

Lost Leader in History: The Transforming and Empowering Partnership of Dolores Huerta & César Chávez

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Abstract

By using Agenda Setting Theory and investigating documented history of the Grape Strike Movement (1960-1970), rhetorical strategies of Dolores Huerta and César Chávez are revealed. By comparing the rhetorical strategies of Huerta and Chávez, it is clear that both leaders contributed differently and equally to the Grape Movement. The focus of this study is to research what significant rhetorical role Huerta played during the most successful boycott in the history of the United States. Despite her key role, Huerta as organizer, negotiator, and political activist, has not been recognized by the print media and mass media. Through a rhetorical criticism and textual analysis of documented historical events, interviews, and speeches, we discover the synergy and complimentary contributions Huerta made to the Great Social Movement of the United Farm Workers. In addition, we discover a new rhetorician and a significant historical figure.

Introduction

From 1965-1970 many Americans forgot the taste of the grape. In the span of those five years, the grape symbolized injustice, inhumane labor exploitation, and most importantly an insult to humanity. It was during these five years that the United Farm Workers Association (UFWA) successfully boycotted the politically powerful grape owners in Delano, CA. For generations the agriculture business in the United States had exploited, manipulated and denied human rights to Mexican American citizens, Mexican immigrants, and many others who were willing to work in the fields. After a challenging five years, the UFWA was able to form a recognized and accredited union. However, justice was not given overnight, justice came slowly.

The Grape Movement was indeed historic and an enormously influential movement for both the United States and the Chicana/o. To this day, the Grape Movement that originated in Delano continues to be an integral part of Chicana/o history. Within this vast and valuable history one man is almost synonymous with the UFW movement—that man is César Chávez. Chávez has been a vital asset for the Grape Movement and there is no denial or any downplaying of his courage, wisdom, and leadership.

However, one very important figure sadly has been forgotten, a figure whose effective leadership, unconventional methods, nontraditional lifestyle, organizational skills, negotiation expertise, and (most importantly) oratory skills, led to the advancement of the grape boycott during the 1960s. A figure that till this day has received limited recognition. The Grape Movement would not have been as successful as it was were it not for the partnership of César Chávez and of this other leader. Together they transformed, and empowered poor farm workers—a population many labeled as uneducated and non-political—to protest for basic labor rights. The lost leader in history I have been alluding to is Dolores Huerta. This essay will establish Dolores Huerta's leadership using Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw's Agenda Setting Theory. Furthermore, to investigate what role the mass media played in developing public consciousness and leadership representation of the UFW while ignoring Dolores Huerta. Finally, I will apply Aristotle's persuasive appeals to validate Dolores Huerta's remarkable speaking abilities.

History Background UFW

It has been recognized that the “United Farm Workers of America is the most influential farm-labor union in America” (Walter P. Reuther Library Collections). The United Farm Workers Union, founded in 1962 in Central California in the San Joaquin Valley town of Delano, “battled some of the most powerful forces in the agribusiness industry in an attempt to organize farm laborers, raise wages and improve working conditions” (Walter P. Reuther Library Collections). As best described by Aurturo Rosales in *Chicano!: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, the Grape Strike became the turning pointing in history. The Grape Strike is what transformed the growing field into the

battlefield. Ultimately, this struggle evolved into the National Farm Workers Association: “The NFWA was born as a massive social movement which had won the hearts and souls of the public” (Rosales 144). It was this method of peaceful protest that galvanized the nation. The national boycott of all table grapes ushered “a four-year era during which many Americans forgot what a grape tasted like” (145). It was with this tactic of peaceful protest that led to a nationwide spread of attention and support. According to Rosales, “On March 12, 1968, Chávez decided to use a hunger strike”; that is a hunger strike to replicate the spirituality and connectedness of a people, heavily influenced by Gandhi’s virtuous philosophy of non-violence protest (145). As the protest and public support for the UFW boycott continued, “cancellation orders for grapes poured into California from throughout the country” (Rosales 147). Not much later, Lionel Steinberg, the owner of Freedman Farms, was forced to sign contracts and give in to the boycott, due to the disastrous economic hits. Lionel Steinberg states in Rosales: “They had hundreds and hundreds of people scattered in at least fifty cities. ... So they gradually closed down our outlet for fruit [and] ... it was the most successful boycott in American history” (147).

Upstage Leadership

The transformation and empowerment of a national movement was rooted in the synergy between Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chávez. To unlock the complimentary contributions of Dolores Huerta we must first understand César Chávez. To the public César Chávez was a man synonymous with the UFW movement in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Hammerback and Jensen in the *The Rhetorical Career of César Chávez*, Chávez was a phenomenal speaker—an “authentic hero” (5). He had been raised in the farm workers’ culture; it was this key identification with the common farm workers that intensified his rhetorical message. Chávez was inspirational and genuine in his speeches and personality. Moreover, it was Chávez that advocated nonviolent protest and the integration of religious artifacts in the movement.

Great speakers have the ability to amaze, astound, and invoke actions; Chávez was able to accomplish this in an unconventional way. He was a poor man in a farming culture, inheriting all the pains, suffering, and starvation that came with it. Rosales describes Chávez as

someone a farm worker could identify with:

[F]ormer farm worker, who had worked in California agriculture since his birth into an Arizona migrant-worker family, [he] did not possess an imposing figure; he did not swagger or project a tough persona as did many militant activists of the era. (130)

It was this indestructible bond with the farm workers that overpowered the stereotype and expectation of a militant-like Chicano leader. Hammerback and Jensen state:

César Chávez rose from the ranks of the poorest and least powerful segment of American society to achieve a status rate in contemporary times: he was a genuine hero. . . . Chávez's discourse did make a difference. Initially lacking financial wealth, political power, family influence, or even an education past the eighth grade, he had little else but his discourse to convince farm workers to join his organizing movement and then to generate public support for it. . . . The unpretentious, soft-spoken and modest Chávez, a child of migrant workers and himself a former crop-picker who had little formal education, seemed an unlikely candidate for such a rhetoric and leader . . . (4-5)

Chávez's leadership was uncommon, yet original. Chávez had only gotten to the eighth grade, and he attended a staggering total of 37 different schools (Chávez, Jensen, and Hammerback xviii). Chávez did not physically look like a leader, Rosales describes him as "short stature and soft-spoken, [whose] quiet demeanor was often mistaken for the stereotypical look of passivity rather than forceful leadership" (130-131).

Another factor of his originality and rhetoric was his use of the symbol of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to "obtain support from a dazzling interdenominational array of religious groups" (Rosales 139). It was when Chávez had a "250-mile march to Sacramento that emphasized religiosity with Chávez's emulation of Ghandi and Dr. King [that] proved to be highly successful in getting national attention" (140). Chávez's genius reasoning for the Sacramento 250-mile march was to "inspire farm workers to join the union" (141). By being an uncommon and original leader, Chávez had a method of winning over the public. He was able to gain attention on a national scale and reveal the brutal labor

treatment the employers had set up in the agricultural business (143). César Chávez as a reserved public speaker did not have the qualities eloquent speakers have; however, his ability to identify with the ordinary farm worker was the most powerful quality a skilled rhetorician could have.

Although Chávez might have had the best intentions in mind for his use of excessive media coverage, “even Chávez’s supporters criticized him for spending too much time appealing to public support rather than sticking to the gritty, day-to-day efforts necessary to build a union that could intimidate growers with the old-fashion strike” (Rosales 143). The man synonymous for an entire movement was only on the front of it. In a letter that Chávez sent to Fred Ross (Community Service Organization director that recruited Chávez), he wrote that both Dolores Huerta and himself had decided on the name of United Farm Workers (Rosales 177). From the very beginning there was cooperation between these two figures. Now that we have discussed Chávez’s qualities, we can better understand Dolores Huerta’s rhetorical contributions.

Backstage Leadership

I went to speak to some of the Latino professionals and they said, “No se puede [you can’t organize] in Arizona you can’t do any of that, only in California.” And a very spontaneous response was, “Si Se Puede in Arizona!” That was the beginning. Then, that night [I] went back and reported it to our meeting. Everyone got up and started clapping, saying “Si Se Puede [yes we can]” and that was it.

—Dolores Huerta¹

It was during our interview that Dolores Huerta told me the origins of “Si Se Puede.” The legendary slogan of “Yes We Can” originated out from her courage and passion. Although Cesar Chávez is synonymous with “Si Se Puede,” in reality it was Dolores Huerta that created the memorable proclamation. Author Julie Felner describes Huerta as having “a gift for crafting sound bites of substance” (46). In my personal interview with Dolores Huerta, when questioned about her very own

¹ The excerpt was taken from a personal interview with Ms. Huerta on January 18, 2011.

persuasive abilities she said, “When you’re trying to get people to join the union or to not buy grapes or whatever, you have to convince them, so you look for those words [persuasive sound bites]” (Huerta, 2011). Later, when asked about her contributions and whether she believed her contributions were behind the scenes and significant she said: “I was the political director of the union, so I was behind all of the legislation that we passed to get drivers licenses in people’s ethnic language, [a] disability insurance bill, [and] the right to register voters door to door [and we had to] get the legalization bill in IRCA. That was a Washington performance. We were working to get that bill passed, [and in doing so] we legalized one million farm workers behind that law (Huerta, 2011).



Marching for Strawberries, Aug 1998
Used with permission from Aurora Solis

Felner notes that during the movement Huerta was able to organize, and persuade. She was a memorable and fiercely effective negotiator and the author of the UFW’s first significant contract. Furthermore, she managed to serve as the director behind the grape boycott of 1965-70, and the Delano Strike—the largest and most successful strike within the most successful boycotts in U.S. history (Felner 46). From 1960 to 1962 Huerta was busy

organizing behind the scenes with the UFW, while successfully lobbying for fifteen bills. According to Margaret Rose in “Traditional and Nontraditional Patterns of Female Activism in the United Farm Workers of America 1962 to 1980,” one bill that stands out “led to the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, the first law to recognize the collective bargaining rights of farm workers in California” (28). This

became a remarkable political success that all farm workers in California would benefit from.

Later, in 1962, Chávez and Huerta formed the National Farm Workers Association, with Chávez as President and Huerta as second in command (Felner 49). However, by 1965 the association was breaking down; Huerta felt frustrated by the slow pace of success. Additionally, the UFW during the early 1960s had a small amount of supporters. It was this misfortune that led to opportunity. With Dolores Huerta as the keystone, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) “joined up with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), a small group of striking Filipino grape workers. Years before, Huerta had also helped start the AWOC; now the two groups merged together to organize the Delano Grape Strike” (Felner 49).

Huerta became UFW chief mediator; “she went up against growers who had never before dealt directly with a Chicano, much less a Chicana” (Felner 49). Initially when Huerta began to negotiate with the Anglo growers they ignored her remarks. Later, “they began to listen to her demands [and] the growers described her as a woman who had balls” (Felner 49). Huerta was not afraid of the land owners, other men within the UFW, or of police officers. Her strength and courage have been recorded by the FBI. She has been arrested more than 20 times during rallies and pickets (Felner 49).

According to Rose, the underlying problem with mass movements and organizations is the male-centered interpretations within history and its texts that have erased many women (26). She argues that “male-centered interpretations have distorted the history of the UFW and the role of women in its development” (26). Coupled with what Rose describes as a “leadership style fit for a male,” the character and discipline of Dolores Huerta is rare, as is the recognition she has been given in the UFW’s history (26). Rose continues that there were in fact many women that had “invisible participation” within the Grape Strike Movement. It is this “invisible participation” that underscores the role of Dolores Huerta. It is astonishing as well as saddening to know that the cofounder and co-leader of the United Farm Workers Movement continues to be unrecognized in the United States basic understanding of both Chicano and UFW history. This serves to only illustrate Dolores Huerta’s invisible participation. Hearing “Dolores Huerta” is not as common as hearing “César Chávez” spoken in the classroom.

It is a shame that many women have been erased or forgotten about completely, and especially shameful when it comes to the history of Dolores Huerta. In Stacy Soward's 2010 article, "Rhetorical Agency as Haciendo Caras and Differential Consciousness through Lens of Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class: An Examination of Dolores Huerta's Rhetoric," she explains that although many scholars have examined the Chicano/a and Farm Workers Movements of the 1960s-1970s, these examinations only explore and analyze men's roles. Although women did in fact play a key role in the Chicana/o Movement, their leadership has not been validated. For instance, communication studies and Chicano/Latino studies scholars Richard Jensen and John Hammerback have written various books about the Chicano Movement and its male leaders, yet Dolores Huerta was only referenced for her comments about César Chávez (Sowards 224-225).

The history of the Farm Workers Movement has a lost leader, who contributed and was vital for the tremendous success. Dolores Huerta was essential for the movement. "Huerta was well known for her stamina, often working 18-hour days, earning between \$5 and \$35 a week, and living on donated food, clothing, and shelter" (Felner 53). The woman who has raised eleven children, who has had two divorces, who has rebelled against even those she rebels with, has been honored by the National Woman's Organization (Gilchrist).

In Richard A. Garcia's "Dolores Huerta: Woman, Organizer, and Symbol," she is described as a woman who not only has great rhetorical skill, but also is a powerful symbol. "She was the woman and organizer who had led the Chávez negotiating team against the powerful growers" and she is a "woman of great complexity: a woman leader, an organizer, a powerful personality with rhetorical skill" (R. Garcia 58). Mario Garcia describes Huerta as "one of the great women of the twentieth century" (15). Huerta has had the courage to devote and sacrifice her own life for a social movement. She is described as a fighter, as a woman of service, as a woman who sacrifices, and as a woman who has so much strength in herself that she is able to help the "powerless so passionately" (M. Garcia 15). Huerta has contributed her life to serving others, yet "Dolores has not received the same type of coverage from historians and journalists as has César Chávez" (M. Garcia 15). It is true that César Chávez has had much written about him, and much credit given.

Although he has been recognized nationally for his life of service, the same cannot be said about Huerta.

Aristotle's Pathos Logos Ethos

Much is gained by looking at speakers through Aristotle's classic three persuasive appeals. According to the article "Aristotle on Persuasion through Character," Aristotle establishes three skillful modes of a successful persuader; these are "through the character of the orator, through emotions of the hearers and arguments of the speech" (Fortenbaugh 207). The first appeal is ethos; does the speaker have ethos? Is she or he creditable and believable? For Richard A. Garcia, an Ethnic Studies professor at California State University Hayward, Huerta was seen as "a symbol of justice and fairness" (57). Aristotle's second appeal is pathos; the emotions that are invoked in the audience. When Professor Garcia heard Dolores Huerta speak in 1990 at Santa Clara University, he noted "we not only remembered it, but we *felt* it" (58). The third classic appeal is logos; is the argument logical? Huerta's underlying logic was to protest the injustice in the fields. A good speaker, a genuine speaker, has the ability to astound, to amaze, to invoke actions, and most importantly to persuade. It is evident that Dolores Huerta possesses ethos, pathos, and logos. Dolores Huerta was an outstanding organizer, negotiator, and fierce speaker for *La Causa*, the farm workers movement. Dolores Huerta is the woman who fought beside César Chávez. She succeeded in behind the scenes activities, not getting enough attention as César Chávez.

Power of Print & Mass Media

What is still necessary for us to answer is the question—why has Dolores Huerta been unrecognized for decades? I argue that this is a result of limited media coverage, which allows the public to make opinions on only limited or "front stage" information.

In the article by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," their empirical research proves that there is a correlation with media representations and the way that reality gets understood from the audiences' perspective (176). There are two main premises to be taken away from the Agenda Setting

Theory. The first is: “the press and the media do not reflect reality; they *filter* and *shape* it; [and] media concentration on a few issues and subjects lead the public to perceive those issues or subjects as more important than other issues” (McCombs and Shaw 187).

I argue that there are two different roles leaders can take. Leaders can decide to work front stage or backstage; neither one is more important than the other. In fact, the reality is that all tasks and responsibilities are dependent on each other to maximize success. Chávez had the front stage responsibilities. Since he was part of the farm workers’ culture, he could identify with the common farmer, and he was viewed by many as genuine and inspirational. While incorporating nonviolence protests and religious artifacts, he was the face that was shown to the audience. The media could only reproduce what was front stage, and according to Agenda Setting Theory, this *limited* information shaped the perception of the audience. It directed them to “perceive those issues or subjects as more important than other issues” (McCombs and Shaw 187). In the case of Chávez, it was his upstage leadership that was represented as the most important.

The media representation of the NFWA was limited since it did not reflect the broad scope of those who participated in backstage positions. Certain positions within the movement were designated to be fit for men and others for women; a sexual division of labor (Rose 26). As a result, it was this media coverage of only reproducing front stage images that left many women invisible. This media representation was made national; there was little to no presentation of behind the scenes organizing, negotiations and many other day-to-day tasks. Dolores Huerta was responsible for much of the NFWA’s success. She was the AWOC contact to merge the AWOC and NFWOC. In addition, she was essential for organizing the Delano Strike, crucial for the East Coast protests, chief mediator for the UFW, the negotiator for the Delano Plan, and political lobbyist. Moreover, she had qualities that most eloquent speakers have—Aristotle’s *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*.

The leadership synergy of Dolores Huerta and César Chaves was needed to maximize success. What one leader lacked, the other possessed. Dolores Huerta was the behind the scenes strike organizer, and an extremely powerful lobbyist (R. Garcia 57). Dolores Huerta was the woman “who had almost lost her life as a result of a police beating.” Yet, this almost invincible woman had managed to transform the UFW

organization to an almost corporate run structure (R. Garcia 57). Chávez always disliked public speaking. He had a fear for it and it was noticed in his mannerisms, and some of his nonverbal communication. However, Huerta “seemed a relax[ed] conversationalist, a self-confident” person (R. Garcia 57).

Leadership Synergy

The significance of this project is to recognize Dolores Huerta for her backstage leadership in the UFW movement. She has not been widely recognized. Her contributions and Chávez’s were different to the movement; however, the synergy of both leaders was vital to maximize the potential for success. Chávez had the upstage leadership responsibilities, which were reproduced by the media. According to the Agenda Setting Theory, the media can “perceive those issues or subjects as more important than other issues” (McCombs and Shaw 187). However, in reality, much more was going on than what the media reproduced. Dolores Huerta was lobbying, organizing, negotiating, and speaking with the astounding abilities that she possessed.

The era of the Grape Strike Movement is without a doubt very important to the Chicana/o and Latina/o community in the United States. Rose describes that time as “one of the most aspiring social movements of the post World War II Era” (26). Dolores Huerta is the lost leader, the rhetorician, the behind the scenes organizer of the United Farm Workers Movement.

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