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ZOOT-SUITERS AND MEXICANS: SYMBOLS IN CROWD BEHAVIOR[1]

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ABSTRACT

Content analysis is used to test a hypothesis that overt hostile crowd behavior is preceded by the development of an unambiguously unfavorable symbol. The Los Angeles "zoot-suit riots" of 1943 provide an instance, and a sample covering ten and one-half years of newspaper reference to the symbol "Mexican" is analyzed. The hypothesis receives support through the unanticipated emergence of new thematic elements displacing the old traditional references. Predominantly unfavorable connotations of the new "zoot-suiter" symbol tend to neutralize the ambivalence in the symbol "Mexican," thus providing a necessary condition for overt hostile crowd behavior.

The purpose of this paper is to test a hypothesis concerning the symbols with which a hostile crowd designates the object of its action. The hypothesis is that hostile crowd behavior requires an unambiguously unfavorable symbol, which serves to divert crowd attention from any of the usual favorable or mitigating connotations surrounding the object. The hypothesis has been tested by a content analysis of references to the symbol "Mexican" during the ten-and-one-half-year period leading up to the 1943 "zoot-suit riots" in Los Angeles and vicinity.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS[2]

The hypothesis under examination is related to two important characteristics of crowd behavior. First, crowd behavior is *uniform* behavior in a broad sense, in contrast to behavior which exposes the infinitely varied attitudes of diverse individuals. Many attitudes and gradations of feeling can be expressed in a group's actions toward any particular object. However, the crowd is a group expressing *one* attitude, with individual variations largely concealed.

In non-crowd situations uniform behavior may be achieved by majority decision, acceptance of authority, or compromise of some sort. But crowd behavior is not mediated by such slow and deliberate procedures. Within the crowd there is a readiness to act *uniformly* in response to varied suggestions, and, until such readiness to act has spread throughout the crowd's recruitment population, fully developed and widespread-acting crowd behavior is not possible.

The response in the community to shared symbols is crucial to this uniformity of action. Ordinarily, any particular symbol has varied connotations for different individuals and groups in the community. These varied connotations prevent uniform community-wide action or at least delay it until extended processes of group decision-making have been carried out. But, when a given symbol has a relatively uniform connotation in all parts of the community, uniform group action can be taken readily when the occasion arises. To the degree, then, to which any symbol evokes only one consistent set of connotations throughout the community, only one general course of action toward the object will be indicated, and formation of an acting crowd will be facilitated.

Second, the crowd follows a course of action which is at least partially sanctioned in the culture but, at the same time, is normally inhibited by other aspects of that culture. Mob action is frequently nothing more than culturally sanctioned punishment carried out by unauthorized persons without "due process." Support of it in everyday life is attested to in many ways. Organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups act as self-appointed "custodians of patriotism" and are fairly widely ac-

[1] Judith Cahn Hart assisted greatly in the collecting and processing of data for this paper.

[2] The authors owe much to Herbert Blumer for the background of ideas from which the present theory and hypothesis have been developed.

cepted as such. The lynching of two "confessed" kidnapers in California in 1933 was given public sanction by the then governor of the state on the grounds of its therapeutic effect on other would-be criminals.[3] The legal system in America implicitly recognizes these supports by including statutes designed to suppress them.

Hostile acting crowd behavior can take place only when these inhibiting aspects of the culture cease to operate.[4] Conflict between the norms sanctioning the crowd's action and the norms inhibiting it must be resolved by the neutralization of the inhibiting norms.

There is normally some ambiguity in the connotations of any symbol, so that both favorable and unfavorable sentiments are aroused. For example, even the most prejudiced person is likely to respond to the symbol "Negro" with images of both the feared invader of white prerogatives and the lovable, loyal Negro lackey and "mammy." The symbol "bank robber" is likely to evoke a picture of admirable daring along with its generally unfavorable image. These ambiguous connotations play an important part in inhibiting extreme hostile behavior against the object represented by the symbol.

The diverse connotations of any symbol normally inhibit extreme behavior in two interrelated ways. First, the symbol evokes feelings which resist any extreme course of action. A parent, for example, is normally inhibited from punishing his child to excess, because affection for him limits the development of anger. Pity and admiration for courage or resolute action, or sympathy for a course of action which many of us might like to engage in ourselves, or charity toward human weakness usually moderate hostility toward violators of the mores. So long as feelings are mixed, actions are likely to be moderate.

[3] Cf. *Literary Digest*, CXVI (December 9, 1933), 5.

[4] This statement and the general hypothesis of this paper are but expressions of the more general proposition that all crowd behavior reflects the neutralization of normally inhibiting phases of the culture in which it occurs.

Second, the mixed connotations of the symbol place the object *within the normative order*, so that the mores of fair play, due process, giving a fair hearing, etc., apply. Any indication that the individual under attack respects any of the social norms or has any of the characteristics of the in-group evokes these mores which block extreme action.

On the other hand, unambiguous symbols permit immoderate behavior, since there is no internal conflict to restrict action. Furthermore, a symbol which represents a person as outside the normative order will not evoke the in-group norms of fair play and due process. The dictum that "you must fight fire with fire" and the conviction that a person devoid of human decency is not entitled to be treated with decency and respect rule out these inhibiting norms.

We conclude that a necessary condition for both the uniform group action and the unrestricted hostile behavior of the crowd is a symbol which arouses uniformly and exclusively unfavorable feelings toward the object under attack. However, the connotations of a symbol to the mass or crowd do not necessarily correspond exactly with the connotations to individuals. The symbol as presented in the group context mediates the overt expression of attitudes in terms of sanction and the focus of attention. The individual in whom a particular symbol evokes exclusively unfavorable feelings may nevertheless be inhibited from acting according to his feelings by the awareness that other connotations are sanctioned in the group. Or the individual in whom ambivalent feelings are evoked may conceal his favorable sentiments because he sees that only the unfavorable sentiments are sanctioned. He thereby facilitates crowd use of the symbol. Furthermore, of all the possible connotations attached to a symbol, the individual at any given moment acts principally on the basis of those on which his attention is focused. By shielding individuals from attending to possibly conflicting connotations, the unambiguous public symbol prevents the evocation of attitudes which are normal-

ly present. Thus, without necessarily undergoing change, favorable individual attitudes toward the object of crowd attack simply remain latent. This process is one of the aspects of the so-called restriction of attention which characterizes the crowd.

While unambiguous symbols are a necessary condition to full-fledged crowd behavior, they may also be a product of the earlier stages of crowd development. In some cases sudden development of a crowd is facilitated by the pre-existing linkage of an already unambiguous symbol to the object upon which events focus collective attention. But more commonly we suspect that the emergence of such a symbol or the stripping-away of alternative connotations takes place cumulatively through interaction centered on that object. In time, community-wide interaction about an object takes on increasingly crowd-like characteristics in gradual preparation for the ultimate crowd action. It is the hypothesis of this paper that *overt hostile crowd behavior is usually preceded by a period in which the key symbol is stripped of its favorable connotations until it comes to evoke unambiguously unfavorable feelings.*[5]

THE "ZOOT-SUIT RIOTS"

Beginning on June 3, 1943, Los Angeles, California, was the scene of sporadic acts of violence involving principally United States naval personnel, with the support of a sympathetic Anglo community, in opposition to members of the Mexican community which have come to be known as the "zoot-suit riots." "Zooter" referred mainly to two characteristics. First, zoot suits consisted of long suit coats and trousers extremely pegged at the cuff, draped full around the knees, and terminating in deep pleats at the waist.[6] Second, the zooters wore their hair long, full, and well greased.

During the riots many attacks and injuries were sustained by both sides.[7] Groups of sailors were frequently reported to be assisted or accompanied by civilian mobs who "egged" them on as they roamed through downtown streets in search of victims.[8] Zooters discovered on city streets were assaulted and forced to disrobe amid the jibes and molestations of the crowd. Streetcars and busses were stopped and searched, and zooters found therein were carried off into the streets and beaten. Cavalcades of hired taxicabs filled with sailors ranged the East Side districts of Los Angeles seeking, finding, and attacking zooters. Civilian gangs of East Side adolescents organized similar attacks against unwary naval personnel.

It is, of course, impossible to isolate a single incident or event and hold it responsible for the riots. Local, state, and federal authorities and numerous civic and national groups eventually tried to assess blame and prevent further violence. The most prominent charge from each side was that the other had molested its girls. It was reported that sailors became enraged by the rumor that zoot-suiters were guilty of "assaults on female relatives of servicemen."[9] Similarly, the claim against sailors was that they persisted in molesting and insulting Mexican girls. While many other charges were reported in the newspapers, including unsubstantiated suggestions of sabotage of the war

[5] There are other factors in the etiology of crowd behavior. The symbol with specified characteristics is hypothesized as merely an essential link in the causal chain and is itself an index of aggravated conditions in the community. The "zoot-suit riots" occurred within a larger social context characterized by violent racial and ethnic turmoil. Nationally, 1943 witnessed more race riots than any other year since the period immediately following World War I. California had recently undergone the experience of Japanese evacuation and rearoused alarm over the possibility that some Japanese-Americans might be relocated in the state. A full accounting for the riot would have to include these and several other conditions.

[6] The zoot suit apparently developed in the East and was associated with the Negroes in Harlem. But in southern California Mexican youth became the recognized wearers of this garb.

[7] For a popular report of the incident see Carey McWilliams in the *New Republic*, CVIII (June 21, 1943), 818–20.

[8] *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1943, Part I, p. 1.

[9] *Ibid.*, June 7, 1943, Part II, p. 1.

effort,[10] the sex charges dominated the precipitating context.

METHOD

In the absence of any direct sampling of community sentiment in the period preceding the riots, it is assumed that the use of the symbol "Mexican" by the media of mass communication indicates the prevalent connotations. Any decision as to whether the mass media passively reflect community sentiment, whether they actively mold it, or whether, as we supposed, some combination of the two processes occurs is immaterial to the present method. Ideally we should have sampled a number of mass media to correct for biases in each. However, with the limited resources at our disposal we chose the *Los Angeles Times*, largest of the four major newspapers in the Los Angeles area. It is conservative in emphasis and tends away from the sensational treatment of minority issues. In the past a foremost romanticizer of Old Mexico had been a prominent member of the *Times* editorial staff and board of directors.[11]

In order to uncover trends in the connotation of the symbol under study, one newspaper per month was read for the ten and one-half years from January, 1933, until June 30, 1943. These monthly newspapers were selected by assigning consecutive days of the week to each month. For example, for January, 1933, the paper printed on the first Monday was read; for February, the paper printed on the first Tuesday was read. After the seven-day cycle was completed, the following months were assigned, respectively, the *second* Monday, the *second* Tuesday, etc. To avoid loading the sample with days that fell early in the first half of the month, the procedure was reversed for the last half of the period. Then, to secure an intensive picture of the critical period, consecutive daily editions were read for one month starting with May 20, 1943, through June 20, 1943. This covered approximately ten days before and after the period of violence. Any editorial, story, report, or letter which had reference to the Mexican community or population was summarized, recorded, and classified.[12] The articles were placed in five basic categories: favorable themes, unfavorable themes, neutral mention, negative-favorable mention, and zooter theme.[13]

1. *Favorable:* (*a*) Old California Theme. This is devoted to extolling the traditions and history of the old rancheros as the earliest California settlers. (*b*) Mexican Temperament Theme. This describes the Mexican character in terms of dashing romance, bravery, gaiety, etc. (*c*) Religious Theme. This refers to the devout religious values of the Mexican community. (*d*) Mexican Culture Theme. This pays homage to Mexican art, dance, crafts, music, fifth of May festivities, etc.
2. *Unfavorable:* (*a*) Delinquency and Crime Theme. This theme includes the specific mention of a law violator as "Mexican," associating him with marihuana, sex crimes, knife-wielding, gang violence, etc. (*b*) Public Burden Theme. This attempts to show that Mexicans constitute a drain on relief funds and on the budgets of correctional institutions.
3. *Neutral:* This is a category of miscellaneous items, including reports of crimes committed by individuals possessing obvious Mexican names but without designation of ethnic affiliation.
4. *Negative-Favorable:* This category consists of appeals which *counter* or *deny* the validity of accusations against Mexicans as a group. For example: "Not all zoot-suiters are delinquents; their adoption by many was a bid for social recognition"; "At the outset zoot-suiters were limited to no specific race. . . . The fact that later on their numbers seemed to be predominantly Latin was in itself no indication of that race" (*Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1943, Part I, p. 1).
5. *Zooter Theme:* This theme identifies the zooter costume as "a badge of delinquency." Typical references were: "reat pleat boys," "long coated

[10] *Ibid.*, June 10, 1943, Part I, p. A.

[11] Harry Carr, author of *Old Mother Mexico* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1931).

[12] The unit of count in the present paper is the entire article, report, or item. A weighting for location and length might have indicated additional findings. For a discussion of this point see Bernard Berelson, *Content Analysis in Communications Research* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952).

[13] In judging references to be favorable or unfavorable, it was asked whether the report tended to encourage (*a*) an increase or a decrease in social distance between the reader and the Mexican and (*b*) a definition of the Mexican as an asset or a liability to the life of the community. The following is the full list of themes and subthemes.

gentry," coupled with mention of "unprovoked attacks by zoot-suited youths," "zoot-suit orgy," etc. Crime, sex violence, and gang attacks were the dominant elements in this theme. Almost invariably, the zooter was identified as a Mexican by such clues as "East Side hoodlum," a Mexican name, or specific ethnic designation.

If the hypothesis of this paper is to be supported, we should expect a decline in the favorable contexts of the symbol "Mexican." The change should serve to produce the type of symbol suggested by the hypothesis, a symbol dominated by unambiguously unfavorable elements.

FINDINGS

The favorable and unfavorable themes are reported alone in Table 1 for the ten and one-half years. The table by itself appears to negate our hypothesis, since there is no appreciable decline in the percentage of favorable themes during the period. Indeed, even during the last period the mentions appear predominantly favorable, featuring the romanticized Mexican. However, there is a striking decline in the total number of articles mentioning the Mexican between the second and third periods. Treating the articles listed as a fraction of all articles in the newspapers sampled and using a subminimal estimate of the total number of all articles, the *t* test reveals that such a drop in the total number of articles mentioning Mexicans could have occurred by chance less than twice in one hundred times. We conclude, then, that the decline in total favorable and unfavorable mentions of "Mexican" is statistically significant.

While the hypothesis in its simplest form is unsubstantiated, the drop in both favorable and unfavorable themes suggests a shift away from *all* the traditional references to Mexicans during the period prior to the riots. If it can be shown that an actual substitution of symbols was taking place, our hypothesis may still be substantiated, but in a somewhat different manner than anticipated.

From the distribution of all five themes reported in Table 2 it is immediately evident that there has been no decline of interest in the Mexican but rather a clear-cut shift of attention away from traditional references. The straightforward favorable and unfavorable themes account for 89, 74, and 30 per cent of all references, respectively, during the three periods. This drop and the drop from 61 to 25 per cent favorable mentions are significant below the 1 per cent level. To determine whether this evidence confirms our hypothesis, we must make careful examination of the three emerging themes.

The *neutral* theme shows a steady increase throughout the three periods. While we have cautiously designated this "neutral," it actually consists chiefly of unfavorable presentations of the object "Mexican"

TABLE 1

FAVORABLE AND UNFAVORABLE MENTION OF "MEXICAN" DURING THREE PERIODS

Period	Favorable Themes	Unfavorable Themes	Percentage Favorable
January, 1933—June, 1936.....	27	3	90
July, 1936—December, 1939....	23	5	82
January, 1940—June, 1943.....	10	2	83
Total.....	60	10	86

TABLE 2

DISTRIBUTION OF ALL THEMES BY THREE PERIODS

Period	Percentage Favorable	Percentage Unfavorable	Percentage Neutral	Percentage Negative-Favorable	Percentage Zooter	Total Percentage	Total Number
January, 1933—June, 1936.....	80	9	11	0	0	100	34
July, 1936—December, 1939....	61	13	23	3	0	100	38
January, 1940—June, 1943.....	25	5	32	8	30	100	40

without overt use of the symbol "Mexican." Thus it incorporates the unfavorable representation of Mexican, which we assume was quite generally recognized throughout the community, without explicit use of the symbol.

The *negative-favorable* theme, though small in total numbers, also increased. At first we were inclined to treat these as favorable themes. However, in contrast to the other favorable themes, this one documents the extent of negative connotation which is accumulating about the symbol "Mexican." By arguing openly against the negative connotations, these articles acknowledge their widespread community sanction. When the implicitly favorable themes of romantic Mexico and California's historic past give way to defensive assertions that all Mexicans are not bad, such a shift can only reasonably be interpreted as a rise in unfavorable connotations.

The most interesting shift, however, is the rise of the *zoot-suit* theme, which did not appear at all until the third period, when it accounts for 30 per cent of the references. Here we have the emergence of a new symbol which has no past favorable connotations to lose. Unlike the symbol "Mexican," the "zoot-suiter" symbol evokes no ambivalent sentiments but appears in exclusively unfavorable contexts. While, in fact, Mexicans were attacked *indiscriminately* in spite of apparel (of two hundred youths rounded up by the police on one occasion, very few were wearing zoot suits),[14] the symbol "zoot-suiter" could become a basis for unambivalent community sentiment supporting hostile crowd behavior more easily than could "Mexican."

It is interesting to note that, when we consider only the fifteen mentions which appear in the first six months of 1943, ten are to zooters, three are negative-favorable, two are neutral, and none is the traditional favorable or unfavorable theme.

In Table 3 we report the results of the day-by-day analysis of the period immediately prior, during, and after the riots. It shows the culmination of a trend faintly suggested as long as seven years before the riots and clearly indicated two or three years in advance. The traditional favorable and unfavorable themes have vanished completely, and three-quarters of the references center about the zooter theme.

From the foregoing evidence we conclude that our basic hypothesis and theory receive confirmation, but not exactly as anticipated. The simple expectation that there would be a shift in the relative preponderance of favorable and unfavorable contexts for the symbol "Mexican" was not borne out. But the basic hypothesis that an unambiguously unfavorable symbol is required as the rallying point for hostile crowd behavior is supported through evidence that the symbol "Mexican" tended to be displaced by the symbol "zoot-suiter" as the time of the riots drew near.

TABLE 3

DISTRIBUTION OF ALL THEMES FROM MAY 20 TO JUNE 20, 1943

Theme	Percentage of All Mentions*
Favorable	0
Unfavorable	0
Neutral	3
Negative-favorable	23
Zooter	74
Total	100

* Total number = 61.

The conception of the romantic Mexican and the Mexican heritage is deeply ingrained in southern California tradition. The Plaza and Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles, the Ramona tradition, the popularity of Mexican food, and many other features serve to perpetuate it. It seems quite probable that its force was too strong to be eradicated entirely, even though it ceased to be an acceptable matter of public presentation. In spite, then, of a progressive decline in public presentation of the symbol in its traditional favorable contexts, a certain ambivalence remained which prevented a

[14] *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 1943, Part I, p. A.

simple replacement with predominantly unfavorable connotations.

Rather, two techniques emerged for circumventing the ambivalence. One was the presenting of the object in an obvious manner without explicit use of the symbol. Thus a Mexican name, a picture, or reference to "East Side hoodlums" was presented in an unfavorable context. But a far more effective device was a new symbol whose connotations at the time were exclusively unfavorable. It provided the public sanction and restriction of attention essential to the development of overt crowd hostility. The symbol "zoot-suiter" evoked none of the imagery of the romantic past. It evoked only the picture of a breed of persons outside the normative order, devoid of morals themselves, and consequently not entitled to fair play and due process. Indeed, the zoot-suiter came to be regarded as such an exclusively fearful threat to the community that at the height of rioting the Los Angeles City Council seriously debated an ordinance making the wearing of zoot suits a prison offense.[15]

The "zooter" symbol had a crisis character which mere unfavorable versions of the familiar "Mexican" symbol never approximated. And the "zooter" symbol was an omnibus, drawing together the most reprehensible elements in the old unfavorable themes, namely, sex crimes, delinquency, gang attacks, draft-dodgers, and the like and was, in consequence, widely applicable.

The "zooter" symbol also supplied a tag identifying the object of attack. It could be used, when the old attitudes toward Mexicans were evoked, to differentiate Mexicans along both moral and physical lines. While the active minority were attacking Mexicans indiscriminately, and frequently including Negroes, the great sanctioning majority heard only of attacks on zoot-suiters.

Once established, the zooter theme assured its own magnification. What previously would have been reported as an adolescent gang attack would now be presented as a zoot-suit attack. Weapons found on apprehended youths were now interpreted as the building-up of arms collections in preparation for zoot-suit violence.[16] In short, the "zooter" symbol was a recasting of many of the elements formerly present and sometimes associated with Mexicans in a new and instantly recognizable guise. This new association of ideas relieved the community of ambivalence and moral obligations and gave sanction to making the Mexicans the victims of widespread hostile crowd behavior.

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[15] *Ibid.*, June 10, 1943, Part I, pp. 1, A.

[16] For an interesting account relative to this point see Donald M. Johnson, "The Phantom Anesthetist of Mattoon: A Field Study of Mass Hysteria," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XL (April, 1945), 175–86.