

City of Refuge, City of Survival Struggles: Contradictions of San Francisco for Low-Wage Latino Immigrants

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San Francisco has been widely perceived as a favorable context of settlement for Latin American immigrants because of its ethnic diversity and multicultural values, which in turn reflect its sizeable immigrant communities.¹ The city has also been prominent for its generally progressive politics, and for being one of the most receptive destinations for Central American asylum seekers during the 1980s and 1990s. San Francisco officials extended Sanctuary City provisions to other undocumented immigrants in 1989 and have opposed federal efforts to target, punish, and deport undocumented Latino immigrants during the extended crackdown since 1996.

However, research focusing on the largest low-wage Latino immigrant communities—Central Americans and Mexicans²—reveals more complex realities of San Francisco. While suffering very little political intolerance, most low-wage Latino immigrants have faced significant socio-economic difficulties and have achieved only limited upward mobility. As first analyzed by Castells (1983) in his pioneering critical analysis of San Francisco's Mission District as a site for Latino migrants and citizens, cultural capital (e.g., murals, major festivals, restaurants) did not translate into socio-economic or political power. Despite being mobilized around particular issues, Latino communities did not increase their actual political or economic *power* vis-à-vis the city's ruling elites and developers. This is not totally surprising, since the Latino communities had a high proportion of non-citizens, many of them undocumented.

The economic and political dominance of downtown developers, as well as structural transformations in the post-industrial political economy of San Francisco in recent decades, made life more difficult and

less secure for low-wage Latinos, especially immigrants. The effects of living in a post-industrial “dot-com” technology-driven economy that was polarized into high-end/low-end service sectors (Sassen 1988), and that underwent spectacular booms and precipitous declines since the 1990s, were felt throughout San Francisco's housing and labor markets. Both boom and bust periods transformed San Francisco into one of the least affordable urban areas for low-income residents with regard to housing and the overall cost of living. In job markets, many newly arriving Latino immigrants tended to remain trapped as the “working poor,” often with more than one job and/or at the bottom of the informal sector—for example, at day laborer street sites (men) or as maids and nannies (women). As a Guatemalan soccer-league organizer described to me in the late 1990s how hard his compatriots had to work to survive, “*Aquí, no se vive, se sobrevive.*”

But these low-wage Latino immigrants were not simply passive objects of structural changes. Their very presence diversified San Francisco's culture and politics. Furthermore, organizations based in their communities became collective social actors; together with other movements, for several decades, from the late 1960s to 2000, they challenged downtown developers' plans and resisted the tide of gentrification in the Mission District's inner core. Some areas in “the Mission” suffered from economic deterioration and poverty, dilapidated and overcrowded housing, crime and gangs; it was largely a barrio of the working poor, but it was *their* Latino space. In addition, their organizing initiatives (e.g., by the Salvadoran Central American Resource Center, CARECEN, and numerous other groups) helped maintain San Francisco as a Sanctuary City for several decades. But by

2011, with San Francisco in flux, these relative achievements faced major challenges.

Two Tales of the City

Contested Space: Gentrification and Latino Displacement in “the Mission”

Rapid-fire boom and bust cycles of high-technology sectors after the mid-1990s took a great toll on Latino neighborhoods, mainly the inner Mission District. Increasing poverty resulted from scarce access to decent jobs and, simultaneously, the extraordinarily high cost of living and insufficient affordable housing. By the early 2000s, this was combined with gentrification-driven evictions and Latino displacement. Subsequently, the Great Recession beginning in late 2007 reduced the availability of even low-wage jobs in San Francisco.

As of 2000, Latino (“Hispanic-origin”) residents had resisted demographic decline, remaining more or less stable from 1970 to 2000 at 14 percent of San Francisco's population, concentrated mainly in the Mission District and along the Mission Street corridor to Daly City (Godfrey 2004). During the 1980s and 1990s, outright gentrification and eviction/displacement of Latin American immigrants in the Mission District had advanced, but far more slowly than predicted. Unlike other neighborhoods of San Francisco that had been completely transformed by these dynamics in the mid-to-late twentieth century (Hartman 2002), gentrification began on the outer edges of the inner Mission District, but did not yet occur wholesale in the core (lower 24th Street). In addition to the neighborhood's longstanding Latino cultural and

commercial capital, activist organizations such as the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition resisted downtown developers' schemes.

As of 2000, Latinos still made up 60.9 percent of the inner Mission District population, compared to 62.3 percent in 1990 (Godfrey 2006, 339). But by 2010, according to the San Francisco Planning Department (2011), using ACS 2005-09 data, Latinos made up only 41 percent of the Mission District population—a huge decrease from 2000. Meanwhile, the non-Hispanic white population increased notably in the Mission District. Beginning in the late 1990s, gentrification and skyrocketing rents as well as outright evictions, including owner move-in evictions and wrongful evictions, accelerated significantly in the inner Mission District. Increasingly during the next decade, the area lost its status as one of the city's least expensive neighborhoods; rentals and home prices are now far higher there than in the nearby "Outer Mission" and Excelsior districts, and median home prices are virtually as high as in bordering upscale Bernal Heights. New condos are constantly being built, giving developers the most profit out of every square inch.

No longer is lower 24th Street simply a Latino ethnic enclave, although Latinos maintain a significant presence. For example, internet cafes such as "L's," exotic ice-cream parlors, trendy Oriental and organic restaurants (e.g., "Sushi Bistro"), and businesses such as Metro/PCS have taken over spaces previously occupied by Latino restaurants such as La Posta and Margarita's Pupusería, and are spatially interspersed with the remaining Latino businesses. In addition, some of the surviving Latino businesses have begun catering to new clientele, mainly recently arrived professional/yuppie residents. The

longstanding Mexican restaurant and bakery La Victoria survived, but became "La Victoria/Wholesome Bakery," offering upscale cupcakes and expensive fair-trade coffee alongside traditional *pan dulce*, in order to "keep up with the changing neighborhood," as the second-generation owner told us.

In the lower 24th Street apartment building where I had lived from the mid-1980s through 2001, instead of six Latino renters and one Anglo as in 2001, there were by 2011 two Latino, two Asian and three Anglo renters. Gone were the graffiti that had frequently defaced the building's exterior during the 1990s, and there was a good security system at the building's entrance. More broadly, throughout the Mission district, issues of "live-work" loft spaces and zoning regulations remained highly contested. This time, the anti-displacement organizations put up a fight, but ultimately were unable to stop the gentrification/expulsion process, as 10 percent of San Francisco's Latino community left the city between 2000 and 2005 (Mirabal 2009, using Census data).

From a top-down analytical perspective, this re-socialization of space can be seen as a triumph for developers and new middle-class residents. Viewed from the bottom-up, it is best captured by Godfrey's (2004) formulation of a "barrio under siege" in regard to "Latino sense of place" in the inner Mission District, responding defensively to the threats of displacement and neoliberal spatial restructuring. Where Latinos saw their *barrio* or place, developers saw a prime property location, in the warmest and sunniest neighborhood of the city, a mere ten-minute drive from downtown. One pragmatic response by low-wage Latinos to intensified displacement from the Mission District during the early 2000s has been out-

migration to less expensive neighborhoods in San Francisco, and even more to Oakland and farther east. Many new Latino migrants in the early 2000s have skipped San Francisco altogether as a destination.

Sanctuary Contested

During the early 2000s, the city and county of San Francisco faced growing pressures to redefine its Sanctuary City policies. The original Sanctuary ("City of Refuge") policy was adopted in 1985 to protect specifically Salvadoran and Guatemalan asylum seekers who had entered the United States undocumented. Confronting the Reagan administration's denial of 98-99 percent of their asylum petitions, the San Francisco ordinance pledged not to cooperate with federal authorities seeking information about them. In 1989, following increased Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raids in the Mission District and federally legislated employer sanctions, the city's Board of Supervisors unanimously extended Sanctuary City to protect undocumented immigrants in general, and stipulated that information about immigrant status would not be shared with federal authorities in the case of undocumented arrestees unless/ until they were convicted of a criminal act—a provision that survived intermittent challenges during the 1990s and maintained San Francisco as a "safe" social space.

Following the Congressional anti-immigrant measures of the 1996 Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), and provisions of the Welfare Reform and Anti-Terrorism laws and their hardening after 9/11 (e.g., in the 2001 USA Patriot Act), massive changes in national immigrant enforcement

reverberated at the local level. In 2003, the enforcement division of the INS was replaced by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Within the national security environment, ICE attempted to establish the primacy of national authorities and to carry out raids and deportations without following local norms, practices, or public opinion.

During the early 2000s, this tug of war among national and local authorities and community organizations in the San Francisco area became more intense and complex. ICE stepped up its raids and used the 287(g) provision of IIRIRA, which allowed local police to routinely share immigration information with ICE in preparation for deportations. The 287(g) agreements were voluntary, and were resisted by many local police forces throughout the country, including San Francisco's. But in 2008, ICE initiated "Secure Communities" (S-Comm), also designed to identify deportable immigrants through police sharing fingerprints with ICE; this program was intended to be mandatory. While both programs were supposed to focus on immigrants who had committed serious violent criminal acts, both caught up and deported many non-criminal immigrants. And in San Francisco, both programs challenged longstanding sanctuary policies.

Beginning in 2008, local events also set the stage for a showdown over the specific meaning of Sanctuary City in San Francisco, with a few high-profile cases in which juvenile undocumented immigrants committed serious felonies after having been freed from jail for previous crimes. Additionally, some Mexican and Central American youth were involved with gangs and drug dealers. These circumstances created a backlash,

with politicians (including the mayor), the mainstream media (particularly the *San Francisco Chronicle*), and some strains of public opinion viewing Sanctuary City as systematically "protecting" undocumented juvenile criminals.

On July 2, 2008, the mayor unilaterally declared that police would share information with ICE about juvenile undocumented immigrants at the time they were first arrested and *charged* with committing a crime. With strong community pressures against the mayor's action, in the fall of 2009, the Board of Supervisors passed a veto-proof (8-3) ordinance, mandating that information about these juveniles should be shared with ICE not at the time of arrest for a crime, but only at the time of their actual *conviction*, in order to protect their due process rights. This measure was spearheaded by Guatemalan-American Supervisor David Campos,³ the first Latino ever elected to represent District 9, which included most of the Mission District as well as neighboring Bernal Heights, with its base of progressive upper middle class voters. The ongoing battle between the mayor, who refused to implement the law, and the Board of Supervisors was somewhat defused in 2011, when a new mayor compromised, preserving due process for many, but not all, undocumented juvenile arrestees.

But by the early 2000s, unconditionally pro-immigrant policies could not be taken for granted outside of District 9. Both in 2004 and in 2010, for example, San Francisco voters soundly defeated initiatives to allow immigrants, regardless of status, to vote in elections for the Board of Education—a measure that some major cities had adopted. The mainstream media further polarized public opinion. Gentrification as well as new bio-tech and

nearby high-tech jobs were changing the electoral demographics of San Francisco, bringing in older, better-off, generally non-Hispanic white and Asian voters who would not necessarily defend immigrant rights. In 2010 and 2011, officials elected to the Board of Supervisors and as mayor were "moderate" centrists.

Simultaneously, enforcement controversies erupted regarding the ICE S-Comm program. Mandated by a strong Board of Supervisors' resolution that passed 9-2 in June, 2010, the San Francisco Sheriff, a progressive, formally petitioned to "opt out" of S-Comm for undocumented residents who had committed minor offenses. After months of mixed messages, in mid-2011, the DHS took a definitive stance against allowing state or local jurisdictions to opt out. In perhaps the bitterest irony, San Francisco County had among the highest rates of deportation of non-criminals or minor offenders under S-Comm: 77.6 percent (of 241 cases) between October 2008 and February 2011.

All of these struggles have sparked grassroots and immigrant rights advocacy mobilizations, with broad coalitions that include many Central American, Mexican, pan-Latino, Asian, Asian-Pacific Islander, African, Arab and overall legal immigrant support organizations. These proactive coalitions have provided support for immigrant rights measures, suggesting an accumulation of political capital over the years by organizations based in San Francisco's immigrant communities, even though they could not stop ICE arrests and deportations.

The mixed record described here reveals some fault-lines of twenty-first century San Francisco immigration politics. The structural issue of how much autonomy can exist for a politically pro-immigrant

local jurisdiction is unresolved. As of early 2012, San Francisco and other cities and states appear to have lost some of their relative autonomy, but this tug-of-war continues. Additionally, at the local level, the scenario is more complex, and there is a denser field of actors, with some local players representing state or federal authorities.⁴ From the perspective of many low-wage Latino immigrants themselves, the future looks uncertain in regard to their economic survival, their neighborhoods, and some basic rights in San Francisco.

Endnotes

¹ Quantitatively, of all U.S. urban areas, San Francisco City and County (coterminous) have had one of the highest percentages of the foreign-born in its population (34.1 percent in 2009; Batalova and Terrazas 2010). The larger San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont Metropolitan Area ranked fourth in the entire United States in 2010 (Wilson and Singer 2011), although Asian immigrants outnumbered Latino immigrants.

² In addition to the studies cited here (and many others), my research for the San Francisco chapter of an in-progress book co-authored with Nestor Rodríguez, *Al Norte: Guatemalans in a Changing Migration Region*, focuses on Guatemalans, but covers many elements shared by other low-wage Latino immigrants in San Francisco from the late 1970s through the first decade of the twenty-first century.

³ See Campos' website <<http://www.sfbos.org/index.aspx?page=2129>>.

⁴ It is worth noting, for example, that even as ICE raids and arrests/deportations increased after 2008, there were mixed messages from other San Francisco-based federal authorities. Throughout the 1990s and even as late as 2010, the San Francisco Asylum office (under the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services branch of DHS) continued to receive and approve significant numbers of asylum applications throughout Northern California and the Northwest.

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