Building Justice Podcast
Episode 10

Reflections on Farm labor, Belonging, and Education from the Margins: a conversation between Dr. Manuel Barajas and Dr. Heidy Sarabia.

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Should you have questions, please email Dr. Barajas or Dr. Sarabia directly.

[music lyrics]

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Conversation

HEIDY SARABIA: Welcome to Building Justice. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. Your host for today are myself, Heidy Sarabia Sarabia Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at State, and Manuel Barajas, also professor in the Department of Sociology at SAC State and co-founder of the Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. Thank you for joining us today. We'll be talking about my real life and how his experiences have shaped his view of and understanding of social justice. Welcome. Thank you very much for talking with us today. I would like to start by asking you, can you tell us your earlier experiences, how much your life as a child and how did that? How did those experiences help you sort of shape your interests today?

MANUEL BARAJAS: See, I was born in Mexico and I was brought to the U.S. when I was four. That was the youngest of four siblings. The oldest was 12 and it was fourth and we migrated to Stockton, California. What's unique about that experience is that. I would say third generation migrants were naughty, meaning that my grandparents from both sides, Elias Barajas, Goyo Pulido, have been coming since the 1910s, 20s, so the US. My father, Luis Barajas, followed those migrations in the 50s, as a bracero. And so when I, what I remember from Mexico, Michoacan, was up to the age of four, and it's more like a dream. And I remember the last two years, probably more, because my mom would join my father to work in the fields. So I was, maybe, I don't know, maybe, I don't know two or three and my mom would come to the US, so she would leave me with my three older siblings under the guidance or supervision of a, a relative, typically young teenagers tambien, also, maybe like in their teens. So one year it was my tia Nena, who was under 18 who took care of us. And then another year was Maria Luisa, a Woman from el pueblito, Jaripo, Michoacan. And so those memories, you're like dream-like. And they're like, you know, maybe they're positive. I was with my siblings and it was like a village. Everybody knew each other. I could go on the street by myself at night. That's a little baby toddle. And people would look after me, and you know. The change came when my family decided to settle in Stockton. So in 73, they brought all of us. It was March of 1973. That we moved to Stockton and we moved to farm labor camps, los campitos. On Matis Roade in Stockton, and it was it wasn't too much of a difference because it was the whole village. That had been migrating for two thirds of a century. Sort of, when, to move, to move into from labor camps. And so I knew everybody. And it was interesting because all the houses looked like, they were like little cubes, sky- blue cubes in color. And it was as a little kid, four or five year-old. It was tough because I couldn't find my way through their homes and find my own home. And then from there, we moved into the housing projects, Conway Homes housing projects, in Stockton. That was a traumatic experience in the housing projects. It was mostly chicanx, brown people and black people. Maybe 80-20 percent, 80 percent brown, 20 percent. And most of the brown people, they were not recent immigrants like us. We're not recent immigrants. We were like migrants, but not immigrants. We were like indigenous to the content of the North America and from el pueblito, that is pre-Columbian. It existed before Mexico existed, before the U.S. existed, and we started migrating early in the 20th century, 1901. Anyways, So when we moved into those housing projects, most of the people who lived there were people from Texas, Nuevo Mexico. There were people who looked like us, indigenous, brown people, Mexican, Chicano and black people. And there was a lot of nativism. They were not used to seeing more recent immigrants who spoke only Spanish, who worked in the fields. And so it was a struggle. You know, we faced a lot of hostility. A lot of hostility, a lot have nativism from people who look like us. Even before I started school, I experienced seeing my older siblings, who were like in third grade, fifth grade, sixth grade coming home, crying, bleeding, demoralized.

When I started Kinder, it was very traumatic. I got placed in a classroom with very diverse children in a bilingual class, but the teacher couldn't speak Spanish and we had a teacher, an instructional aide, who would come in for an hour or two and help help her out with us. But then she would leave. And so I didn't know the language. It was just, like, very difficult as a little kid, who didn't speak the language and then in first grade, I had a very smart friend, Miguelito, who would help me in understanding what was going on in the classroom. And he would help me pronounce words in English. And one day he didn't show up. And then the next day he didn't show up and then I was terrified and traumatized, like who was going to help me now with my communication with school. And I later learned that he and his family got deported. And I was in first grade. So the housing projects, the schooling, those early years, they were not, I didn't feel too welcomed It was traumatic learning the language and then facing a lot of hostility. I saw a lot of fights. By third grade I formed a little clikita, a little defensive group to defend ourselves, to protect ourselves. And they were just like, Nene, myself, my best friend Nene and like five other kids. And so we formed this click, to defend ourselves against the large hostile school environment. And we got into a lot of trouble with the schools. They had conferences, suspensions, but you know, we survived and then we moved. I think my parents in the 80s, they were able to get it through Low-Income Housing to buy their own home through HUD. So in 1980, I was 11 and we moved into where my parents live right now. They call it Crow Valley constructive, and it was beautiful, I loved it. It was a predominately black neighborhood, maybe 20 percent Mexican, and we were bussed to school from our little community. But people owned their homes, a lot of the neighbors, the elders. They were from the south and we shared a lot. They grew vegetables in their backyards, they had chickens. And so those are those were things that I was not familiar with, but that my family and parents feel very comfortable with. It reminded them of their pueblito, in Michoacan. And so that was a better experience. And then what else? Well, I grew up working in the fields from the age of four since I was brought to the U.S., to when I graduate from high school. And that's another defining experience working in farm labor. Even when I went to college, I would go back home and work in the fields. And so we worked as a family. And my mom was the first one to get up, 3:30-4:00. In the blender, making chocomilk, a smoothie, at 4:30 in the morning. That was the alarm for us to get up. Use the restroom, drink our chocomilk, get into the car and take a little nap before we got to the fields. Pickling cherries in May, Maybe apricots in June. Cucumbers and then tomatoes throughout November. And then we went back to school when we work on the weekends. So working in the fields is something that really, really impacted me. I got to see, it was both bad and good. It was nice because we worked as a family and we worked as a community. Typically, typically, we would see people from only open little pueblito in the fields together. People would tell stories working in the fields, and they would compete with each other to see if it was the most productive and they would sing and kids would try to connect with each other, teenagers in the fields. And so that's the good thing. The bad thing was just the devaluation of our humanity. We got up early. We worked up to three four and sometimes working all day, we would earn half a day's minimum wage, meaning that we may have been there At five, it was three. Back in the 80s, maybe I don't know what the minimum wage was, but it was not even half a day's minimum wage. And and I remember I was 15 years old and thinking, This is wrong! This is inhumane, how can it be? And so yeah, I think. Those, you know, growing up in a racially segregated community, working in the fields, facing nativism, Anti-Immigrants, and it isn't like really anti-immigrant, is really anti-Indigenous, anti-brown people, nativism. And it was directed to those of us who were more like, you know, more ethnic, more communal, more indigenous in our way. That's what I think, those who are acculturate, you know, they were not at the bottom. And so that's how I saw things. The fighting, the nativism within our own community, always That was that was something that interested me. Why is it that we always fight against each other, people from the same background with the same histories? Why do we fight? So I think that was one of the major questions that guided me to my studies as an undergraduate later into graduate studies. What makes us fight? And also, why is it that the people who Work the hardest, do the most difficult and deadly jobs. in society, earn the least, and has the least secure economic, secure, stable lives going into November when the rains came and there were more, There were no more crops to pick, there were fewer jobs for the family. Only a few people would go out to work. My dad would go the grape vines, in the bricks. My myself and my siblings would help them out. But there were less money. There was less, you know, and it was stressful. Holidays came and I don't remember them as being like, Oh, how exciting! you know? It was very stressful. A lot of my community would continue to migrate back and forth in the in the seventies. It changed in the eighties, with the extension of unemployment insurance to farm workers, which had been denied to them from the 1930s. I think it was from the unemployment insurance from 1935, the National Labor Relations Act, of 35 and then fair labor standards, of 38, a lot of those labor rights were denied to farm workers and domestics, people of color, indigenous in the southwest and black in the south. And, so yes, race, immigration, class, gender. That always interested me. You know, the hierarchies of that divide up society, into the haves and have-nots, and into those who have status and power and those who don't.

HEIDY SARABIA: Manuel, I wanted to follow up with you on the issue of experiencing firsthand, right?
The the the hard labor that goes into working in agriculture and the devaluation, right? The fact that we don't get paid, just a living wage.

MANUEL BARAJAS: Yeah, thank you, thank you for asking that question. I remember when I went to. You know, undergraduate classes in sociology and theories about, you know, about the value of labor and. And then there were these notions of supply and demand, that scarcity, you know, increase the value and that oversupply decrease the value, including labor and how, to pick specific types of jobs were more valuable because they were contributing to society than others. And then I knew when I went to college that. I realized I didn't know that we were the working poor until I went to graduate, to college, as an undergraduate and I had to do a financial aid form and I realized that we were working poor. We're like way below. And then that's when I discovered and I thought like, wow, how unfair it is that we work every day, sometimes nonstop for a whole month, nonstop in the fields. We're getting up at four, at five, to get to the fields at five, and we come back home at four? All tired that we can't do anything else. And this job is not like any job, it requires great discipline, and being prepared to be at the fields, empty your stomach because there's no toilets nearby, having your food because you know, we get paid so little that we can't afford to be buying lunch at the truck or whatever every day. And so saving, managing, almost, very scarce resources and making them like, you know, stretch them to help you, you know, endure a day of labor. And picking cherries was it was the easiest crop. I think it's the big trees, beautiful cherries, the fruit. But the letters, the the ladders, were tall, 14 feet, 16 feet made of wood. Hearing them around the tree all day. It's hard. And then you have a bucket strapped to your stomach, picking the cherries up and down, up and down. And then like, That was the easiest harvest I think to do. Picking cucumbers, being there at 5:00 in the morning before the Sun rose, being waiting for the call, Comienze! start! and started picking the cucumber leaves or plants are beautiful, but they're like sandpaper. If you have no rubber gloves. It's like putting your hands in sandpaper, and they will they will be abrazed. You will, they will tear your hands off, your fingers. And so you've got to go well prepared. And then like bending down, on like muddy, the muddy ground as you're picking your cucumbers and the mud clings to your shoes, your shoes, your steps are heavy and just being bent down, from waist down, because you can kneel down. It's very difficult. And then if you have worked more than six hours doing that work, is really, really tough. And when it starts that the temperature reaches 100 and you haven't finished the [inaudible] of picking crops, it's it's it requires tremendous mental discipline like none that I have had to experience in graduate school or even as a professor. And I can only imagine that it makes you have a different relationship to food, right, because then when you see these products, it's not just what you are consuming. It's the work that goes behind that cucumber. I'm thinking of a cucumber to your table. It's a sign of respect. The right and one that I can only imagine just gives you that kind of respect for the labor that goes into it. It's complicated because when you're there, you don't want eat the food. You might if, you're hungry and then you have to clean up really good because sometimes the pesticide irritates your skin and irritates your eyes. So you have to be very careful, wash it. Or like, if you're not hurting you, risk it. You clean up the cucumber in your shirt, really, really good. Bite into it. Spit it out and eat the inside. Same thing with the tomatoes, but. I have siblings who develop like this, just, what is it not phobia? but yes, phobia for the food that they would pick. I had an older brother who, when he graduate from high school, he went straight to pick asparagus. They were so fatiguing that even at night, he would moan and complain in his sleep about picking asparagus. I myself it to this day I haven't picked for, in the fields since I was twenty-five years old. I was in graduate school. I went back to visit and I worked in the fields for a few days. I haven't been in the fields in that capacity for over twenty five years. And I still dream that I'm working in the fields and that I'm struggling finding the fruits to fill up my bucket. I have dreams of frustration that the person giving you the tickets for the buckets that you picked, don't wanna Give you the token that's pays you, you know, that pays you after work. what you earned per piece. For whatever excuse, that maybe there's too many leaves inside, not the right. Measurement of the tomato, and things like that, and and so the fields is impactful. I mean, like. Having said that, that's in the fields, but growing your own food, your own food for yourself, that's a different thing. A lot of these farm workers who are picking our fruits, they're not just farm workers, some of them are farmers and they have grown organically and they have harvested their own produce and they've grown their maiz, their squash, their beans, chiles. And so it isn't that they aren't skilled. They, they have a lot of knowledge about how to, yes, grow food from nothing. And yes, and again again, talking about relationships, right, that the relationship that people have to the land between them. In some ways, we'll have to work to earn money, but that doesn't diminish also the relationship and the knowledge that they bring with them. And that sometimes they are able to implement at home through growing their own food.

HEIDY SARABIA: Did your family grow, you know, keep this tradition in light of growing their own food?

MANUEL BARAJAS: Yes, they did this in the homeland, and they do this in Stockton, in housing projects, in the backyard. They were always, making space to grow their chiles, de arbol negro, to grow their tomatillo, their squash, their corn, even when we moved into that house where my parents live now, they would also grow their, you know, their produce. And to this day, I go and visit and there's a whole bunch of chiles and tomatillos, the onions, things that they grow. And, you know, but you talk about relationships that's relating us with our food, that we're growing and we're like communicating with those plants every day, seeing if you're sad or not, if they need water, and then getting invested and just knowing how to intervene in a healthy way, in the fields is different. It's like mode of production, is like, it's a different type of relationship, you are relating with the environment, not in a healthy, mutual way, that we're helping each other, we are seeing each other with care. But you're just using exploiting it for mass production. Which is very different.

HEIDY SARABIA: And, you know, I guess the the issue of profit, right, when it's there are some things that when you try to get profit out of it, it sort of develops into these very twisted kind of ways, something that it's so beautiful. This relationship to the land, to the to the plants, to this, becomes toxic and exploitative. And just, unfortunately.

MANUEL BARAJAS: there's a lack of democracy in economic relationships, the lack of democracy, in which one party benefits. And the other party is not, and the other party is very numerous in that one party is very few, and so it would be nice if they could meet eye-to-eye and democratically set the values. This is what my job is and my work is worth. But the concept that we have in today's labor relationships in the field is one that is truly rooted in colonial times. We're Native Americans since 1492, like humanity's been reduced. Labor and encomiendas, unfree labor from the encomiendas. And administrators form Europe were placed in charge of administering lands and labor, indigenous people, and later, brothers from Africa. Sisters from Africa. Were brought, and forced to work for nothing as well. And so in that concept, you know, people's humanity, are reduced to serve and create wealth for that one party. But that wealth is not fairly shared with the rest. After independence movements, after struggles for liberation from slavery, new forms were introduced, shared-cropping and among Native Americans throughout the Southwest. and meso-American, including Mexico, Central America, that's what was common, a feudal economy, where the workers produced the food, but always in-debt They have to pay that, by the seeds, the instruments, the rent, the oxes, and so they are always kept in debt. And so, and so yes, we have a an the economic system that is very undemocratic, that requires more healthy logics, that conceptualizes profit in a more expansive way, that considers not just material well-being for some But well-being in a more holistic way. Are people, healthier, mentally health-wise, materially. When engaged in these relationships at work or are not. And so what we've seen in the past 40 years in the US and globally is that we've become more prosperous. In terms of gross domestic product, in terms of wealth measures. Most people are working more and have more debt, in that, productivity has gone to a very few. So that one percent, and we become more unequal as a nation. And so this economic system greatly reflects a very unhealthy form of reducing sustenance for people.

HEIDY SARABIA: And Manuel, this system that you mention, of the 1%, requires that the working class. Remain, as you know, as a destitute working class, and I'm just. And so the system is not is not meant for for for people like us to to move up. People tend to remain in the class, were they they were born, if not, you know, if some people, even when they are, they grow up in middle class, they even go down. So I'm curious about how was that transition into college? How did that happen in your family, that you're able to attend college and eventually graduate school and eventually become? Professor, and sort of attain a a middle class lifestyle with such a an amazing sort of, you know, growing up story. So can you tell us a little bit about that process?

MANUEL BARAJAS: Yeah, thank you for those questions. First, like you said, you know, in terms of mobility, there's this American dream that people come. Work and just, value education do the right thing and they move on. Like that, American dream has been a myth for people of color, especially those of indigenous ancestry and so-called Mexicans, Latinx and black people and people who come from some colonized regions by the US, like the Pacific Islands. With us, brown people of indigenous ancestry, we've been there since conquest, and we largely remain there in the service-laboring occupational sectors because it has nothing to do with merit. It has to do with structural opportunities, being denied, exclusion from jobs, being segregated, from jobs and even when we transition into those more diversified jobs or whiten jobs, that are reserved for those who benefit from colonialism We're devalued, we do more and get paid less. And that's empirical, especially for women of color and indigenous ancestry. Women, fifty-five cents for white-male dollar, black women like 65, and so on. And so there, it isn't class. There's also a racial gender system that devalue our labor work. So when I went to college as a first generation, I entered a very solid middle class space where people like myself, where erased, schools were Missions were meant to erase indigenous history and culture. And so universities are no different. We're, you know. When I went, I thought it was beautiful, manicured lawns, big buildings and a lot of books, I love books. But I feel very erased, very isolated. And in terms of like connecting with the content. And I think that's maybe why sociology, I connected to sociology, they had a focus on inequality and social movements. And I felt like they're talking about these theories and this applies to our own experiences. We transition again, it was nice being in such a privileged basis, but I feel very alienated when I went to to the university Davis. There were about twenty thousand students, maybe like three percent were chicanx Latinx So whenever brown people and black people see each other, we would like say what's up! or try to greet each other in an affirming way. Sometimes I was confused by Middle Easterners, who looked dark and brown and like, you know, like Indo-Americans, indigenous Americans. And so we're very few in the classrooms and they were very competitive. They use curves. So it didn't matter if you got 90 percent. We had a curve and it would be A and B and C, and so it was very competitive. And to me, like working was no problem, learning was no problem. It was a hostility. I think in the first year at Davis, I encountered like microaggressions.I wouldn't even call them micro, just aggressions against my humanity. I was walking to the library and some older European-American passing called me "Pinche Chicano." And I didn't know what a Chicano was at that time. And, you know, it was an aggression against my humanity. I mean, the library was a space of hostility. I remember another occasion when I entered an elevator, and another European-American male was looking at me, an older man, And when he exited the elevator, he asked whether I was a Latino. And I didn't know what a Latino was, so I was like, no, I am a Mexican. He said, "all Latinos look alike." And he walked out. And so they were, you know, profiling by the police, as well, being stopped for good reason. And driving on a car, or even in a bike at Davis. So it was interesting. It was nice to get an education, to being in such a special space. But it also alienating, to be, to be in rooms with five-hundreds of students and seeing so few of us. Now things are different. Now, the demographics, we see more diversity, more brown. More Asians, more African-Americans in higher education. But we don't see ourselves in academic affairs as teachers, as mentors, as researchers. We remain almost erased. And that isn't just about color, but also that ideological content, that unique experiences that shape your understanding of the world, your questions that you investigate, that you research Typically the university feels more comfortable with those who have sort of been acculturated, assimilated to their norms. And that is challenging to see that, you know, so they want to talk about "we" We shouldn't without recognizing the divisions and stratification and inequalities. That we can't be a "we" when the minorities, who are now a majority, remain excluded. Are denied voices of equity and respect, and so that transition has always been tough, I am still in transition. I feel that I don't really belong. I feel that I belong to my connections with students who come from my background or first-generation working class backgrounds. We're not mainstream, but they're also in great numbers now, facing what I faced when we were smaller in numbers. And that is erasure, distortions of who we are. Homogenizing who Chicanz/Latinx are It's a it's struggling, it's it's hurtful to see this in our times, 21 century, 20-21.

HEIDY SARABIA: Well, the you know, your experiences kind of remind me that that sort of experiences among Latinx is not the same. And I think some of us are always reminded that we don't quite belong. And and it sounds like you not only faced those kinds of experiences as you know as, as as you entered college because you were one of few. But even as you remain in academia and student demographic changes, you remain, right? remain one of the few and now you're one of the few faculty. And and so I'm wondering about these experiences that sort of That happened in various spaces within this country. That kind of reminds us in many ways that we don't quite belong in some spaces. Well, what what do you make? This?

MANUEL BARAJAS: This is what's interesting. I mean, like, I've always felt that I belong, inside. You know, I grew up here and I'm in, I'm in America, indigenous land. I'm in the land of the Miwok right now in Elk Grove. When I got to work in the land of Nisenan, I've always known that we've been erased. So I'm made to feel that I don't belong. But I know that I do belong. It is hurtful to experience that that alienation that you have, That your voice matters less, and then also to see that deployment, the attribution of racial-gender-class stereotypes of who we are. Monolithic, stereotypical understanding of who we are. Immigrants, backward, primitive, savage. Like things that were used to appropriate, exploit our lands, our labor. And it continues in different spaces, so it's like back in the fields, but now our knowledge, like your voice, is gentrification, is less valid. You know, they're not universal and everything is, Everyone is shaped by their environment, by race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality. To claim a universal voice, when we're shaped by that, it's so dishonest, so colonial. So yes, the university needs to open up.

HEIDY SARABIA: Thank you, Manuel, for sharing your experiences growing up in the field and with your family and as you transition into higher education as an undergraduate at UC Davis. This is the first part of a two part series where we learn about the life and work of Professor Manuel Barajas. Please join us next time when we talk to Professor Barajas, and he reflects further about his involvement in the creation of the Center of Race, Immigration and Justice at Sac State and on the issues confronting higher education and their incorporation and embracement of diversity in these spaces. Again, thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations sparked understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future.

[music]