Episode 10: Reflections on Farm Labor, Belonging and Education from the Margins: a conversation between Dr. Manuel Barajas and Dr. Heidy Sarabia.

[music begins]

Heidy

We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

0:34

Your host for today are myself, Heidy Sarabia Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at State, and Manuel Barajas,

0:42

also professor in the Department of Sociology at SAC State and co-founder of the Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice.

0:51

Thank you for joining us today.

0:59

We'll be talking about his life and how his experiences have shaped his view of and understanding of social justice.

1:01

Welcome. Thank you very much for talking with us today.

1:12

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?

1:18

How did those experiences help you sort of shape your interests today?

1:27

Manuel: I was born in Michoacan, Mexico and I was brought to the U.S. when I was four.

1:35

I was the youngest of four siblings. The oldest was 12 I 4 when we migrated to Stockton, California.

1:42

What's unique about that experience is that I was a third-generation migrant to el norte, meaning that my grandparents from both sides,

1:50

Elias Barajas, Goyo Pulido, had been coming since the 1910s and 20s to the United States.

2:00

My father, Luis Barajas, followed those migrations in the 50s, as a bracero.

2:07

And so when I, what I remember from Mexico, Michoacan, was from the age of four, and it's more like a dream.

2:14

And I remember the last two years, probably more, because my mom would join my father to work in the fields.

2:22

So I was, maybe, ... two or three years and my mom would come to the US,

2:28

so she would leave me with my three older siblings under the guidance or supervision of a, a relative,

2:32

typically young teenagers ....

2:41

So one year it was my tia Nena, who was under 18 who took care of us.

2:46

And then another year was Maria Luisa, a woman from el pueblito, Jaripo, Michoacan.

2:51

And so those memories, are dream-like and ... they're positive.

2:56

I was with my siblings and it was like a village. Everybody knew each other.

3:04

I could go on the street by myself at night as a little baby toddler.

3:10

And people would look after me, and you know. The change came when my family decided to settle in Stockton.

3:15

So in 73, they brought all of us. It was March of 1973.

3:23

We moved to Stockton and we moved to farm labor camps, los campitos

3:28

On Mathews Road in Stockton. it wasn't too much of a difference because it was the whole village

3:35

that had been migrating for two thirds of a century... moving into the labor camps.

3:42

And so I knew everybody. And it was interesting because all the houses looked like, they were shaped like little cubes, sky- blue in color.

3:49

And as a little kid, four year-old, it was tough because I couldn't find my way through the houses and find my own home.

3:58

And then from there, we moved into the housing projects, Conway Homes , in Stockton.

4:05

That was a traumatic experience in the housing projects. It was mostly chicanx, brown people and black people.

4:13

Maybe 80-20 percent, 80 percent brown, 20 percent black. And most of the brown people, they were not recent immigrants like us.

4:20

We're not recent immigrants. We were like migrants, but not immigrants.

4:26

We are indigenous to the continent of the North America and from a pueblito that is pre-Columbian.

4:29

It existed before Mexico existed, [and] before the U.S. existed, and we started migrating early in the 20th century, 1901. Anyways,

4:37

So when we moved into those housing projects, most of the people who lived there were people from Texas, Nuevo Mexico.

4:47

There were people who looked like us, indigenous, brown people, Mexican, Chicano and black people.

4:55

Yet there was a lot of nativism. They were not used to seeing more recent migrants who spoke only Spanish, who worked in the fields.

5:01

And so it was a struggle. You know, we faced a lot of hostility.

5:09

A lot of hostility, a lot nativism from people who look like us.

5:14

Even before I started school, I experienced seeing my older siblings, who were like in third grade,

5:18

fifth grade, sixth grade coming home, crying, bleeding, demoralized.

5:23

When I started Kinder, it was very traumatic.

5:29

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,

5:32

an instructional aide, who would come in for an hour or two and help help her out with us.

5:40

But then she would leave. And so I didn't know the language.

5:44

It was just, like, very difficult as a little kid, who didn't speak the language and then in first grade,

5:48

I had a very smart friend, Miguelito, who would help me in understanding what was going on in the classroom.

5:53

And he would help me pronounce words in English. And one day he didn't show up.

6:00

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 in school.

6:06

And I later learned that he and his family got deported. And I was in first grade.

6:17

So the housing projects, the schooling, those early years, they were not, I didn't feel too welcomed

6:23

It was traumatic learning the language and then facing a lot of hostility.

6:33

I saw a lot of fights. By third grade I formed a little clikita, a little defensive group, to defend ourselves, to protect ourselves.

6:37

And we were just like [a few], Nene, myself, my best friend Nene and like five other kids.

6:44

And so we formed this click, to defend ourselves against the large hostile school environment.

6:49

And we got into a lot of trouble with the school. They had conferences, suspensions, but you know, we survived and then we moved.

6:56

I think my parents in the 80s, they were able to get it through Low-Income Housing to buy their own home through HUD.

7:05

So in 1980, I was 11 and we moved into where my parents live right now.

7:12

They call it Crow Valley community, and it was beautiful, I loved it.

7:16

It was a predominately Black neighborhood, maybe 20 percent Mexican, and we were bussed to school from our little community.

7:20

But people owned their homes, a lot of the neighbors, the elders.

7:28

They were from the south and we shared a lot.

7:33

They grew vegetables in their backyards, they had chickens.

7:37

And so those are those were things that I was not familiar with, but that my family and parents feel very comfortable with.

7:41

It reminded them of their pueblito, in Michoacan. And so that was a better experience.

7:48

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 graduated from high school.

7:55

And that's another defining experience working in farm labor.

8:03

Even when I went to college, I would go back home and work in the fields. And so we worked as a family.

8:08

And my mom was the first one to get up, 3:30-4:00 a.m. And the blender, making chocomil [a smoothie] at 4:30 in the morning

8:14

was the alarm for us to get up, use the restroom, drink our chocomil, get into the car and take a little nap before we got to the fields.

8:22

Pickling cherries in May, Maybe apricots in June. Cucumbers and then tomatoes throughout [the summer into] November.

8:29

And then we went back to school and we worked on the weekends. So working in the fields is something that really, really impacted me.

8:36

I got to see both bad and good.

8:44

It was nice because we worked as a family and we worked as a community.

8:48

Typically, typically, we would see people from our little pueblito in the fields work together.

8:52

People would tell stories working in the fields, and they would compete with each other to see if who was the most productive; they

8:57

would sing; and kids would try to connect with each other, teenagers in the fields.

9:05

And so that's the good thing. The bad thing was the devaluation of our humanity.

9:11

We got up early.

9:17

We worked up to three or four [in the afternoon] and sometimes working all day. Yet, we would earn half a day's minimum wage, meaning that we may have been there

9:19

at five [in the morning], it was three [in the afternoon]---back in the 80s, I don't know what the minimum wage was--- but it was not even half a day's minimum wage [what we got paid].

9:27

And I remember as a 15 year old and thinking, This is wrong!

9:35

This is inhumane, how can it be? And so yeah, I think [those were defining experiences]

9:40

growing up in a racially segregated community, working in the fields, facing nativism,

9:49

Anti-Immigrants.And it isn't like really anti-immigrant, is really anti-Indigenous, anti-brown people, nativism.

9:59

And it was directed to those of us who were more like, you know, more ethnic, more communal, more indigenous in our ways.

10:06

That's what I think, those who acculturate, you know, they were not at the bottom.

10:18

And so that's how I saw things. The fighting, the nativism within our own community, always

10:24

was something that interested me. [I wanted to understand it.]

10:35

Why is it that we always fight against each other, people from the same background with the same histories?

10:37

Why do we fight [each other]? So I think that was one of the major questions that guided me to my studies as an undergraduate later into graduate studies.

10:41

What makes us fight? And also, why is it that the people who

10:51

Work the hardest, do the most difficult and deadly jobs

10:58

in society, earn the least, and have the least secure economic, stable lives going into November when the rains came and there were

11:06

no more crops to pick, there were fewer jobs for the family.

11:16

Only a few people would go out to work. My dad would prune grape vines [in the late fall]; in the school breaks.

11:20

my myself and my siblings would help him out. But there was less money.

11:26

There was less, you know, and it was stressful. Holidays came and

11:31

I don't remember them as being like, “Oh, how exciting!” You know, it was very stressful.

11:35

A lot of my community would continue to migrate back and forth in the seventies.

11:40

It changed in the eighties, with the extension of unemployment insurance to farm workers, which had been denied to them from the 1930s.

11:44

I think it was from the unemployment insurance from 1935, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 and then fair labor standards,

11:53

of 1938, a lot of those labor rights were denied to farm workers and

12:01

domestics, people of color, indigenous in the southwest and black in the south.

12:07

And, so yes, issues ofrace, immigration, class, gender

12:13

always interested me.

12:23

You know, the hierarchies that divide up society, into the haves and have-nots, and into those who have status and power and those who don't.

12:24

Heidy: Manuel, I wanted to follow up with you on the issue of experiencing first-hand, right?

12:42

The the hard labor that goes into working in agriculture and the devaluation, right?

12:50

The fact that we don't get paid, just a living wage.

12:58

Manuel: Yeah, thank you, thank you for asking that question. I remember when I went to

13:02

You know, undergraduate classes in sociology and [reviewed] theories about, you know, about the value of labor and

13:10

then there were these notions of supply and demand, that scarcity, you know, increases the value and that oversupply decreases the value,

13:21

including labor and how specific types of jobs were more valuable because they were contributing to society more than others.

13:34

I didn't know that we were the working poor until I went to college, as an

13:44

undergraduate and I had to do a financial aid form and I realized that we were working poor.

13:54

We're like way below [the poverty line for a family of 9].

13:58

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.

14:00

We're getting up at four [in the morning], to get to the fields at five, and we come back home at four.

14:09

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,

14:14

empty your stomach because there are no toilets nearby, having your food because you know,

14:24

we get paid so little that we can't afford to be buying lunch at the [lunch] truck or every day.

14:29

And so saving, managing, almost, very scarce resources and making them like, you know, stretch to help you, you know, endure a day of labor.

14:35

And picking cherries was it was the easiest crop.

14:47

I think it's the big trees, beautiful cherries, the fruit. But the ladders were tall, 14 feet, 16 feet and made of wood,

14:52

carrying 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, [the tall ladder].

15:02

And then like, that was the easiest harvest I think to do.

15:10

Picking cucumbers, being there at 5:00 in the morning before the sun rose,

15:15

waiting for the call, Comienzen! [start!] and started picking! The cucumber leaves or plants are beautiful, but they're like sandpaper.

15:20

If you have no rubber gloves. It's like putting your hands in sandpaper, and they will be abrazed.

15:34

[Cucumber plant] will scratch your hands off, [especially your fingers. And so you've got to go well prepared.

15:45

And then like bending down, on the muddy ground as you're picking your cucumbers and the mud clings to your shoes,

15:51

, your steps are heavy and just being bent down, from waist down, because you can't kneel down [because the muddy and wet ground].

16:01

It's very difficult. And then if you have worked more than six hours doing that work, is really, really tough.

16:07

And the temperatures can reach 100 [degrees]; and if you haven't finished picking [the target field]crops;

16:15

it requires tremendous mental discipline like none that I have had to experience in graduate school or even as a professor.

16:22

HEIDY: And I can only imagine that it makes you have a different relationship to food, right,

16:34

because then when you see these products, it's not just what you are consuming.

16:40

It's the work that goes behind that cucumber.

16:47

I'm thinking of a cucumber to your table. It's a sign of respect.

16:52

The right and one that I can only imagine just gives you that kind of respect for the labor that goes into it.

16:59

MANUEL: It's complicated because when you're there, you don't want eat the food. You might if,

17:08

you're hungry and then you have to clean it up really good because sometimes the pesticide irritates your skin and irritates your eyes.

17:13

So you have to be very careful, wash it. Or like, if you're not, you, risk it.

17:20

You clean up the cucumber with your shirt, really, really good.

17:25

Bite into it. Spit it out and eat the inside. Same thing with the tomatoes, but.

17:29

I have siblings who develop like this,...what is it not phobia? but yes, phobia for the food that they would pick.

17:36

I had an older brother who, when he graduated from high school, he went straight to pick asparagus.

17:44

It was so fatiguing that even at night, he would moan and complain in his sleep about picking asparagus.

17:50

I myself it to this day I haven't picked in the fields since I was twenty-five years old.

17:58

I was in graduate school. I went back to visit [family] and I worked in the fields for a few days.

18:05

I haven't been in the fields in that capacity for over twenty five years.

18:10

And I still dream that I'm working in the fields and that I'm struggling finding the fruits to fill up my bucket.

18:15

I have dreams of frustration that the person giving you the tickets for the buckets that you picked, don't wanna

18:21

Give you the token that's pays you, you know, that pays you after work.

18:29

what you earned per piece. For whatever excuse, that maybe there's too many leaves inside [the bucket], not the right

18:34

measurement of the tomato, and things like that, and so the field [experience] is impactful.

18:44

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.

18:52

A lot of these farm workers who are picking our fruits/vegetables, they're not just farm workers,

19:01

some of them are farmers and they have grown organically and they have harvested their own produce and they've grown their maiz,

19:05

their squash, their beans, chiles. And so it isn't that they aren't skilled.

19:13

They, they have a lot of knowledge about how to... grow food from nothing.

19:19

Heidy: And yes, and again, talking about relationships, right, that the relationship that people have to the land between them.

19:29

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.

19:40

And that sometimes they are able to implement at home through growing their own food.

19:51

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

19:58

Manuel: Yes, they did this in the homeland, and they do this in Stockton, in housing projects, in the backyard.

20:05

They were always, making space to grow their chiles de arbol negro, to grow their tomatillos, their squash, their corn,

20:14

even when we moved into that house where my parents live now, they would also grow their, you know, their produce.

20:25

And to this day, I go and visit and there's a whole bunch of chiles and tomatillos, the onions, things that they grow.

20:34

And, you know, but you talk about relationships that's relating us with our food,

20:43

that we're growing and we're like communicating with those plants every day,

20:47

seeing if they're sad or not, if they need water, and then getting infested

20:51

and just knowing how to intervene in a healthy way, in the fields is different.

20:55

It's like [a different] mode of production;...it's a different type of relationship, you are relating with the environment,

20:59

not in a healthy, mutual way, that we're helping each other, we are seeing each other with care.

21:05

But you're just using exploiting it for mass production.

21:12

Which is very different.

21:17

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,

21:19

it sort of develops into these very twisted kind of ways, something that it's no so beautiful.

21:28

This relationship to the land, to the plants, to this, becomes toxic and exploitative.

21:38

And just, unfortunately, there's a lack of democracy in economic relationships, the lack of democracy, in which only one party benefits.

21:46

And the other party is not (benefitting), and the other party is very numerous in that one party is very small,

22:00

and so it would be nice if they could meet eye-to-eye and democratically set the values.

22:09

This is what my job is and my work is worth.

22:19

But the concept that we have in today's labor relationships in the field is one that is truly rooted in colonial times.

22:22

We're Native Americans. Since 1492 our humanity has been reduced to

22:30

labor; and encomiendas made us unfree labor .

22:35

Administrators form Europe were placed in charge of administering lands and labor, indigenous people, and later, brothers from Africa.

22:40

Sisters from Africa were brought, and forced to work for nothing as well.

22:51

And so in that concept, you know, people's humanity are reduced to serve and create wealth for that one party.

22:56

But that wealth is not fairly shared with the rest.

23:09

After independence movements, after struggles for liberation from slavery,

23:14

new forms [of slavery] were introduced, such as share-cropping among Native Americans throughout the Southwest

23:21

and meso-America, including Mexico, Central America, that's what was common, a feudal economy, where the workers produced the food, but always in-debt.

23:27

They have to pay for the seeds, the instruments [tools], they rent the oxes and so they are always kept in debt.

23:41

And so yes, we have

23:50

an the economic system that is very undemocratic, that requires

23:55

more healthy logics, that conceptualizes profit in a more expansive way, that considers not just material well-being for some

24:01

But well-being in a more holistic way:

24:13

Are people, healthier, mentally health-wise, materially

24:23

when engaged in these relationships at work or are not?

24:35

And so what we've seen in the past 40 years in the US and globally is that we've become more prosperous

24:40

in terms of gross domestic product, in terms of wealth measures.

24:48

[However,] most people are working more and have more debt, in that, profits have gone to a very few---

24:55

one percent; and we become more unequal as a nation.

25:02

And so this economic system greatly reflects a very unhealthy form of producing sustenance for people.

25:06

Heidy: And Manuel, this system that you mention, of the 1%, requires that the working class.

25:18

Remain, as you know, as a destitute working class, and I'm just.

25:28

And so the system is not is not meant for people like us to to move up.

25:35

People tend to remain in the class, were they they were born, if not, you know,

25:44

if some people, even when they are, they grow up in middle class, they even go down.

25:50

So I'm curious about how was that transition into college?

25:55

How did that happen in your family, that you're able to attend college and eventually graduate school and eventually become?

26:01

Professor, and sort of attain a a middle class lifestyle with such a an amazing sort of, you know, growing up story.

26:10

So can you tell us a little bit about that process? Yeah, thank you for those questions.

26:21

Manuel: First, like you said, you know, in terms of mobility, there's this American dream that people come,

26:26

work and just, value education do the right thing and they move up.

26:36

Like that, American dream has been a myth for people of color, especially those of indigenous ancestry and so-called Mexicans,

26:44

Latinx and Black people who come from some colonized regions by the US,

26:53

like the Pacific Islands. With us, brown people of indigenous ancestry,

27:00

we've been here since conquest, and we largely remain in the service-laboring occupational sectors. It has nothing to do with merit.

27:05

It has to do with structural opportunities, being denied, exclusion from jobs, being segregated, from jobs

27:15

and even when we transition into those more diversified jobs or whiten jobs, that are reserved for those who benefit from colonialism

27:21

We're devalued; we do more and get paid less. And that's empirical, especially for women of color and indigenous ancestry.

27:30

Women [earn] fifty-five cents per white-male dollar, black women like 65, and so on.

27:38

And so there, it isn't class [alone]. There's also a racial-gender systems that devalue our labor work.

27:44

So when I went to college as a first generation,

27:53

I entered a very solid middle class space where people like myself, were erased; schools were [like]

27:57

Missions, and were meant to erase indigenous history and culture.

28:03

And so universities are no different. .

28:08

When I went [to college], I thought it was beautiful, manicured lawns, big buildings and a lot of books, I love books.

28:13

But I felt very erased, very isolated, and in terms of like connecting with the content.

28:20

And I think that's maybe why …. I connected to sociology, they had a focus on inequality and social movements.

28:31

And I felt like they're talking about these theories and these apply to our own experiences.

28:38

We transition again, it was nice being in such a privileged space, but I felt very alienated when I went to

28:45

to the university at Davis. There were about twenty thousand students, and maybe like three percent were chicanx

28:55

Latinx

29:02

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.

29:04

Sometimes I was confused by Middle Easterners, who looked dark and brown and like, you know, like Indo-Americans, indigenous Americans.

29:12

And so we're very few in the classrooms and they were very competitive.

29:19

They used curves [to grade]. 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.

29:23

And to me, like working was no problem, learning was no problem. It was the hostility.

29:32

I think in the first year at Davis, I encountered many microaggressions.

29:38

I wouldn't even call them micro, just aggressions against my humanity.

29:43

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.

29:46

And, you know, it was an aggression against my humanity.

30:00

I mean, the library was a space of hostility. I remember another occasion when I entered an elevator,

30:06

and another European-American male was looking at me, an older man,

30:13

And when he exited the elevator, he asked whether I was a Latino. And I didn't know

30:18

what a Latino was, so I was like, no, I am a Mexican. He said, "all Latinos look alike." And he walked out.

30:23

And so there was also profiling by the police, being stopped for no good reason.

30:28

And driving on a car, or even in a bike at Davis. So it was interesting.

30:35

It was nice to get an education, to being in such a special space.

30:42

But it was also alienating, to be, to be in rooms with five-hundred students and seeing so few of us [of color].

30:46

Now things are different. Now, the demographics, we see more diversity, more brown.

30:55

More Asians, more African-Americans in higher education.

31:04

But we don't see ourselves in academic affairs as teachers, as mentors, as researchers.

31:09

We remain almost erased.

31:16

And that isn't just about color, but also that ideological content, those unique experiences that shape your understanding of the world,

31:18

your questions that you investigate, what you research.

31:26

Typically the university feels more comfortable with those who have been acculturated, assimilated to their norms.

31:27

And that is challenging to see that, you know, so they want to talk about "we" [a general collective].

31:36

We shouldn't,

31:42

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,

31:42

Are denied voices of equity and respect, and so that transition has always been tough, I am still in transition.

31:54

I feel that I don't really belong.

32:04

I feel that I belong to my connections with students who come from my background or first-generation working class backgrounds.

32:06

We're not mainstream, but they're also in great numbers now, facing what I faced when we were smaller in numbers.

32:14

And that is erasure, distortions of who we are. Homogenizing who Chicanx/Latinx are

32:21

It's a struggle; it's it's hurtful to see this in our times, 21 century, 2020-21.

32:30

Heidy: Well, the you know, your experiences kind of remind me that that sort of experiences among Latinx is not the same.

32:39

And I think some of us are always reminded that we don't quite belong.

32:51

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.

32:57

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.

33:12

And and so I'm wondering about these experiences that sort of

33:25

That happened in various spaces within this country.

33:34

That kind of reminds us in many ways that we don't quite belong in some spaces.

33:39

Well, what what do you make? This?

33:45

Manuel: This is what's interesting. I mean, like, I've always felt that I belong, inside.

33:48

You know, I grew up here and I'm in, I'm in America, indigenous land.

33:53

I'm in the land of the Miwok right now in Elk Grove. When I got to work in the land of Nissenan, I've always known that we've been erased.

33:58

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,

34:06

That your voice matters less, and then also to see that deployment,

34:18

the attribution of racial-gender-class stereotypes of who we are. Monolithic,

34:24

stereotypical understanding of who we are. Immigrants, backward, primitive, savage. Like things that were used to appropriate,

34:31

exploit our lands, our labor. And it continues in different spaces, so it's like back in the fields,

34:41

but now our knowledge, like your voice,

34:49

is less valid. You know, they're not universal and everything is,

34:54

Everyone is shaped by their environment, by race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality. To claim a universal voice,

35:03

when we're shaped by that; it's so dishonest, so colonial.

35:13

Heidy: So yes, the university needs to open up. Thank you, Manuel,

35:19

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.

35:24

This is the first part of a two part series where we learn about the life and work of Professor Manuel Barajas.

35:35

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,

35:41

Immigration and Justice at Sac State and on the issues confronting higher

35:49

education and their incorporation and embracement of diversity in these spaces.

35:57

Again, thank you for listening.

36:04

We hope our ongoing conversations sparked understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future.