

# Ford Foundation Support for Bilingual Education in the Civil Rights Era

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## Abstract

This report is part of a book project that examines the ways that the institutionalization of bilingual education in the post-Civil Rights era served to maintain racial hierarchies. The primary focus of the report examines the role of the Ford Foundation in funding this institutionalization of bilingual education. After providing a general overview of the foundation's support for bilingual education internationally and domestically, it examines the Ford Foundation's support for bilingual education within its broader efforts to promote the creation of and institutionalization of the Southwest Council of La Raza (SWCLR). This report illustrates the ways that the Ford Foundation was able to effectively utilize funding as leverage for pressuring the SWCLR to transition away from supporting politically contentious community organizing work toward a professional advocacy organization focused on lobbying elite political actors. This, in turn, also pressured more radical elements of the Mexican American community to moderate their stances through active participation in electoral politics. As a result, bilingual education gradually shifted from being an issue connected to grassroots political struggles toward professionalized advocacy reliant on philanthropic and federal funding. As this funding began to dry up with the ascendancy of neoliberalism, Mexican American community leaders found themselves ill-equipped to counter the dismantling of bilingual education.

## Ford Foundation Support for Bilingual Education in the Civil Rights Era

My book project, *Becoming the System: A Raciolinguistic Genealogy of Bilingual Education in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, examines the ways that institutionalizing bilingual education in the post–Civil Rights Era in the United States has served to maintain racial hierarchies. The first part of *Becoming the System* lays the theoretical and contextual groundwork for the rest of the book. The second part of *Becoming the System* makes the link between this political incorporation of the demands of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of neoliberal educational reforms. The third part of *Becoming the System* reflects on the implications of the study and calls for reclaiming a vision of bilingual education that situates struggles for bilingual education within broader efforts to dismantle racial hierarchies.

I use the Ford Foundation (FF) as a case study for examining the role of philanthropic funding in this institutionalization of bilingual education. At the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, language education was already an interest of the Ford Foundation. In particular, the foundation positioned English language development as a necessary component of the modernization of emerging postcolonial nations.<sup>1</sup> As a result, by the mid-1960s, the Ford Foundation was funding hundreds of projects seeking to improve English instruction.<sup>2</sup> Gradually, the FF began to shift its interest away from a sole focus on English language teaching, toward the promotion of local and regional languages in addition to English. This was part of its effort to support national self-determination in postcolonial contexts.<sup>3</sup> The Ford Foundation situated this support for bilingual education within broader efforts to support US interests within the international context of the Cold War. In particular, the FF connected its efforts to promote local and regional languages in postcolonial societies to a wider vision of developing a nationalist buffer against the spread of communism in favor of the promotion of liberal democracy and capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

The Ford Foundation conceptualized its support for bilingual education in the US in similar ways with bilingual education fitting into the FF's vision of improving race relations. This would be accomplished by supporting racialized communities' successful assimilation into mainstream liberal democratic and capitalist institutions.<sup>5</sup> This vision intersected with Cold War politics that elevated Spanish to a politically important role with the influx of primarily middle- and upper-class Cuban refugees into the United States. Because they were seen as reluctant visitors who were strategic political allies in the fight against communism, Cubans found themselves in more hospitable environments than other Latinxs such as Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.<sup>6</sup> For Cuban refugees, bilingual education was relatively uncontroversial with the idea that it would be important for Cuban refugee children to maintain their Spanish to prepare for their return, even as they learned English to adapt to their temporary home.<sup>7</sup> In line with this thinking, the Ford Foundation provided support to help open Coral Way Elementary School, a bilingual school targeting both Spanish-dominant Cuban refugees and English-dominant students.<sup>8</sup> These funds were primarily directed at providing ESL curricular materials for the Spanish-dominant students participating in the program and for staff training.<sup>9</sup>

More politically contentious were the Ford Foundation's efforts to support bilingual education in the context of its broader support for community control of schools within the Puerto Rican community. Sometimes, this emerged spontaneously, as was the case of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, where the local governing board approved the creation of a bilingual education program without receiving direct support from the Ford Foundation.<sup>10</sup> Other times, the foundation took a more active role in providing funding to support bilingual education. In the case of New York City, FF support for bilingual education became more explicit, based on the increasing concern among foundation staff that most of their educational priorities focused on the African American community. As a result, Mario Fantini, a Ford Foundation program officer, advocated providing funds that specifically targeted the Puerto Rican and Chinese communities to "balance its interest with minorities,"<sup>11</sup> with a sizeable portion of these funds going to support a range of bilingual education initiatives across the city. However, strong political backlash turned the Ford Foundation and other funders away from

supporting community control, making it increasingly difficult for organizations to receive funding for these types of projects. I have collected archival materials from the PA Historical Society and the El Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños that trace the journey of Aspira, a Ford Foundation-funded organization, as it transitioned from a proponent of community control toward a professional advocacy organization.

Yet, the greatest Ford Foundation support for bilingual education was in the American Southwest, with the bulk of this funding being funneled through the Southwest Council of La Raza (SWCLR).<sup>12</sup> Foundation support for the SWCLR stemmed from the culture of poverty thesis that suggested that the “major deficiencies of Mexican American communities are divisiveness and argumentiveness, low trust in their leaders, and an absence of a sense of priorities and progress.” The hope was that the SWCLR “could bring together the many disparate themes of Mexican-Americans, offer a strong voice and programs, strengthen leadership capabilities, and promote the capacity at the neighborhood and city level to conduct programs that will improve the economic position of the poorer Mexican-Americans and deepen their political participation.”<sup>13</sup> The SWCLR’s original leadership team adopted the same culture of poverty discourse in its proposal for funds that asserted that “economic deprivation and linguistic damage combined explain the low rate of college attainment of Mexican-American youth.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, the organization adopted a decentralized model that gave a great deal of autonomy to its local affiliates and prioritized funding grassroots community organizing efforts that responded to the immediate needs of the communities most impacted by existing local policies.<sup>15</sup> This decentralized organizational structure provided space for more radical activists to gain leadership roles within the organization and use the funding available to support militant political action against the white establishment.<sup>16</sup>

These political actions led the Ford Foundation to be accused of funding militant extremists and for “stirring up revolutionary activities among the ordinary peaceful and patriotic Mexican Americans in our southwestern states.”<sup>17</sup> Most contentious was the SWCLR’s decision to subcontract funds to the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). Founded by five Mexican American

college students in 1967, MAYO was an organization with a fairly eclectic ideological vision, built around the cultural nationalism of Chicanismo. It offered a critique of “gringo institutions” such as schools that were seen as key instruments in the colonization of the Mexican American community. MAYO leaders combined this relatively broad ideological framework with a strong belief in the need to organize directly within the Mexican American community around the issues that community members identified as most relevant.<sup>18</sup> A key aspect of their political strategy was to directly confront white political opponents in the hopes of challenging the stereotype of Mexican American subservience and with the goal of getting their opponents to show their racism.<sup>19</sup> These confrontational tactics served to raise MAYO’s profile within the Mexican American community, positioning it as a key leader in the Chicano movement.<sup>20</sup>

MAYO’s primary focus for community organizing work was challenging what they believed to be the educational genocide occurring within San Antonio area public schools. A primary focus of this organizing work were efforts to dismantle district policies that prohibited Spanish and to promote bilingual education as an alternative. Indeed, one of MAYO’s major accomplishments was successfully advocating for the overturn of policies that prohibited the use of Spanish in all seventeen San Antonio school districts. It also rallied for the initiation of legislation to promote bilingual education, to develop bilingual curricular materials, and to test the efficacy of these programs and materials.<sup>21</sup> These efforts to implement educational policies that built on the cultural and linguistic knowledge of Mexican American students fit into its broader vision of dismantling gringo institutions and replacing them with community-controlled institutions.<sup>22</sup>

MAYO leaders were initially able to strategically position themselves in ways that allowed them to receive indirectly both governmental and philanthropic funding for their political organizing work. In the case of the Ford Foundation, they were able to tap into funding provided to the SWCLR through the development of the Mexican American Unity Council (MAUC), a nonprofit educational development corporation started and led by MAYO leaders. MAUC received funding from the SWCLR to support its work within the San Antonio community. The SWCLR provided both full-time employment for the MAYO leadership while also directly

providing MAYO with \$10,000 that it used to hire a staff person and engage in local community organizing work.<sup>23</sup> While this funding was vital to supporting MAYO's work, it also proved to be a double-edged sword, as MAYO's increasing reliance on funding began to come into conflict with its militant approach to community organizing.

MAYO's confrontational tactics were condemned by mainstream white and Mexican American politicians, most notably Congressman Henry González, who openly condemned MAYO on the floor of the House of Representatives. He also condemned the Ford Foundation's support for MAYO, suggesting that "the best designed of grants may well be meaningless if the grantees have no judgment, dedication, skill or energy."<sup>24</sup> Yet, González was not the only person pressuring the FF to withdraw its support for MAYO. Complainants wrote letters to the foundation describing MAYO's office as "plastered with Che Guevara posters,"<sup>25</sup> as a "Castro type organization,"<sup>26</sup> and as a hate group comparable to the anti-Semitic groups that Henry Ford had been known to support in his lifetime.<sup>27</sup> Particular attention was brought to comments made by José Angel Gutiérrez, one of the founders of MAYO who argued "some Mexicanos will become psychologically castrated, others will become demagogues and gringos as well, and others will come together, resist and eliminate the gringo. We will be with the latter."<sup>28</sup> Complaints to the Ford Foundation argued that Gutiérrez wanted to kill all gringos<sup>29</sup> with Congressman González suggesting that Gutiérrez's rhetoric showed that he was no different than a white segregationist.<sup>30</sup> Because many of the complaints were actually mailed to the Ford Motor Company, as opposed to the Ford Foundation (two separate organizations with different boards), the Ford Foundation also found itself under pressure from the Ford Motor Company because of concerns that FF support for militant groups was hurting the company's bottom line.<sup>31</sup>

The Ford Foundation tried to defend MAYO by celebrating its gains related to bilingual education. The FF also insisted that Gutiérrez's comment was taken out of context, and that he was referring to "the elimination of the racist attitudes held by some white men so that the Mexican American could be free to fulfill his potential as a citizen with dignity and security."<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the Ford

Foundation found itself increasingly under pressure and, in turn, placed pressure on the SWCLR to reign in MAYO and other local community groups receiving funds. MAYO's continued involvement in controversial political activities eventually led the foundation to refuse to renew funds for the organization. Its justification was that MAYO was engaged in partisan political activities that the Ford Foundation could not fund for fear of losing its tax exempt status.<sup>33</sup> It also prompted the foundation to impose new strict rules on the SWCLR that mandated the organization to divert its efforts away from community organizing and advocacy toward the development of "hard programs" with measurable objectives that would be pre-approved by the foundation.<sup>34</sup>

As the SWCLR began to adopt this new "hard program" approach, it also sought to expand its efforts beyond the American Southwest by becoming a national organization focused on advocating for Mexican Americans across the country. This led the organization leaders to change the name to the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). It gradually shifted its focus toward serving as a professional liaison to federal government agencies and corporations, primarily through the release of public statements on pending legislation and through a focus on business projects within Latinx communities.<sup>35</sup> As it relates to bilingual education, a great deal of its efforts focused on compiling research related to best practices along with federal policy analysis intended to inform and persuade lawmakers on issues related to bilingual education.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, despite having experienced some political backlash, funding the SWCLR and its transition to the NCLR was a resounding success from the perspective of the Ford Foundation. This is best illustrated by Ford Foundation President McGeorge Bundy's comments in 1970 that the NCLR had "taken the first steps toward converting the long pent-up anger and frustration of its people, ever in danger of explosion and violence, into beneficial programming and planning," noting that the foundation was "glad to assist in their pioneering effort to provide constructive direction to the growing energy and momentum of the Mexican-American movement."<sup>37</sup>

More radical political activists condemned the increasingly top-down nature of the NCLR, with Bert Corona accusing the Council of being " beholden to the Ford



Foundation” which “limited the effectiveness and autonomy of the group and steered it toward more of an establishment perspective.”<sup>38</sup> MAYO founder José Angel Gutiérrez argued that reliance on Ford Foundation funding made the NCLR “less accountable and accessible to Chicano militants, activists, and community that they purported to represent.”<sup>39</sup> Some radical critics sought to sustain their work outside of the NCLR and other mainstream institutions.<sup>40</sup> Yet, many radical critics decided to adopt more establishment perspectives through a focus on voter registration and electoral politics, which provided them a new point of entry into mainstream institutions that wasn’t reliant on philanthropic funding.<sup>41</sup>

MAYO leaders adopted this second tactic. By the early 1970s, they had refocused attention away from grassroots community organizing to partisan politics through the development of La Raza Unida Party (RUP) that was designed to be a third party alternative to the white-dominated Republican and Democratic Parties.<sup>42</sup> One major victory of the RUP was successfully taking over the Crystal City school board where it was able to implement a range of educational reforms. The board was able to use federal funds to create a K-12 bilingual education program that was celebrated as a national model.<sup>43</sup> Yet, political controversy resulting from board actions; it purged white and conservative Mexican American teachers and administrators seen as unsupportive of RUP’s vision for the schools and mandated that all staff members become bilingual, coupled with the beginning of federal retrenchment away from supporting bilingual education. These actions led to gradual decreases in funding that made the programs difficult to sustain.<sup>44</sup> As a result, by the 1980s, the bilingual education program had shifted away from a K-12 maintenance model to a transitional model focused exclusively in early elementary school.<sup>45</sup> This demise of the bilingual education program in Crystal City paralleled the decline of the RUP. It disbanded by the early 1980s, as a result of political attacks to keep it off ballots, voter suppression tactics, government surveillance and infiltration, and campaigns to discredit key leaders. Many former RUP members becoming part of the Democratic Party.<sup>46</sup>

In short, while having experienced a few road bumps on the way, the Ford Foundation achieved its overall objective in serving as a moderating force in the American Southwest. It did this by first providing funds to Mexican American

leaders who were seen as more moderate to fund the the SWCLR. When these leaders used funds to support controversial grassroots political action, the FF used its funding as leverage to change the direction of the SWCLR and its subsidiaries away from supporting grassroots community organizing toward supporting professional advocacy work focused on technical expertise. In the case of bilingual education, this led to a movement away from local community-led work focused on dismantling the racist structures and practices of schools as part of broader efforts to dismantle the white power structure. The emphasis shifted instead to sharing professional expertise about the value of bilingual education with a particular focus on federal-level policy. More radical elements of the Mexican American movement found other avenues for entering local community work, primarily through electoral politics. Neither of these tactics was particularly successful with most of the most prominent Mexican American activists absorbed into the Democratic Party by the 1980s, just as bilingual education began to be systematically dismantled with the rise of the Ronald Reagan presidency. The rest of the book will examine the shift in bilingual education advocacy within the context of the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Phillipson, ‘English Language Spread,’ *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 107 (1994), 7-24.

<sup>3</sup> Melvin Fox, *Language and Development: A Retrospective Survey of Ford Foundation Language Projects, 1952-1974, Volume 1*. (New York: Ford Foundation, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Peter D. Bell, “The Ford Foundation as a Transnational Actor,” *International Organization*, 25, no. 3 (1971), 465-478; Kathleen D. McCarthy, “From Cold War to Cultural Development: The International Cultural Activities of the Ford Foundation, 1950-1980,” *Daedalus*, 116, no. 1 (1987), 93-117.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Ferguson, *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Dennis Lopez, “Cultivating Aztlán: Chicano (Counter)Cultural Politics and the Postwar American University,” *American Studies*, 58, 73-111.

<sup>6</sup> Alejandro Portes & Cynthia Truelove, “Making Sense of Diversity: Recent Research on Hispanic Minorities in the United States,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 13 (1987), 359-385; Sylvia Pedraza-Bailey, *Political and Economic Migrants in America: Cubans and Mexicans*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> James Crawford. *Hold Your Tongue: Bilingualism and the Politics of English Only*. (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1992); Josué M. González, “Coming of age in

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<sup>8</sup> J.L. Logan, “Coral Way: A Bilingual School,” *TESOL Quarterly*, 1, no. 2 (1967), 50-54.

<sup>9</sup> Rosa G. Inclan, “The Uses of Adversity are Sweet: The Cubans and the Rebirth of Bilingual Education in the United States,” *Scientific and Humanistic Dimensions of Language* edited by Kurt R. Jankowsky, (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985): 123-134.

<sup>10</sup> Annette Rubinstein, “Visiting Ocean Hill-Brownsville in November 1968 and May 1969,” *Schools against Children: The Case for Community Control* edited by Annette Rubinstein, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970): 228-247.

<sup>11</sup> Mario Fantini to Mitchell Sviridoff, 1 February 1968, Ford Foundation Records, Grants Them-Tw, Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, Inc. Grant 06700427, Reel 2368, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell Sviridoff to McGeorge Bundy, 28 May 1968, Ford Foundation Records, Grants L-N, National Council of La Raza, Grant 06900526, Reel 2002

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell Sviridoff to McGeorge Bundy, 14 May 1968, Ford Foundation Records, Grants L-N, National Council of La Raza, Grant 06800564, Reel 2238-2239, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>14</sup> Miguel F. Barragan, Henry Santiestevan, Bernardo Valdes & Alex Mercure, *Proposal for the Southwest Council of La Raza*, Ford Foundation Records, Grants L-N, National Council of la Raza, Grant 06800564, Reel-2238-2239, Rockefeller Archive Center., p. 6-7.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Marie Sierra, *The Political Transformation of a Minority Organization: The Council of La Raza, 1965-1980*, (Stanford University, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 1983); Emily Gantz McKay, *The National Council of La Raza: The First 25 Years* (Washington DC: National Council of La Raza, 1993)

<sup>16</sup> José Angel Gutiérrez, *The Making of a Chicano Militant*, (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Joseph P. Kesler to the Ford Foundation, 9 January 1970, Ford Foundation Records, Grants L-N, National Council of La Raza, Grant 06800564, Reel 2238-2239, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>18</sup> Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Ignacio M. García, “Mexican American Youth Organization: Precursors of Change in Texas,” *Mexican American Studies & Research Center’s Working Paper Series*, no. 8, (1987).

<sup>20</sup> Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Siobhan Oppenheimer to Samuel F. Tower, 23 May 1969, Ford Foundation Records, Grants L-N, National Council of La Raza, Grant 06800564, Reel 2238-2239, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>22</sup> Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

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- <sup>25</sup> John L. Seiler to Ford Motor Company, 19 May 1969, Ford Foundation Records, Grants L-N, National Council of La Raza, Grant 06800564, Reel 2238-2239, Rockefeller Archive Center.
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- <sup>27</sup> Robert Gleichenhaus to Henry Ford II, 12 April 1969, Ford Foundation Records, Grants L-N, National Council of La Raza, Grant 06800564, Reel 2238-2239, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>28</sup> Ignacio M. García, "Mexican American Youth Organization: Precursors of Change in Texas," *Mexican American Studies & Research Center's Working Paper Series*, no. 8, (1987).
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- <sup>30</sup> Ignacio M. García, "Mexican American Youth Organization: Precursors of Change in Texas," *Mexican American Studies & Research Center's Working Paper Series*, no. 8, (1987).
- <sup>31</sup> The Ford Community Affairs Committee to McGeorge Bundy, 6 May 1969, Ford Foundation Records, Grants L-N, National Council of La Raza, Grant 06800564, Reel 2238-2239, Rockefeller Archive Center.
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<sup>39</sup> José Angel Gutiérrez, *The Making of a Chicano Militant* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 118.

<sup>40</sup> Arnoldo García, "Toward a Left without Borders: The Story of the Center for Autonomous Social Action-General Brotherhood of Workers," *Monthly Review*, 54, no. 3 (2002), 69-78; Mario T. García, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Jorge Mariscal, 'Left turns in the Chicano movement, 1965-1975,' *Monthly Review*, 54, no. 3 (2002), 59-68; Carlos Muñoz, Jr., *The Chicano Movement: Mexican American History and the Struggle for Equality* (New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2013).

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<sup>42</sup> Ignacio M. García, *United We Win: The Rise and Fall of La Raza Unida Party* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989).

<sup>43</sup> Armando Trujillo, *Chicano Empowerment and Bilingual Education: Movimiento Politics in Crystal City, Texas*, (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Armando Navarro, *The Cristal Experiment: A Chicano Struggle for Community Control* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

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