

***COMMENTARY: THE HISTORY OF BARRIOS UNIDOS, HEALING COMMUNITY VIOLENCE
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I'm excited and honored to be included as a voice on this important, yet largely unknown story of the work of Barrios Unidos. I hope this book inspires a new dialogue in America about civil rights, the community peace movement and the need to better understand the experience of poor Latino and African American youth. I'm often fascinated by the fact that young people of color are hunting for answers to questions as to the present state of things; yet they seem either unaware of, or to have dismissed almost entirely, any in-depth references to the history from which they come. There is a tragic loss of history taking place that threatens to stifle progress in civil rights and the progressive movement for social change.

I am also taken aback by the lack of knowledgeable references to those who have laid down the guidelines for the movement or who have pioneered methods on how to conduct social processes to change the way people experience life. I'm speaking about reaching the poor and disenfranchised, those who are in the midst of the severe economic oppression and distress that continues to devastate so many lives in America today. It seems to me that it has never been more important to learn from the work of César Chávez, Dr. King, Minister Malcolm X, Dolores Huerta, and other amazing men and women who have led in the struggle for justice. There are so many leaders and great social thinkers who framed social movements of the past, everyone must build on and learn from those that came before. These people helped us to envision the magnificent higher ideals upon which we hoped the post-civil rights society would be shaped.

It is an old adage but a true one; know history and apply its lessons or be condemned to relive its failures and tragedies. It worries me that too many young leaders are either not being educated on the rich legacy of the civil rights movement or have just turned their backs on the history of struggle, dismissing that history as old-fashioned and irrelevant. This selective amnesia is central to what young people face today. It is understandable that they look for new methodologies and ways to deal with current issues, but it is exceedingly dangerous not to be grounded in the history of where they came from or to lack a sense of the value and validity of the knowledge at their disposal. In one sense, every generation must be responsible for itself, a notion that is fundamentally empowering. But it is also wise to know with some clarity where we

came from, what the struggle was like for those that preceded us, what was accomplished in the face of overwhelming odds, and how seemingly impossible victories were achieved.

The Barrios Unidos César Chávez School for Social Change is a model for this kind of education and empowerment. It is fundamental to the mission of the school to re-connect young ones to their history and heritage—to the legacy of struggle from which they came, and to provide them with a clear understanding of the examples set by such leaders such as César, Dolores, Rigoberta Menchú, Corky Gonzales, Dr. King, and Malcolm. The school helps its students know not just who these people were, but also the magnitude of what they did and how they did it. The critical importance of school's approach is that it goes beyond solely academic instruction to the teaching of applied principles and methods of social change. All students, fledgling activists, and agents of change need historical context for continuing the struggle for civil rights, but they also need the skills, tools and practical instruction. Non-violence 101, theory and application, should be a graduation requirement of the César Chávez School.

Non-Violence and Social Change

It seems to me that the community peace movement—and particularly groups dealing with the gang culture such as Barrios Unidos and Unity One in Los Angeles, could draw much wisdom from even more deliberate study of what went on before them. Most obvious is the powerful set of principles and strategies to emerge from civil rights and non-violent social change. I believe that non-violence is the answer. Learning how to apply the principles of non-violence in a strategic, meaningful and critical way can create the human space to collectively solve the social dilemmas of today. I would implore all young leaders and activists to verse themselves in the Gandhian principles of social change and the more modern applications of Dr. King and César Chávez. Non-violence is the greatest gift to humanity by these great leaders.

By unleashing the power of non-violence as an instrument to re-create society, today's community peace leaders can breathe new life into the various fronts of the broader social justice movement. As a matter of fact, if one was to take a quick survey of history they would discover that non-violence not only gave us voting rights, which for too long were denied to us as people of color, but also non-violence brought an end to institutionalized apartheid, legal segregation and systematic exclusion. It was the moral underpinnings and humanity of non-violence that created the mass political will to achieve the change associated with *Brown v. Board of*

Education. Even advances in women's rights, such as *Roe v. Wade* can trace their achievement to the effects of non-violent struggle. Until today's generation studies these historical examples and gains greater understanding of the power of non-violent action, it will lack perhaps the greatest tool passed down from the past to create the world we all desire and deserve.

Important Lessons and Unfinished Business

The successes of the civil rights movement centered on ending legal apartheid, segregation, exclusion and sanctioned white privilege. It certainly created opportunities over time for the social, economic and political advancement of many blacks, Latinos, and other poor people of color and women that had previously been denied. Many people including myself benefited from these hard-fought changes in America. But we must not forget that some 45 years into the civil rights struggle the prevalence of suffocating poverty and its attendant oppressions still defines daily existence for the majority of blacks, Latinos, Native Americans and other forgotten inhabitants of this nation. The malady of poverty knows no boundaries when it comes to race, but we must be honest and acknowledge that it is concentrated more in some communities than in others. Clearly stated, the greatest war of the civil rights movement—ending poverty—still remains to be waged and won.

Dr. King, at the time of his assassination, had just begun to devise a clear agenda for the civil rights movement to end poverty in America. He recognized that the demands of economic change would require a radical reordering of economic structures and priorities in this country. It was his intent to bring attention to those living in the lowest experience in the human chain in America. He hoped to establish that it was morally wrong and counter to the principles of democracy to allow people to suffer the indignity and inhumanity of abject poverty. It was his aim to organize a critical mass of people across lines of race, class and creed that believed there was no reason for, or reward in, sustaining and profiting from the poverty of others.

The "Poor People's Campaign" that King envisioned along with Phillip Randolph, the leadership of the SCLC, and a multi-racial coalition of other national leaders, was to unveil a detailed social change agenda after a mass non-violent demonstration modeled after the historic march on Washington D.C. It had the potential to be the largest demonstration in the history of the protest movement. Sadly, when Dr. King went to Memphis, Tennessee to support organizing efforts of local garbage workers—people hovering on the lower rungs of the economic ladder, he

was senselessly killed. By this time there were specific plans, coalitions and a leadership infrastructure that had been created to initiate the Poor People's Campaign. The second phase (the first phase being the end of legal apartheid and discrimination) of the civil rights movement fell into some disarray after Dr. King's death due the absence of a voice with his moral authority, on poverty or any other issue. Instead, we were left with a power vacuum, turf battles, infighting and outright obstructionism. To make matters worse, the proximal assassinations of Malcolm X and Bobby Kennedy only amplified the movement's disarray and diffusion. In many ways the most pressing next phase priority of the movement—the poverty question—was abandoned.

The astute student of history will trace the resurgent bold agenda of the right wing elements in the country to this time. Taking advantage of the loss of focused leadership and direction on the left they began to organize extensively at the grassroots level, within fundamentalist churches, and took control of local institutions like the PTAs, school boards and city councils, while setting up the regional and national political machinery to wage campaigns and elect policy makers to push back civil rights gains. Although there have been some progressive advances in legislation, public policy and the courts to further civil rights, the groundswell of conservative backlash has mainly eaten away at these gains over the past thirty years. The steady erosion of social, economic and political advances in civil rights has brought us to the point of crisis we find ourselves in today under the second coming of President George Bush and the prevailing conservative agenda.

Getting the Movement Back on Track

For the civil rights and progressive movement to get back on track there will have to be renewed commitment to the kind of far-reaching vision, goals and change agenda that will be necessary to end poverty. Leaders will have to show the kind of decisiveness and willingness to sacrifice that was demonstrated in the first phase of the movement. From the big picture to the simplest details, we need to do what conservatives have done and return to the community and put organizing back into the movement. There is no substitute for creating a groundswell of consciousness and commitment to the values and principles of civil rights. Sadly, for the movement to regain its fervor and dynamic force, we need to remove obstructionist leaders. Somewhere along the way, communities relinquished their voice of self-determination to social brokers and politicians. Too many leaders, elected or otherwise, come out of an exceedingly

corrupt process that renders them mediocre and/or accommodationist. If poor communities want dramatic change they need to stop looking to these types of leaders as strong, principled voices with their best interests at heart.

The community needs to retain leadership within itself, working collectively to nurture a dynamic, organic vision that sustains the broad participation of people in the decision making process—the political and moral voice being a collective voice. It is this organic kind of leadership within community that holds elected officials, government and private institutions most accountable and responsive. Lifting up new leaders and promoting a collective brand of leadership within and across communities is thus critical to building momentum and restoring vibrancy to the movement. Until we lift up leaders who are informed, educated and prepared to be rooted in the values, principles, methods and vision of the movement we will be mis-served and misrepresented. The movement needs leaders that have the guts, strength and power of moral conviction to lead in the way the most effective leaders of the past have led.

The greatest opportunity to galvanize the movement still today is among the young; this has always been the case. The role of youth and students in the anti-war and civil rights movements is one of the greatest legacies of that bygone era. Were it not for young organizers in the anti-war efforts focused on Vietnam, there would have been far less accountability and attention to the issue. Today, it is up to the young to assume leadership and rise up against the war in Iraq, to rebel in a systematic way to the inadequacies and inaccessibility of education, to protest against mass incarceration and suppression, and to prepare themselves for a protracted and sophisticated non-violent campaign to end poverty. Groups like Barrios Unidos need to prepare and organize a critical mass of organizers in the poorest communities of urban and rural America—anyplace where young ones and families live in misery. A new Poor People's Campaign, led by the young and the poor may be the tonic to revive the movement. Poverty touches every walk of human life, creating the dysfunction and social upheaval that destabilizes the world for all. Poverty is everybody's business.

Other Civil Rights Priorities

It is an absolute imperative to reform the administration of justice in America. There is no greater priority than reforming the justice system from top to bottom, including the various departments of justice, attorney general offices, and youth and adult correctional systems at

every level across the nation. In the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, there is a dangerous and almost unbridled power vested in the federal Department of Justice (DOJ) through the Patriot Act and other executive branch edicts that have seriously diminished civil liberties and accountability to the public. The apparatus of checks and balances for protecting and preserving civil rights and civil liberties of the poor have all but been gutted.

The criminal and civil courts are failing to serve a higher good and the public interest, as intended in their creation. For instance, the criminal and juvenile justice systems have achieved levels of incarceration unprecedented in modern global civilization. The net effect of this mass incarceration has decimated poor black and Latino communities through what amounts in some communities to social, political and economic genocide through the physical removal and disfranchisement of adults, young men, children and women from family and civic life. Due to the draconian focus on punishment versus rehabilitation, individuals leave prisons or juvenile detention centers unredeemed, uneducated, unskilled, and often retrenched in the anti-social subculture mentality that led to their detrimental behaviors in the first place. The outcome is that these human beings are taken further from a future of meaningful connection to and participation in their families, communities, and society than when they started. Certainly a civilized nation rooted in the highest spiritual and democratic ideals can fashion a more humane, restorative, redemptive and conciliatory approach to the administration of justice.

It is without doubt a tragedy of the times to see a critical intent and purpose of one of our greatest moral victories in civil rights, the court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, to go unfulfilled after 50 years of struggle. At a threshold level, every taxpayer in this country deserves the right to access a free and quality education. It is the right of every child to know how to read, write and creatively ponder the highest quality curricula and instruction possible in this day and age. Instead, we are witness to the dismal failure of public education in serving the needs of poor African American and Latino children—a fact that is irrefutable given the data on academic performance, drop out, retention and graduation rates, and enrollment in higher education programs. Education remains the most important determinant of social, economic and political access and achievement. Educating our children is among our highest and most unequivocal responsibilities as a nation. It is not an unreasonable proposition to assert that the quality of education for the poorest among us is the key indicator as to the state of our democracy and civilization.

The Barrios Unidos Movement

The most powerful statement that Barrios Unidos makes about itself is that it is a spiritual movement. This is important because we can look upon history and see that the most significant movements—for better or worse—have been motivated, at least in theory, by spirituality or religion. In effect, Barrios Unidos follows in the positive spiritual traditions of Gandhi, Dr. King, César, and Malcolm following his pilgrimage to Mecca. Its tenets also mirror the deep spiritual inclinations of each of these leaders' indigenous ancestors and relations. Barrios Unidos offers a way to remake oneself, to reconcile, and to create and recreate community. The only way for a community to talk to itself is to come together with a sense of higher purpose and human healing; this is where people find a deeper appreciation of their human mind, heart and soul—where commonality and shared humanity is found. Standing together in such a space, people can focus on the kind of humanity they desire to experience, a place where they can begin to imagine and in fact create the kind of world they desire.

This kind of spirituality engenders the creation and positive exchange of a universal framework of principles upon which respectful relationships and community are forged. The cornerstone tenet is to treat others as you would like to be treated. Spirituality is also there to incite positive and constructive action against the objective realities of injustice and poverty. When people understand and practice the higher tenets of most spiritual traditions, there is invariably a connection or relationship between spirituality and activism. True spirituality is neither a debilitating opiate nor a license to impose one's will on others. It does, however, provide each person with a moral base upon which to act towards the change of unjust, inhumane social circumstances that diminish life—such as poverty, exploitation, racism, discrimination, violence and all forms of human oppression.

When I look at Barrios Unidos I am glad that the organization saves young people by giving them back their culture, providing essential knowledge, discovery of identity, a sense of purpose, and the wherewithal to resist the deadly lure of gangs and destructive violence. The question for Barrios Unidos as an organization and movement is whether it has reached the threshold where it is building off decades of changing lives to take this work to the next level. The next level I'm talking about requires that Barrios Unidos leaders set social objectives for the movement and community to help create more tangible change. These objectives need to be

focused on achieving some identifiable benchmarks that Barrios Unidos constituents can organize around and work to bring about. For example, within their immediate realm of influence, Barrios Unidos leaders can set social objectives related to reforms in juvenile and criminal justice, or make change in ineffectual public schools in the communities they serve, or advance some of their economic development initiatives to create job or entrepreneurial opportunities that foster self-reliance.

Similarly, these leaders must be a steadfast voice of conscience against injustice, such as police abuse, discriminatory law enforcement practices like racial profiling, and gang injunctions that brand and criminalize youth and entire communities. They must exercise their leadership in promoting comprehensive solutions to gangs beyond suppression, mass incarceration and unchecked demonization by public institutions and media pundits. Our young have been transformed from human beings that can be reclaimed and restored, to subhuman social pariahs that are readily discarded as refuse. In our day, we picked our battles, such as the bus boycott in Montgomery. It certainly wasn't the most pressing issue on our plate but we picked one objective, focused and won to demonstrate the power of non-violence. A simple act of non-violent civil disobedience made a profound statement on the power of our movement and provided a building block for future resolve. Achieving social objectives on our overall platform for change brought a validity and resolve that grew with each victory. This is what Barrios Unidos needs to do—establish clear social objectives around which it's various areas of work can be more concretely organized, thereby establishing itself as an even more catalytic force for change.

Closing Thoughts

There is a t-shirt that Barrios Unidos produces which is one of the best I have ever seen. It is the classic beautiful picture of Che Guevarra wearing his beret and underneath is written the caption, "*We Are Not A Minority!*" This is exactly what Barrios Unidos teaches and needs to continue to impress on its constituency—namely, that they are in fact not a minority. Getting rid of that minority mentality is critical to people of color in America. If you are poor, you are not a minority! If you are Latino, you are not a minority! If you are a woman, you are not a minority! If you are in prison, you are not a minority! We need to stop calling ourselves what our oppressor calls us. We need to understand as people of color that we are whole human beings

and that collectively we have power; and that we must begin to exercise and apply that power. We need to harness the power of cultural identity, purpose, spirituality, new belonging, connectedness and collective activism to create change. Barrios Unidos has shown a commitment to working in this way.

The story and example of Barrios Unidos is an inspiration to everyone in the movement, but the organization is just hitting its stride. I implore Barrios Unidos to reach even farther and do all in its power to make its promising plans and initiatives a reality—including the development my proposed platform of social objectives that can contribute to the entire movement. Everyone is watching, especially the naysayers out there, to see if Barrios Unidos can continue to live up to its ideals. In this book, BU leaders are putting forward a set of bold and exiting initiatives to advance economic justice and self-reliance through the principles of the César Chávez Peace Plan and the first Barrio Enterprise Zone. The institute model aspired to by the organization hopes to educate, prepare and mobilize an army of peace warriors as principled leaders in the community peace movement. It will be up to its leaders to connect the vision of Barrios Unidos to what is taking place elsewhere in the nation and internationally, to advance self-determination and human rights. I believe they will.

When I think of Nane Alejandre, Otilio Quintero, and all the others at Barrios Unidos, I know we come from the same kind of hope; we come from the same kind of love, and the same kind of desire for a better world and nation. We need now to support one another, and hold each other accountable, to be in step with the heart and aspirations of our communities. We need to uphold the values of the movement, walking together to fulfill the dream.