IT'S TIME TO BRUSH UP AND TO MAKE HISTORY: A RESPONSE TO MARY MITCHELL

Mary Mitchell, columnist of the *Chicago Sun Times* needs to brush up on the history of social and political struggles, including that of African Americans in this country and beyond. In her August 22 column, ("Immigrant activist holed up in church is no Rosa Parks"), she wrote that "Elvira Arellano is definitely no Rosa Parks." Elvira Arellano is an undocumented immigrant and activist who did not attend her deportation hearing last August, and instead has taken sanctuary at the Adalberto United Methodist Church in Chicago with her US-born son, Saul. Her aim is to publicize the divisiveness of the current laws threatening hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants and their families with separation.

In her column, Ms. Mitchell goes on to explain that unlike Elvira, Rosa Parks did not formally break the law. But Elvira Arellano's stance is not about Rosa Parks herself. For, if all Blacks had abided strictly by the law, slavery would not have ended. If all Blacks had abided by the law, many more African Americans might have been persecuted. If all Blacks and their non-Black sympathizers and supporters had abided by the law, there would have been no sit-ins, no freedom rides, no civil disobedience.

In her column, Ms. Mitchell also states that Elvira Arellano should have reported to the immigration authorities for deportation, with her son and supporters in tow. This way, she suggests, Elvira Arellano would have made her point. "Maybe then," Mitchell writes, "more of us would respect her stance." She ends her article, saying that "Hopefully, while Arellano is languishing she will brush up on black history."

Perhaps Arellano should have begged forgiveness for disturbing the sensibilities of Americans – for not knowing "her place" – and that of her Mexican compatriots – for lack of civility! Yet, if Mitchell were herself to brush up on her American history, she would know that human rights of all kinds have been won precisely when people "forget their place" in the dominant scheme of things. That is one important way to earn respect and dignity anywhere on earth, the United States included. Indeed, taking a stand against injustice is in the best tradition of civic courage and dignity in this country, including but not limited to the African American struggle for justice.

Ms. Mitchell and those who agree with her would also do well to familiarize themselves with the history of slavery in other parts of the

Americas. In 1871, for example, the Brazilian government passed “the law of the free womb” (*lei de ventre livre*), granting freedom to children born of slave mothers. But since the mother was still a slave, the law was actually a moot point – for, children were in effect still forced to live, like their mothers, in slavery.

Forcing Elvira Arellano’s son, Saul, a US citizen, either to leave his homeland when his mother is deported, or to stay here alone without his mother, has a similar effect: It gives priority to the laws *against* the undocumented, rather than to the protection of the rights of US citizens. It also squarely denies the value of the family as the main pillar for the health of US society. In this respect, one wonders why a citizen like Ms. Mitchell, who apparently also upholds the premises of the civil rights movements of the 1960s, seems to be so willing to allow the arbitrary and yes, unjust laws, against undocumented immigrants to take precedence over the laws protecting the civil rights of US citizens, let alone the human rights of all.

What is even more serious and unforgivable is the banning of simple compassion for a stranger and a mother in dire straits, while Ms. Mitchell poses as the outraged defender of uprightness, going so far as to abuse her – as well as, presumably, the thousands of other working families whom Arellano represents and who are also threatened by the same divisive laws – as someone “pimping the system.”

Even a cursory attention to the history of Mexicans and other Latinos in the United States, would be beneficial for Mitchell to help her to understand the historical context for the presence of Latin Americans in our midst. After all, immigration, legal or otherwise, is always a relationship between two countries. Latin American immigration to the United States, like Mexican Americans’ historical presence in this country, is one of the unquestionable results of the political and economic expansionist history of this country into Mexico’s territory during the mid-19th century. It is also the result of continued US intervention in Latin America’s political and economic affairs to this day.

Mary Mitchell *is* right on one point. As she points out toward the end of her column, all of US society does owe a lot to the struggles and sacrifices of the millions of African Americans and their supporters for some of the freedoms we now enjoy as a society. Like all citizens and residents of this country, Latinos too need to acquaint themselves more with those struggles. We must also recognize how damaging racism is and has been throughout the hemisphere. Latinos could benefit from becoming more aware of the racism that exists in Latin America, the treatment of Blacks and Indigenous peoples there, and the ways that those ideologies also continue to exist within the Latino community in this country.

Still, gratitude is a relationship, and not a one-way street. And hence, just as we all must acknowledge the debt owed by this society to African Americans, it is also important for all US citizens, whatever their racial or ethnic backgrounds, to recognize the kinds of sacrifices that immigrants, regardless

of their status, have made and continue to make for our benefit today. Like African Americans, Mexican and other Latino citizens and residents have also helped to build this country since the mid-19th century. Moreover, today, researchers such as Jeffrey Passel, Randy Capps, and Michael Fix, note that “the US Social Security Administration has estimated that three quarters of undocumented immigrants pay payroll taxes, and that they contribute \$6–7 billion in Social Security funds that they will be unable to claim” – corroborating the same point made by Eduardo Porter, in his April 5, 2005 *New York Times* article, “Illegal Immigrants Are Bolstering Social Security with Billions.”

Perhaps it is time for those like Mary Mitchell to acknowledge that she, like all African Americans and Latinos, as well as other groups in this society, needs to become better acquainted with the facts – and the commonalities – of our respective histories. Only in that way can we begin a serious discussion about whether the unjust laws against immigrants are indeed going to prevail over the protection of the rights of US citizens. Only in that way can we begin to define what kind of society we want to live in, what kind of future we really want to forge, as a nation and as human beings.

Saludos!

Suzanne Oboler
University of Illinois, Chicago

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