

The immigrants' stories testify to the progressive amnesia that infects much of present-day civic consciousness in the United States. The caravan is a reminder to all of us that this nation's historical memory must not be allowed to atrophy; that it should be rallied to improve the plight of the most recent newcomers, while withstanding the determined assault on general democratic rights and ideals.

The self-righteous posturing by some US citizens, as much as their lack of active participation in the mobilization for justice, contributes to the blatant exploitation of the undocumented. It both secures the indifference (to say the least) of the federal government and leaves the greed of the multinational owners of the large corporate farms, factories, and sweatshops unchecked. Undoubtedly, the apathy of those who can do something (but for whatever reason, don't) ultimately ensures that it is US citizens who are in fact condoning the increasingly-common open practice of treating the less fortunate in this country as the new slaves of the 21st century. The unrelenting struggle that marks the daily existence of most of the undocumented, like the marginalizing and segregating material poverty in which many ordinary Latinos live their lives, is intimately tied to the political reality within which Latino/as can and do struggle for justice.

The effective concentration of "citizenship" in ever-smaller sectors of the society must not be allowed to become endowed with the aura of natural and historical inevitability; neither, for that matter, should the overall decline in the "rate of profit" of social justice, as the principle organizing the distribution of rights and duties in a modern democratic state. Today's political reality, immersed as it is in this cut-throat economic context of our times, needs to be better understood, and also transformed and overcome. As the articles in our special issues on citizenship attest, scholarship on, by, and about Latino/as is undoubtedly key to this process, engaged as it is in defining, analyzing, and debating the issues in thought-provoking and meaningful ways, while simultaneously pointing to their practical implications. It is in this spirit that we offer this discussion on Latino/as and the changing meanings of citizenship in contemporary US society.

Saludos!

Suzanne Oboler
University of Illinois, Chicago

Latino Studies (2004) **2,** 1–3. doi:10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600061