Challenging the Sociological Notion of the ‘Ghetto’: A Case Study of South Los Angeles

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Just as the inner cities of America were transformed by the great African American migrations from the South, immigrants from Latin American countries, such as Mexico, have begun to change the contemporary urban landscape. As early as 1990, the Mexican and Central American population was close to edging out African Americans as the largest ethnic population in South Central Los Angeles. This paper relies upon ethnographic fieldwork to assess the impact of Latino neighborhood settlement on politics in the ghetto. An examination of two key and interrelated institutions – local L.A. City chartered Neighborhood Councils and a local Catholic church – shows that even though Latinos are the majority population, they have had a minimal impact on politics in South L.A. when measured in terms of their participation in Neighborhood Councils. Moreover, the comparatively high rates of participation among African Americans in Neighborhood Councils can be understood, in part, as a direct response to the influx of Latino immigrants into South L.A. As result of their marginal position in local politics, Latinos have developed an alternative set of institutions that serve as sites of civic engagement. In light of the findings of this study, a new concept of the ghetto is needed to explain the significance of “two worlds” that coexist in South L.A.
Introduction

Inner city neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York are experiencing a massive influx of Latino immigrants. Roger Waldinger (2001) suggests that today’s newcomers are more likely to head for urban America. Just as the inner cities of America were transformed by the great African American migrations from the south, immigrants from Latin American countries, such as Mexico, have begun to change the contemporary urban landscape.

As early as 1990, the Mexican and Central American populations were close to edging out African Americans as the largest ethnic population in South Los Angeles, where African Americans constituted 60 percent of the population, while Latinos made up close to 40 percent of the area (U.S. Census 1990). According to the 2000 Census, Latinos now comprise close to 60 percent of the residents, while African Americans now make up close to 40 percent of the population. These demographic changes are striking, considering that South L.A. is considered by many to be the largest ghetto west of the Mississippi. Although these demographic changes are interesting, they tell us very little about how the institutions of this community have been affected.

My research project relies upon ethnographic fieldwork to enhance our understanding of the political impact of these demographic changes. The ethnic shift in South L.A. raises an important research question: What is the impact of Latino neighborhood settlement on politics in the ghetto? This project builds upon previous studies of the ghetto by examining the coexistence of two racial groups, African Americans and Latinos, that occupy the same geographical space. More importantly, this study seeks to explore how the coexistence of two racial groups challenges sociologists’ conceptions of the ghetto.
In order to gauge the impact of Latino neighborhood settlement on South Los Angeles, I focus on two key and interrelated institutions – local L.A. City chartered Neighborhood Councils and a local Catholic church. I argue that Latinos have had a minimal impact on politics in South L.A., when measured in terms of their participation in Neighborhood Councils, whereas African Americans in South L.A. continue to have strong participation and representation in local politics. This finding is striking given the fact that Latinos are the majority population in this area. Moreover, the high rates of participation among African Americans in Neighborhood Councils can be understood, in part, as a direct response (a defensive posture) to the influx of Latino immigrants into South L.A.

This study also shows that as result of their marginal position in local politics, Latinos have developed an alternative set of institutions that serve as sites of civic engagement. After reviewing the dominant conceptions of the ghetto in the sociological literature, I offer an assessment of Latino and African American participation in Neighborhood Councils. Next, I consider the ways in which Latinos rely upon their local Catholic church as a site of civic engagement and a means for creating social order in the ghetto. Finally, I argue that, in light of the findings of this study, a new concept of the ghetto is needed to explain the significance of “two worlds” that coexist in South L.A.¹

**Literature Review**

In the sociological literature, the concept of the ghetto has been widely used to explain the urban experience of African Americans. Embedded within this concept are different assumptions regarding segregation, economic development, and social organization.
The concept of the ghetto has been useful in helping researchers understand the social dynamics of African American communities. This concept, however, fails to explain the dynamics of multi-ethnic geographic communities where Latino and African American populations exist side by side. Much has been written about the ghetto in urban America. To date, however, no systematic study has explored the impact of large-scale Latino neighborhood settlement on the ghetto. Instead, the contemporary sociological literature (Wilson 1987, Wacquant 1997) views the urban experience of African Americans as one where they are socially isolated from other groups, such as Latino immigrants and migrants.²

Although the sociological literature identifies many characteristics that comprise the ghetto, the dominant view contained within this literature is that ghettos have three main characteristics. These include: 1) high levels of segregation, 2) economic decay and a lack of economic organization, and 3) low levels of social organization, or social disorganization.

Most scholars agree that a high level of segregation is the most distinctive characteristic of ghettos (Wilson 1987, Massey 1993, Drake and Cayton 1962). For example, Drake and Cayton (1962) argue that while other European ethnic colonies tended to break up over time, the African American community became more concentrated (Drake and Cayton 1962, 174). According to Massey and Denton (1993) “by the late 1960’s, virtually all American cities with significant black populations had come to house large ghettos characterized by extreme segregation and spatial isolation” (57).

William Julius Wilson (1987) has been influential in defining the economic dimension of the ghetto. He argues that economic decay, which results in joblessness and lack of employment opportunities, is one of the central characteristics of ghettos, such as South Central L.A. Other

² According to the 2000 census Latinos, including Mexicans, Mexican-Americans and Central Americans have now become the majority population group in South Central L.A.
scholars share Wilson’s view of the ghetto as a community that is not economically viable (Wilson 1987, Wacquant 1996, Clark 1965, 27).

Finally, social disorganization is a third central characteristic that scholars use to define the contemporary ghetto. Wilson (1996) argues that structural changes, such as economic restructuring, lead to increased unemployment, which then acts as a powerful force in undermining the social organization of communities. He defines social organization as the extent to which neighborhood residents are able to maintain effective social control and realize common goals (20). Wilson measures social organization along three dimensions: 1) the prevalence, strength and interdependence of social networks, 2) the extent of collective supervision that residents exercise and the degree of personal responsibility that they assume in addressing neighborhood problems, and 3) the rate of residential participation in voluntary and formal organizations.

Wilson asserts that neighborhoods plagued by high levels of joblessness are more likely to experience low levels of social organization (21). For example, he states that unemployment has played a critical role in the rise of the single parent family structure by contributing to the sharp rise in solo parent families. Wilson claims that because mothers are more likely to be on welfare and fathers are not likely to be around (105), African American children are less likely to be socialized in a manner that promotes the values necessary to achieve high levels of social organization.

According to social disorganization theorists, ghetto neighborhoods are characterized by low levels of civic participation and weak social networks. Based on the sociological literature then we should expect to find low levels of civic participation and an absence of social networks in South L.A.
Methodology

Whether South L.A can be characterized as socially disorganized is an empirical question. This study seeks to assess the extent to which political life in South L.A. can be adequately characterized as socially disorganized by examining different forms of civic engagement among Latinos and African Americans. An examination of formal and informal institutions of social order – specifically, Los Angeles City Neighborhood Councils and a local Catholic church – allows us to assess the ways in which large-scale Latino immigration has transformed an area conceived of as a ghetto. We are also able to assess two important aspects of the ghetto, as it has been conceived by sociologists: 1) the rate and nature of residential participation in voluntary and formal organizations, and 2) the prevalence, strength and interdependence of social networks. A more general question that this study addresses is: Given the recent influx of Latino immigration into this area of Los Angeles, does South L.A. still conform to the sociological concept of the ghetto?

There are several advantages that South L.A. offers with respect to understanding the effect of Latino immigration on local politics. Local politics in L.A. operates at three different levels: 1) city-wide mayoral government, 2) individual city council districts, and 3) Neighborhood Councils. Unlike the mayor and council members, who have large constituent bases, Neighborhood Councils are more closely connected to ordinary residents because of the low number of constituents they represent. Neighborhood Council districts and boundaries are also considerably smaller than L.A. City Council Districts.

This setting is also unique in that it brings together a variety of different types of community organizations from different racial groups that are both formal and informal in nature. It therefore allows one to observe the divergent perspectives, values and attitudes of
various organizations and how they interact with one another in a single public forum. In this respect Neighborhood Councils provide a unique view into the way in which the emerging Latino population has shaped politics in South L.A.

Data for this study were collected using primarily the method of participant observation. The researcher lived in South L.A. for one year, volunteering and working in a Catholic church and in Los Angeles City Neighborhood Councils. Over 100 in-depth interviews were also conducted to supplement the researcher’s participant observations.

Findings: Neighborhood Councils

Brief Background and History of Neighborhood Councils

In 1998, in response to the impending pressure of the secession movement organized by Southern California’s Valley residents, the City of Los Angeles Charter was amended and rewritten. The new reform Charter measure was passed by 60 percent of the voters. The revised Charter made three major changes to city government. First, it gave the mayor of Los Angeles the power to hire and fire city department heads. For example, unlike in the past, the mayor can now fire the police chief or other agency managers. Second, it created five neighborhood planning boards with power over most zoning issues, which are subject to City Council review. Finally, and most importantly, it mandated the creation of a system of Neighborhood Councils, which were given an advisory role in local issues, such as zoning.

In theory, the creation of Neighborhood Councils brings city government down to the neighborhood level, making it more responsive and less remote. This represents a direct response to the concerns and critiques of secessionists who claimed that local government was not in touch with the needs of the people. Given the lack of political infrastructure set in place to
foster civic participation – such as precinct captains, political machines, political parties and the gigantic City Council districts, which are too large to address the needs of diverse constituents – Neighborhood Councils provided Angelenos with a new way to participate in city affairs.

In practice, Neighborhood Councils identify issues that residents feel are important and develop solutions that are passed on to the mayor. Councils consist of three components: a board of elected council members; ad hoc committees set up to address specific community issues of interests; and stakeholders.

Civic Participation among African Americans and Latinos in Neighborhood Councils

According to the mainstream sociological literature, which characterizes the ghetto as socially disorganized, formal and informal types of civic and political engagement within the ghetto are underdeveloped and weak. This study of Neighborhood Councils in South L.A. however, found high rates of political participation and strong social networks among African American homeowners. In contrast, Latinos displayed low levels of political participation in the same institutions, but strong social ties in other social settings. These findings demonstrate weak and mixed evidence in support of social disorganization theory.

In South L.A., there are approximately thirteen Neighborhood Councils. With the exception of two Neighborhood Councils, located in neighborhoods where Latinos constitute approximately 80 percent of the population, Latinos were nearly absent among those who attended the council meetings and those who made up the Council members and appointees. Even in neighborhoods where Latinos make up 50 to 70 percent of the population, Latinos were severely underrepresented at Neighborhood Council meetings. Finally, in neighborhoods where
African Americans are the narrow majority, no Latinos attended the meetings or served in Council-related positions.

African American homeowners, on the other hand, had strong rates of participation in Neighborhood Councils; they served as elected Council members, appointees to ad hoc committees, and attendees of general meetings. Most of the elected Council members are elderly African American individuals who have been active in the South L.A. community for many years. These individuals demonstrated a strong commitment to improving the quality of life in their neighborhoods. They attended meetings regularly and participated in ad hoc committees even though most positions are voluntary. The same was true for the majority of Neighborhood Councils in South L.A.

Many of the African American who participated in their Neighborhood Council are also affiliated with or are members of other organizations in the community, such as block clubs, community based organizations (CBOs) and churches. These formal and informal institutions work together to form strong social networks, which are an effective means of mobilizing residents to participate in Neighborhood Councils. In many instances, however, these types of community organizations seek to further their specific agenda and interests through the use of Neighborhood Councils. Community organizations are also able to mobilize members and resources to strengthen their causes and interests through utilization of Neighborhood Councils. While this can be a positive factor in fostering Council participation, it can also marginalize both Latino and African American residents of the area who are not members of these core community organizations. The process of exclusion and dominance of Neighborhood Councils by certain community organizations was often referred to as “high jacking” by residents in South

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3 As the Latinos population continues to increase, African Americans have begun to cluster in the western part of South L.A., near Crenshaw Ave.
L.A. One common result of “high jacking” is that outreach to other groups is overlooked and ignored by Neighborhood Council members.

Contrary to the claims of social disorganization theorists, political and civic engagement was strong among African Americans in South L.A. The comparatively low level of political engagement among Latinos, however, might be viewed, on the surface, as evidence that supports social disorganization theory. This assumption may not be entirely correct though. Below I will show that Latinos have high levels of civic engagement in other, informal institutions, such as their local Catholic church, rather than in formal political organizations.

The Emergence Of a Defensive Posturing By African American Homeowners

Although an increase in the Latino population of South L.A. has not resulted in greater participation among Latinos in Neighborhood Councils, it does seem to have contributed to heightening fears in the African American community that Latinos are “taking over.” Indeed, social networks between African American homeowners and Latinos were virtually non-existent. The defensive posturing of African Americans played a role in dividing both Latino and African American groups.

The perception, shared by some of the African Americans that I interviewed, that Latinos (mostly from Mexico and, secondarily, from Central America) are taking over, is both real and imagined. There are noticeably more brown than black faces that are visible in the streets and neighborhoods in South L.A. For example, along Slauson Ave., one of South L.A.’s major corridors, one can regularly see Latino taco trucks, street vendors, people selling flowers near the freeway exits, and a whole host of informal Latino vendors selling various items. In addition, some formal businesses that cater to Mexicans, such as carnecerias and small shops that sell
goods for quinceneras and parties, have begun to pop up in commercial corridors such as Central Ave., long considered to be the heart of once known “South Central.” In public places, such as elementary, middle and high schools, the demographic changes with regard to the increase of Mexican, El Salvadoran and Guatemalan students are startling.

South L.A.’s new public image is indicative of a new way of life that complements the traditional African American way of life. Both groups have much in common with regard to their socio-economic status, and their exposure to a high rate of crime, poverty and a host of other social pathologies. There are, however, subtle differences between the two groups. Instead of hip hop rhythms and blues playing in the streets, one is likely to hear ranchera music from Mexico blasting from houses and from cars in the streets. Other common sights and sounds in residential areas are chickens that roam in backyards and sound-off early in the morning, and laundry hanging from clotheslines.

What is important to note about these changes is that they are visible signs of a community that has gradually come to be demographically dominated by Latino ethnics, mostly from Mexico and Central American countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. To many African Americans the visual changes in South L.A. represent a different way of life.

Changes in the “public image” of South L.A. are important because they strike at the connection between place, identity and race. South L.A. is an unique area rich with African American heritage. For example, Central Ave. became famous in the 1940s and 1950s as a mecca for Jazz music. The area emerged as a result of geographic isolation, which is rooted in an ugly history of segregation where redlining and restrictive housing covenants were prevalent. The common experience of being African American in L.A and the concentrated interaction of
its residents (due to segregation) became the basis of a distinct “South Central”\(^4\) identity and outlook. Place and space are often a reflection of the needs, history, local practices, and cognitive frames of its residents. In this respect place becomes tightly connected with the racial/ethnic group of a given area.

Due to legal segregation that existed prior to the 1960s civil rights legislation, establishing a space where African American Angelenos could feel safe, comfortable and respected has been historically difficult to do. For this reason, there is a sentiment among African Americans that the neighborhoods they call “home” must be protected and preserved. The gradual emergence of Latinos is viewed by some African Americans as evidence that their way of life is being threatened. Today, as the traditional “public image” of South L.A. is complemented and in some instances replaced by the dramatic increase in Latino residents, some African Americans feel the need to preserve and maintain a traditional African American way of life. This sentiment serves as the basis for the defensive posturing among some African American residents.

**The Latino Informal Economy and African American Homeowners**

One of the most common sources of discontent expressed by African American homeowners in Neighborhood Council gatherings concerns the informal economic activity of Latinos. Street vending by Latinos was a common complaint of African American homeowners especially in mixed neighborhoods were Latinos maintained a slight majority and in areas that were still mostly African American.

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\(^4\) Although the Los Angeles City Council officially changed the name from South Central to South Los Angeles, many African Americans continue to use the older term South Central in daily conversation. It should be noted that many politically and socially conscious residents resist the term South Central because of the negative stigma associated with the term.
As the Mexican and Central American populations have increased in South L.A., so too has the emergence of street vending. Vendors, who were mostly unlicensed to sell their goods, specialized in selling one or more items from a variety of different goods, including candy, soda, corn, fruit, popcorn ice cream, tamales, chicharones (Mexican style pork grinds), and in some instances small trinket-like toys. They would set up their carts and sell these items at parks, churches and schools. Many African American homeowners complained that street vendors were not good for the community and needed to be removed.

For example, on a weekday afternoon, at a Neighborhood Council meeting located in the central portion of South L.A., officers from the South Traffic Division of the LAPD gave a presentation to residents, most of whom were African American. A handful of Latinas with their children, mostly El Salvadoran and some Mexican, sat in the back quietly listening with headphones on as someone translated the officers’ presentation from English to Spanish. Several elderly African American residents and a councilperson, asked questions about street vendors and what the police were doing to clear them out. Many complained about the health problems that the goods sold posed to children, while others said it wasn’t fair that children were being targeted by vendors after school. Someone mentioned that kids could get run over by vendors who lured kids to the streets.

The LAPD traffic officers responded that they were no longer monitoring vendor activity in the area. They stated they had direct orders from their Captain to leave vendors alone because their department did not have the resources and time to deal with the problem. “We simply have too many other important problems to deal with and don’t have enough man power to deal with those vendors,” stated one officer. They said that LAPD was not going to deal with vendors at all unless they committed serious crimes. Instead the officers noted that the L.A. City
Department of Public Works Street Division was going to assume responsibility for regulating and removing street vendors.

Many Neighborhood Council members and participants at the council meeting voiced their unhappiness and demanded that more be done to remove street vendors from the neighborhood. In response, the officers said that they would ask vendors to move to a different location, but this was all they could realistically do. The officers reiterated that all concerns regarding street vendors should be directed to the Department of Public Works. After the meeting ended, conversations continued among residents and council members regarding street vendors. They described vendors as a nuisance and expressed frustration that even the LAPD couldn’t do anything to solve the perceived problem.

African Americans at other Neighborhood Council meetings expresses similar complaints about street vendors. In the central and western parts of South L.A. where African Americans controlled Neighborhood Councils, street vending was described as a major problem that had to be addressed. Interestingly, Latino residents were not concerned about the informal activity of street vendors. In the three Neighborhood Councils where Latinos had strong and regular participation, street vending never came up as an issue or nuisance that needed to be addressed.5

Informal car dealerships also became a contentious issue and another target of Neighborhood Councils. Many African American residents considered as a nuisance Latino-operated, unlicensed car dealerships set up in South L.A. residential neighborhoods. Residents complained that unlicensed car dealers would place anywhere from two to ten automobiles on a street corner or in some instances park them down a residential street. It was not clear from my

5 My first-hand observation of street vendors outside of local elementary schools revealed that Latino parents regularly purchased candy, churros, sodas, hot dogs, etc. from vendors. The same was true at other locations, such as parks and churches, where vendors sold their goods. Through interviews with street vendors, as well as first-hand observation, I learned that African American children frequently purchased items from vendors, though not as much as Latino children.
observations if the dealers lived in the neighborhoods where the businesses were set up. It is, however, fair to assume that the dealers lived in the general area and had some association with the residents living in the blocks where the cars were sold. Dealers would place a sign with pertinent information in the window, such as the make, year, price, and a telephone number. A potential customer would then call the number and meet the dealer at a designated location to discuss purchasing the vehicle.

African American residents argued that this type of informal economic activity caused an inconvenience for many residents because many of the autos for sale took up limited parking in the area. As the Latino population has gradually increased in the area, the sheer number of people residing in the residential areas has skyrocketed, increasing urban density. Many homes that were built in South L.A. were designed for single-family use. Latino families, who have moved into the area, since the 1980s, have converted these homes so that now two to three families reside in one dwelling. The rise in population has increased the number of people driving cars and created more of a demand for parking in the area.

Unlicensed car dealer businesses added to a lack of parking in residential areas. The parking shortage angered many residents and this sentiment was echoed in Neighborhood Councils. Like street vendors, residents asserted that they wanted the car dealer businesses removed from the neighborhoods. LAPD representatives were asked to attend several Neighborhood Council meetings in the western and central parts of South L.A. in order to answer questions from residents regarding their policy in dealing with the problem. In every case, the police stated that they had received complaints from residents and were working to solve the problem. One way of dealing with illegal car dealers was to set up sting operations. Catching the illegal, unlicensed car dealers was difficult because there is no law against parking
a car in the street. The police pointed out that dealers would have to be caught making a business transaction in order to be arrested, something difficult to witness.

What were Neighborhood Councils able to do about the informal economy that had sprung up all over their community? Even if they wanted to eradicate unlicensed street vendors and street car dealers they did not have much power to do so. Measures to eradicate street vendors and street auto dealers were never proposed because Neighborhood Councils understood their limited power to deal with the informal economy.

As designated in the L.A. City Charter, Neighborhood Council powers are limited to an advisory role in land use issues. Neighborhood Council members did, however, have direct contact with the LAPD. This placed them in a strategic position to have their concerns heard – an advantage that most regular citizens did not have. So although they may have limited powers with regard to neighborhood enforcement, they did have power to influence local L.A. City agencies such as the LAPD, the L.A. Unified School District, and the Department of Public Works. In this regard, Neighborhood Councils were used as a forum where African American homeowners came together to push the City to take action on issues they thought were important.

This examination of Neighborhood Councils illustrates the way in which council members and residents responded to changes in the public image of South L.A. and its expanding informal economy. When it came to informal business activities, such as street vending and auto street dealers, the common sentiment expressed by many African Americans was to preserve and defend the traditional, pre-Latino way of life in South L.A. Contrary to social disorganization theory, African Americans were highly organized in their defensive response to the activities of some Latino immigrants. Both groups, however, remained divided in their perception of the problematic nature of these activities.
Latino Citizenship and Low levels of Formal Participation

The fact that many Latinos are not citizens has played a central role in their lack of involvement and participation in South L.A. politics. In this section I argue that fear of the INS significantly inhibited formal political participation among Latinos.

Many of the immigrants who live in South L.A. and emigrated during the 1980s from Mexico and Central America are not U.S. citizens. There are Latinos in the area, however, who are citizens. For example, many Latino children are citizens because they were born in the U.S.; however, their parents may have been born in Mexico or El Salvador and were never naturalized. These types of citizen and non-citizen ties are also common among Latinos in spheres outside the home, such as the informal economy, politics, and social life in general.

Throughout 2004, sweeps by the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) were common in different parts of Los Angeles. These INS sweeps are significant because they contribute to creating fear that leads to the avoidance of formal, civic institutions by Latinos. This sentiment has had a detrimental impact on Latino’s formal civic participation in South L.A.

In parts of South L.A., such as Watts, this scenario has played itself out in many different ways. The area gained much attention after authorities discovered that several homes were being used as detention centers by smugglers (coyotes) for immigrants from Mexico and Central America. In some instances as many as eighty to one hundred Latin American immigrants were imprisoned against their will by smugglers. Parts of South L.A. such as Watts were common destination points for immigrants coming directly from Mexico and other parts of Latin America.

INS raids became common in the South L.A. area because of the large number of immigrants present in the area. The threat and fear of being detained by the INS caused many
Latinos to withdraw and avoid any official government or public entity that could potentially collect their personal information or physically detain them. This attitude of avoidance of government institutions was prevalent among Latinos living in South L.A. Distancing oneself from public governmental agencies, such as Los Angeles City Neighborhood Councils, became a common strategy among Latinos. This strategy of avoidance is one major contributing factor to the low rate of participation among Latinos in Neighborhood Councils.

Fear of deportation, which forces non-citizens underground, has always been an issue for Latino immigrants. This is especially clear during times when the INS increases its operations, such as in the spring of 2004. During this period there was widespread fear among Latinos that they might be detained and deported to their country of origin if they took their children to local public elementary schools. In some parts of L.A., school attendance among Latino children dropped shortly after highly publicized raids in the City of L.A. Many local radio and television stations aired public service announcements telling parents they should take their children to school and that for the most part it was safe to do so.

Avoidance was a common strategy used by Latinos immigrants in dealing with the LAPD as well. Based on interviews with several LAPD police officers, I learned that Latino immigrants were far less likely than other residents to report when they were the victims of crime. According to LAPD officers, Latinos were often the victims of robbery and assault committed by African American gangs and youth.

Fear and avoidance of government entities by Latino immigrants was not limited to the LAPD and public schools. Latino immigrants reacted in a similar way to the city’s political institutions. In particular, immigrants declined to participate in Neighborhood Councils in order
to minimize the risk of potential sanctions and deportation to Mexico and other Central American countries.

**Language and Cultural Differences between Latinos and African Americans**

Cultural differences between both groups also contributed to the lack of participation of Latinos in local politics. In general, Latinos and African Americans seem to lack a basic understanding of each other. For example, Latinos often perceive African Americans as being loud in public, which can often be construed as a form of disrespect and is sometimes viewed as a sign that a fight is about to occur. A prominent Latino activist expressed his concern about African Americans and loudness when he stated, “Mexicans often sit by the exit of a building for fear that a fight is going to break out when African Americans speak loudly in public.” Although, Latinos do strongly voice their views, they often feel that they must be reserved and quiet in public.

Language differences also make it difficult for both groups to communicate. In many Neighborhood Councils Latinos wore headsets that provided translations from English to Spanish. While this act is commendable and helps Spanish speakers, it can also divide the meetings into groups of English and Spanish speaking cliques. More generally, language differences between Latino and African American created a barrier making it difficult for both groups to communicate with each other.
Alternative Social Order/Church

Although Latinos have low levels of political participation in formal L.A. City political institutions, such as Neighborhood Councils, they have strong rates of civic engagement in informal institutions such as local churches. This finding challenges the claim made in the social disorganization literature that ghetto neighborhoods are characterized by low levels of civic participation and weak social networks.

In this section I offer an examination of a South L.A. Catholic church, St. John’s, to argue that local churches play a critical role in promoting social order for Latino immigrants in South L.A. In addition to its religious function, there are three main social functions that St. John’s provides: the church integrates newcomers; creates the basis for social solidarity by articulating a shared vision of the “common good”; and provides a framework for Latinos to build community.

St. John’s, which is ninety years old, has played an important role in this community for many years. Even though the church is located in what became the epicenter of the 1965 Watts riots, it survived the riots untouched. Like many institutions in South L.A., St. John’s has undergone a significant transformation from a church that mostly served the African American community to one that now caters to Latinos. Until the early 1980s, the church served mostly the African American population. From the mid-1980s on, the church’s membership began to mirror the larger demographic change of Latinos gradually becoming the majority ethnic population in the area. As one clergyman explained to me, “The mission statement of the church has been totally remade to accommodate the Latino population.”

6 St. John’s is not the real name of the Catholic Church, however, in order to maintain the confidentiality of the church I will refer to it by this name.
The most startling observation about St. John’s and other catholic churches in South L.A. is the sheer number of Latinos who attend and participate in worship services and other church activities on a regular basis. The church offers eight separate masses on Sundays – six in Spanish and two in English. Most masses average 250 to 300 parishioners in attendance. In addition, many people visit the church on the weekends and weekdays for weddings, baptisms, reconciliation and quinceneras.

Unlike many modern storefront churches, most of the families involved with the church live nearby, either in residential housing or in public housing projects. In fact, St. John’s is located between four of the largest housing projects in the City of Los Angeles, and many but not all parishioners come from low income and poverty backgrounds.

Close to one thousand children attend catechism classes every Saturday at St. Johns. Eight classes of catechism occur during the morning, lunch and late afternoon periods. These classes instruct children in the basic principles and religious teachings of the Catholic Church. At the same time the catechism classes are held, parenting courses are conducted in a separate room. Anywhere from thirty to forty parents attend classes, often times with their children who are too young to attend catechism classes. During the week, St. John’s offers confirmation classes to instruct teenagers in the religious practices and beliefs of Catholicism as well. The church’s priest estimates that close to 300 youth participate in this program during the fall and spring semesters.

Outside the church hall where these meetings occur some parishioners just hang out, talking with other people and eating. The church priest explained, “They have nothing to look forward to when they go home, most of them are poor and it’s not safe to play out in the open

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7 Most Latinos who attend and participate are of Mexican origin, although some Central Americans, mostly from El Salvador, attend as well.
8 This information is based on talking with priests and parishioners of the church.
where they are from, that’s why they stay here.” Others who socialize and hang around sell food for the church or organize future church activities.

St. John’s also provides programs designed to offer Latinos basic services required for daily existence. Families and individuals use these services on a regular basis. For example, an examination of the church’s food pantry records indicates that the service is frequently used by families, especially those headed by single women. The church also offers educational scholarships for a Catholic elementary school that is affiliated with St. John’s. Since the school is private it charges tuition; however, many low-income parents cannot afford to pay the tuition. Each year the church gives out close to $30,000 worth of scholarships to local residents of the area so that their children might attend the school.

Attorneys who are affiliated with a sister parish from the Manhattan Beach area of Orange County provide legal consulting for parishioners free of charge. This allows many parishioners, who deal with legal issues such as citizenship, housing and employment, to receive legal advice in an environment where they feel safe and do not have to worry about negative sanctions from the local government and police. The church also provides job training for adults and offers English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, which help Spanish speakers learn English.9

These and other services offered by St. John’s and other local churches play a central role in helping Latinos integrate into American society. For example, being able to communicate in a shared language is a basic necessity for any American citizen. Legal services help Latinos to understand and know their rights in relation to the institutions they encounter on a daily basis,

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9 Bilingualism in Spanish and English is common at the church, which helps to foster a sense of community. Most priests and other related officials of the church speak Spanish. This makes it easy for them to communicate with parishioners who are Latino immigrants. More importantly, it makes parishioners feel comfortable and encourages dialogue with other members of the church. Indeed, three of the four priests at the church are fluent in Spanish and English.
such as the workplace, local government and the police. This is especially important for non-
citizens, who may be unfamiliar with the way these institutions operate. Finally, receiving a
quality education for one’s child is of paramount importance for any member of American
society.

In addition to providing vital services to its parishioners, St. John’s church has modified
its rituals, ceremonies and symbols in a manner that ultimately has created the basis for
community in this area of South L.A. The central rituals and symbols of the church have been
reworked to accommodate the type of Catholicism that Mexicans are accustomed to and,
thereby, forge solidarity among parishioners. For example, prior to the early 1980s the Virgin
De Guadalupe, who represents holiness and goodness, was not a central figure of the church. As
the ethnic population of the church began to change, the Virgin gradually became the most
important religious symbol of the church. In addition, the procedures for administering the seven
sacraments\(^\text{10}\) of the church have been transformed in order to serve the new Latino population.
More specifically, priests have had to develop efficient and unique ways of administering the
sacraments to large numbers of parishioners. One priest explained, “We had to find a way of
going from two or three baptisms with African Americans in the early 80s to twenty to thirty on
Saturdays for Mexicans. It required a lot of creativity.”\(^\text{11}\)

Symbols, rituals, and the seven sacraments help facilitate and strengthen the collective
beliefs and values of the parishioners by making the presence of God appear real. In an

\(^{10}\) The seven sacraments are baptism, confirmation, first Holy Communion, reconciliation, healing of the sick, appointment to a
holy order, and marriage.

\(^{11}\) The church has adapted in order to fulfill the cultural needs of the Latino population as well. For example, food served after
religious events is selected and prepared to satisfy the needs of the Mexicans. Carne asada, empanadas, beans and rice are often
served after Sunday mass. The cultural perception of time has also been reorganized in a way that satisfies Latinos. Prior to the
1980s parishioners were required to make appointments to see the priests, however, this changed when the church became mostly
Latino. Father Greg elucidates this point when he states, “The Mexicans don’t believe in making appointments, they just show
up! I am from Ireland and I was not used to seeing such a thing. Well now I have just become accustomed to it. I have to be
flexible and if someone comes by my office, I will often see him or her right on the spot. They have a whole different cultural
understanding of time.”
environment where beliefs are shared, parishioners are more likely to trust one another and feel safe from the violence and crime that lies outside the walls of the church\textsuperscript{12}. The shared faith, trust and services dedicated to fostering the “common good” provide a basis for creating social networks, systems of exchange, and, ultimately, community.

**Self-Segregation Among Latinos and African American Church Members**

Many classical sociological studies of ethnic neighborhood change examine the extent to which social networks are strengthened or weakened in periods of transition. The strengthening or weakening of ties is believed to have a direct impact on the robustness of communities. The transformation of St. John’s demonstrates that horizontal social networks among Latino parishioners and other community members have been strengthened as a result of Latino immigration; the social networks created by the church provide an important means for building community among its Latino members.

The same cannot be said for building ties between Latinos and African Americans. Although African Americans constitute 20 to 30 percent of St. John’s parishioners, with the exception of Sunday mass and the choir, there is little or no interaction between Latinos and African Americans parishioners. Thus, for African Americans, the social networks that the church once provided have grown weaker. There are signs that this is changing, however. Father Greg pointed out that some African Americans have begun to embrace Latino parishioners. As relations between African Americans and Latinos gradually improve at the church, the possibility of new social ties between both groups increases.

\textsuperscript{12} For 2004, the Southeast police division that St. John’s falls within led the city in homicides; in 2003, the division had the second highest homicide rate. During one week in October 2003, three members of the parish were murdered near the church in separate incidents. Thus, violent crime is a real issue that parishioners confront on a daily basis.
The clergy of the church is aware of the self-segregation between Latinos and Africans and has taken steps to ensure peace and unity between both groups. For example, Father Greg is careful to include an equal number of Latinos and African Americans as participants in the English masses. Father Greg states, “It’s very important that African Americans are equally represented in church activities, we want them to feel welcome. These kinds of things can cause problems between Latinos and African Americans if we don’t address them.”

The case of St. John’s suggests that race and religion can further divide racial and ethnic groups into separate social orders in South L.A., and present a barrier to African Americans and Latinos working collectively on local issues. Horizontal ties between St. John’s and other churches in South L.A. are virtually non-existent.\(^\text{13}\) This lack of attachment weakens the church’s connection with other components of the community. Indeed, in many respects St. John’s is a self-contained community. Most Latinos in South L.A are involved with the Catholic or Pentecostal church. Much of this has to do with the religious experience and history of Latinos coming from Latin America. African Americans, on the other hand, tend to be concentrated in Baptist and Methodist churches.\(^\text{14}\) The implications of Latinos and African Americans being concentrated in different religious communities cannot be underestimated.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{13}\) Horizontal ties with the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and its sister parish in Manhattan Beach are the few institutional connections St. John’s has established. Like most Catholic churches, St. John’s is subject to the rules and oversight of the Archdiocese. The sister parish in Manhattan Beach provides financial assistance, clothing and a host of other free services, and recruits the lawyers for the free legal consulting program. The Manhattan Beach parish consists of members who are affluent and mostly white. A common vision of the “good” promotes cooperation between the two parishes. Currently, the sister parish in Manhattan Beach has provided funding for a literacy program targeted at elementary students to help improve the reading and writing of students who attend St. John’s elementary school. In addition, the parish provides financial assistance for scholarships and the maintenance and building of new projects at St. John’s.

\(^\text{14}\) The 1st AME and 2nd AME churches are very common in the South L.A. area.

\(^\text{15}\) African American churches enjoy political influence that Latino churches don’t share. For example, many African American churches such as the 1st AME have direct connections to high profile entertainers and high-ranking city and national political leaders. Members of the Democratic Party at the national congressional and senate level visit African American churches regularly for various political events such as elections, fundraisers, etc.
**Conclusion**

Due to their marginal position in South L.A., Latino settlers have begun to create new forms of community. At the same time, the traditional African American leadership has maintained its formal political power at the local level. The findings of this study challenge traditional sociological conceptions of the ghetto, which do not accurately depict how individuals who live in the ghetto organize social life. In practice, both African Americans and Latinos displayed high levels of social organization and political engagement, although this occurs in different venues.

Latino neighborhood settlement has had two concrete effects on South L.A. First, it has played a role in creating a defensive posture among African Americans who wish to maintain their political control over the neighborhood. This is unfortunate because many of Los Angeles’s poorest inhabitants reside in South L.A.; this is true for both Latinos and African Americans. Without adequate political representation many of the poor will have no vehicle to remedy their socio-economic condition. Paying heed to Latino issues is important because many African Americans live in the same neighborhoods as their Spanish-speaking brothers. Thus the social ills that plague Latinos will also affect African Americans in some form or other.

Currently, citizenship, race, religion and neighborhood gang affiliation are the primary factors dividing both groups. A lack of shared political power can only further divide these groups, since one will perceive the other as advancing at its expense.

Second, Latino neighborhood settlement has facilitated the emergence of two separate worlds in South L.A. Fearing that interactions with local civic institutions will result in surveillance or deportation, Latinos have developed an alternative social order through their local Catholic church. Local churches promote social solidarity in the form of shared beliefs and
values, and by supplying an infrastructure with which to provide needed services to members of
the Latino community. When asked why Latinos do not participate in Neighborhood Council’s
an active member of St. John’s stated, “When we deal with government institutions, like
Neighborhood Councils, we are treated like we don’t have human rights. Here at the church we
are human beings with human rights and are treated with dignity.” This statement speaks to the
trust, solidarity, and sense of community that the church actively promotes.

More importantly, the alternative social order performs many of the same functions that
traditional local politics provided to European immigrants upon their arrival to the United States.
The negative side to this alternative social order is its limited ability to promote change through
formal politics. This is especially true given the limited horizontal and vertical ties of the church
to other key institutions in Los Angeles.
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