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César Chávez and Egalitarian Ethics: Lessons from a Contradictory Legacy

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Introduction

This article analyzes the context and content of the egalitarian moral vision of César Chávez, co-founder of the United Farm Workers of America (UFW), whose labor organizing activities and speeches are, I argue, a vital and underappreciated part of the U.S. Catholic moral tradition in the 20th century. Further, this analysis recognizes the UFW—and its associated embryonic organizations—as “sacraments” or mediations of Chávez’s moral vision because, through the UFW, Chávez and other social agents transformed U.S. social life. By situating Chávez within Christian ethics generally and Catholic social ethics in particular, I also seek to identify descriptive and moral claims concerning U.S. political-economic inequalities.¹

While several Christian ethicists have considered Chávez’s importance for Christian virtue ethics and social ethics, I believe that this is worthwhile time for ethicists to revive analysis and

¹ Keeping in mind that the UFW was co-founded by Dolores Huerta, it would be prudent to ask, “Why attend to César Chávez but not Dolores Huerta?” Certainly, Huerta’s UFW leadership has not received the scholarly and popular attention that Chávez’s has garnered. However, Dolores Huerta’s distance from Christian thought and practice during her time in union leadership makes her praxis a less pertinent object of study in an article about the Catholic social tradition in the U.S. Moreover, according to sociologist and former UFW board member Marshall Ganz, the union’s decision-making structures and ethos (a focal point in this paper) were established by Chávez much more than by Huerta, whose impact within the union was more closely tied to her role as a labor contract negotiator. Marshall Ganz, interview by Jeremy Cruz and Sheila McMahon, via Skype, February 4, 2011. Ganz’s brief narrative concerning the establishment of the Farm Workers Association (FWA) and National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) also centers on Chávez: Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 89.

assessment of Chávez's legacy, in dialogue with other scholarly disciplines.² First, the human horrors that Chávez dedicated his life to resisting within the sector of U.S. agriculture remain with us and, in much of the country, have worsened. Second, recent histories of the UFW have been less favorable in their depictions and assessments of Chávez's leadership, compared to earlier works on Chávez's life; this warrants careful attention and consideration from anyone who draws upon Chávez's life for inspiration or for normative purposes.³ Third, racist and anti-immigrant groups have seized upon recent scholarly critiques of Chávez and upon instances where Chávez himself deployed anti-immigrant rhetoric, in order to justify political-economic

² In texts surveying the history of U.S. Christian ethics, Chávez has mostly been ignored or, on rare occasion, regarded as a "doer" (but not an innovative thinker) of Christian praxis. This article seeks to situate Chávez more firmly within Catholic social ethics specifically. An analysis of works by Christian ethicists who have studied or made use of Chávez's thought is not the aim of this article. Nevertheless, several works are worthy of note: Donovan Orman Roberts, "Theory and Practice in the Life and Thought of César E. Chávez: Implications for a Social Ethic," (Ph.D. Diss., Boston University, 1978); Carlos R. Piar, "César Chávez and La Causa: Toward a Hispanic Christian Social Ethic," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 16 (1996): 103-120; Frederick John Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003); Kevin O'Brien, "La Causa and Environmental Justice: César Chávez as a Resource for Christian Ecological Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32, no. 1 (2012). Additionally, several theologians and religious studies scholars, some cited in this text, have recognized Chávez's importance for contemporary Christian praxis.

³ This article will rely most heavily upon Marshall Ganz's *Why David Sometimes Wins*, an insider account of UFW leadership that shows little interest in critiquing Chávez's personal character and that provides a theory of effective social organizing, drawing upon both Chávez's successes and his failures. Additionally, journalist Miriam Pawel published two books assessing Chávez's leadership, expanding upon shorter critiques that she began publishing in the 1980s: Miriam Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in César Chávez's Farm Worker Movement* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009) and Miriam Pawel, *The Crusades of César Chávez: A Biography* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014). Similar critiques are detailed in Frank Bardacke's *Trampling Out the Vintage: César Chávez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (London: Verso, 2011) and in Matthew Garcia's *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of César Chávez and the Farm Worker Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

agendas that Chávez himself opposed during his lifetime.⁴ Fourth, the field of theological ethics has not given enough sustained attention to Chávez’s intellectual and practical contributions, significantly overshadowed by scholars engaging Chávez’s life from other disciplinary perspectives.⁵ Thus, I aim to situate Chávez firmly among those concerned with Christian social ethics, which enables an adequate appreciation of the structural/institutional aspects of his ethical thought (in contrast to a personal virtue-centered approach) and in hopes that we will assess and learn from both his achievements and his failings with mindfulness of the web of communal and societal relationships that shaped his thought and actions.

I argue that Chávez understood *equality* as an indispensable element of *social justice* yet

⁴ In one highly symbolic instance, Texas Congressman Louie Gohmert introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives in 2018 seeking to declare César Chávez’s birthday “National Border Control Day.” Rafael Bernal, “Hispanic Caucus Lashes out at Gohmert over César Chávez Comments,” *The Hill*, March 21, 2018, <https://thehill.com/latino/379533-hispanic-caucus-lashes-out-at-gohmert-over-César-Chávez-comments>.

⁵ For example, Chávez is not referenced at all in Charles E. Curran’s *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008). Decades earlier, Curran named Chávez among exemplars of Christian nonviolent resistance, but provided no discussion of noteworthy ethical contributions, in *American Catholic Social Ethics: Twentieth-Century Approaches* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982). In Gary Dorrien’s *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), Chávez is referenced once in 691 pages, but not to discuss any contributions to Christian praxis. By comparison, Chávez’s contributions receive greater consideration from historians documenting Latinx Catholicism. Two noteworthy examples are Moises Sandoval, *On The Move: A History of the Hispanic Church in the United States* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990) and Timothy Matovina and Gerald E. Poyo, eds., *¡Presente! U.S. Latino Catholics from Colonial Origins to the Present* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000). However, Chávez’s contributions to religious morality and his influence upon academic thought are much more apparent in introductions to Chicana studies generally, and to Chicana religious studies in particular. See Rodolfo F. Acuña, *The Making of Chicana/o Studies: In the Trenches of Academe* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011) and Mario T. García, *Católicos: Resistance and Affirmation in Chicano Catholic History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008). Additionally, an entire chapter is dedicated to Chávez’s religious praxis in Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García, eds., *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). In this book, Espinosa credits Chávez’s 1968 speech “The Mexican American and the Church” with being “the spark that helped ignite the field” of Mexican American religious studies. Espinosa and García, *Mexican American Religions*, 23.

interpreted “equality” in a variety of overlapping and sometimes conflicting ways. In other words, César Chávez understood *equality* as a multi-dimensional social goal and considered it a core element of social justice. Chávez regularly objected to vast disparities in the possession of or access to basic goods necessary for sustaining the human body. At other times, his objections to inequality pointed to disparities in human freedoms between racial or economic groups, such as disparities of control over one’s labor or over determining its market value. Identifying causes of these disparities, Chávez and the UFW also objected to unequal civil rights, such as rights concerning worker association and union representation, rights that most U.S. workers enjoyed but that were denied to farm workers. Still further, Chávez resisted attempts to denigrate and erase the cultural and religious language and symbolism of marginalized workers. These varying forms of egalitarian concern—material, freedom-centered, rights-focused, cultural-symbolic—were generally understood by Chávez as complex and related social realities and were linked to his broader understanding of injustice, which was commonly expressed through themes like bodily deprivation, racist ideology and culture, and the instrumentalization of human labor through institutionally-structured power. Additionally, for a time, Chávez viewed equality between persons, at the hyper-local level, as an instrumental means to the achievement of equalities in the wider society. This practical insight and lessons learned from his advocacy in this regard contribute to an emphasis on the importance of political-economic equality not only as a proper moral end to pursue through social action, but also as a proper and effective means to this goal.

Furthermore, I argue that César Chávez embodied a race-conscious and trans-state (transnational) approach to class conflict and social transformation, contributing to “popular” Catholic social ethics by enacting and articulating an egalitarian vision of social life that

responds to both the racial and the political status (citizenship) dimensions of capitalism (i.e., the structure of economic production), which enabled the UFW to achieve successes in undermining poverty and related socio-political inequalities. I arrive at these conclusions by considering Chávez's implicit and explicit responses to the following methodological questions:⁶ 1) *Why* is social inequality⁷ harmful and morally objectionable? (Why is equality a social obligation?) 2) *What particular types and levels* of inequality are harmful and morally objectionable? (Specifically, what equalities are morally desirable?) 3) *Who* ought to be included in or excluded from prescriptive efforts to ensure equality? Put differently, *toward whom* should wealth and power redistribution be directed and from whose resources should they be taken? (Equality between whom?) 4) *How* ought equalization to be achieved?⁸

This article begins with a summary of the socio-historical context of California farm worker organizing, out of which Chávez and other UFW leaders comprehended and responded to U.S. social inequalities. The second section summarizes César Chávez's familial context, indicating recognition that social context largely conditions and limits the content of one's social and moral vision. The third section of the article analyzes the contours of Chávez's social vision, which was foundational to the UFW's institutional structure and to Chávez's own actions. The fourth section of the article provides an analysis of the UFW's successes in transforming U.S.

⁶ A full analysis of the egalitarian and pragmatic social morality of César Chávez lies beyond the scope of this paper. The aim here is to sketch the basic contours of his egalitarian social vision.

⁷ Throughout this article I use *social equality* as an umbrella term for various forms of equality: political, economic, racial, gendered, etc. Here, "social," is not used in distinction to these various categories. Alternatively, I will often use *political-economic equality* to signify the centrality and mutually interwoven character of politics and economics.

⁸ The source of the trivalent distinction between *descriptive*, *normative*, and *prescriptive* egalitarian analyses, which frames this article's approach, is Anna Kasafi Perkins, *Justice as Equality: Michael Manley's Caribbean Vision of Justice* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010).

social systems in a more egalitarian direction. Consideration is given to the ways in which the UFW's institutional structure enabled these successes, followed by discussion of the ways in which changes to that institutional structure led to the UFW's eventual decline as an agent of egalitarian social change. The article concludes by proposing a shift in how Chávez's life is drawn upon as a source for Christian ethics, urging greater attention to lessons embedded in Chávez's personal failings as a leader and, more importantly, to morally instructive communal failure.

California Agriculture: A Brief Pre-History of the UFW (1850-1962)

In contrast to the smaller "family farms" commonly imagined by U.S. Americans, from its very beginnings, the California agricultural industry was characterized by "factories in the field," large-scale enterprises that were dependent upon large numbers of seasonal workers; California's agricultural enterprises often hired thousands of workers to labor on tens of thousands of acres.⁹ This "agribusiness" system functioned within the larger social order produced by U.S. settler colonization and violent incorporation of Alta California, which included increasingly capitalist forms of agricultural production.¹⁰ Sociologist and former UFW organizer Marshall Ganz recounts how these large-scale enterprises developed following the forced cession of this Mexican territory in 1848, a primary goal of U.S. military intervention:

Large-scale farming was a legacy of the way public lands were privatized after

California became a state in 1850. Because they were exempted from the

⁹ The term "factories in the field" was popularized by lawyer and journalist Carey McWilliams, whose 1939 book *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939) detailed California agribusiness and was published within months of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

¹⁰ For a historical account of U.S. colonization and annexation of Alta California, see Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 7th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2010).

Homestead Act, which would have broken the land into family farms of no more than 160 acres, some 35 million acres—one-third of the state's total area—had been sold off in large units by 1880.¹¹

Wealthy U.S. landowners soon shifted from raising cattle to other forms of farming, as the latter became more profitable as a result of the new transcontinental railroad, expanded irrigation facilities, and newly available capital to invest in agriculture production technologies.¹² Political-economic inequalities between landowners and agricultural workers proliferated rapidly and continuously, as landowners became increasingly organized and cooperative with one another.

Successfully organizing farm workers required overcoming intersecting structural, material, and cultural-ideological challenges. Included among these challenges were legalized racial inequality and segregation (along with intergenerational legacies of white supremacist violence), legal exclusions from labor rights, agribusiness owners' ability to control or circumvent U.S. immigration policy, and the significant influence of land and agribusiness owners in all levels and branches of the U.S. state.¹³ For example, when many categories of U.S. workers gained new legal protections and empowerments through the Depression-era labor legislation of the 1930s, agricultural workers (along with domestic workers) were excluded.¹⁴ Most significantly, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 did not protect farm workers'

¹¹ Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 24.

¹² Ganz, 24.

¹³ Ganz, 23-51. For more lengthy analysis of California agricultural history, see Lawrence J. Jelinek, *Harvest Empire: A History of California Agriculture*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1982).

¹⁴ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 38.

freedom of association or their freedom to bargain collectively for contracts, a form of inequality in U.S. federal law that exists to this day.¹⁵

These New Deal exclusions perpetuated white supremacy and capitalist dominance, key functions of U.S. labor law. Black people constituted the majority of farm and domestic workers in the South, as did Mexicans/Mexican-Americans, Filipinxs, and people from other Asian countries working in these sectors in California: thus, these groups overwhelmingly bore the disproportionate impact of excluding farm and domestic workers from constitutionally-guaranteed labor rights.¹⁶ Further, agribusiness owners were able to suppress worker-organizing efforts through their influence over U.S. immigration policy while leveraging wartime and consumer sentiments, which enabled land and agribusiness owners to control the size and market value of the available labor pool of immigrant farm workers to achieve their financial interests.¹⁷

¹⁵ Most of these federal exclusions from labor rights are replicated in state constitutions. Recent campaigns have experienced some successes in amending state constitutions to grant equal labor rights to domestic workers. The National Domestic Workers Alliance and its allies won passage of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York (2010), followed by Hawaii (2013) and California (2014). Similarly, the Justice for Farmworkers Campaign, a diverse coalition of organizations, is currently advancing the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act in the New York state legislature. If passed, this bill would remove farmworker exclusions from labor rights granted by the state constitution. In 1975, via the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (CALRA), California became the first state in the U.S. to grant farm workers the right to associate and to collectively bargain for labor contracts, as a direct result of the advocacy campaigns by the UFW and its allies.

¹⁶ Margaret Gray, *Labor and the Locavore: The Making of a Comprehensive Food Ethic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 49. See also Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 37-38, and Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 24-25.

¹⁷ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 5.

Nevertheless, California farm workers rejected this “coloniality of power,”¹⁸ along with the deprivation, suffering, and premature deaths it produced. Prior to the UFW, there were three distinct periods of California farm worker organizing (1900-1919, 1933-1942, 1946-1951). Each of these periods of intensive labor organizing unfolded following reductions in available farm labor, which created opportunities for farm workers, if well organized, to make more effective demands on their employers.¹⁹ Ganz recounts the history of these three periods of possibility, during which well-organized land and agribusiness owners repeatedly crushed attempts by farm workers to organize, often by deploying violent force: “From 1900 to 1950 three waves of farm worker organizing attempts failed to win a single multiyear contract, establish a sustainable farm workers union, or reform the rules governing the farm labor market.”²⁰ Thus, prior to the UFW and its associated precursor organizations, localized and insufficiently networked attempts to organize California farm workers for better compensation and working conditions achieved only minimal and short-lived successes.

After the short third wave of organizing that followed World War II, nearly a decade passed before any viable opportunities for successful farm worker organizing reemerged in California. The next opportunities came in the 1960s, when new possibilities to mobilize labor

¹⁸ The term “coloniality of power,” coined by the late Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, describes the intersecting institutional legacies, practices, and modes of knowing associated with Eurocentric colonial power, which endure beyond formal decolonization or formal integration and which become integrated into the racialized social orders of post-colonies. Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181–224.

¹⁹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 23.

²⁰ Ganz, 51-52.

support within state institutions emerged and when the gradual ending of the bracero program²¹ again shrank the farm labor market. Significant and long-term farm worker organizing successes finally came with the United Farm Workers of America, which began in 1962 as the Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos, or Farm Workers Association (FWA), under the leadership of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta.²² Ethnic leaders, far-left radicals, and the AFL-CIO gradually joined in a common endeavor coordinated by the UFW, the first time that these historically competing groups had successfully united. Amid the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, the UFW enhanced its public demands for economic justice with appeals to racial justice, while also challenging longstanding ethno-racial and ideological barriers to cooperation within the labor movement itself.²³ The UFW and its leaders were shaped within this social context, marked by the anti-racist mobilizations of the 1960s and by a long tradition of farm worker resistance to a racialized social order rooted deeply in the colonial soil of California.

César Chávez: Chicax Familial Roots of a Catholic Social Ethic

In his analysis of the UFW, Ganz convincingly argues that it was the “strategic capacity” drawn from persons and institutional arrangements within the UFW that enabled the union to

²¹ The “bracero program,” in reality a series of agreements between the U.S. and Mexico, brought Mexican workers to the U.S. for temporary labor in the agricultural and railroad industries during World War II. It began in 1945 and its agricultural agreements formally ended in 1964, though some bracero contracts continued informally until 1967. The program was criticized by social leaders for exploiting braceros, for attracting even more vulnerable unauthorized migrants, and for degrading labor standards and wages for U.S. citizens. Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 50. See also Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Post-War United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

²² Dolores Huerta’s moral vision is not analyzed in this project because her leadership in the UFW was more relevant to its strategic negotiations than to envisioning the institutional goals and structures of the union, where Chávez exercised much more influence.

²³ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 51–52, 251.

succeed during the 1960s and 1970s, not comparatively favorable social environments, compelling messaging, or charismatic leadership.²⁴ Because “identity” is one of the personal sources of strategic capacity named by Ganz, this analysis will now focus on Chávez’s personal experiences, summarizing interactions with his social environment most relevant for understanding and interpreting the intellectual content of his moral vision of social equality.²⁵

César Chávez self-identified as a Mexican-American Catholic or a Chicano Catholic. The primary source of his moral vision was his Chicano Catholic experience of farm worker suffering and his commitment to free his oppressed and impoverished people from what he deemed unjust suffering.²⁶ His familial story was marked by the experience of profound inequalities and the struggle for justice, which he interpreted through the lens of a religious faith that was mediated by his family’s Mexican/Mexican-American popular Catholicism.²⁷ Chávez’s commitment to the cause of organizing farm workers was rooted not only in his long-term interests (because freeing

²⁴ Ganz, 10.

²⁵ Ganz defines “identity” as the way that a person reflects on the past, attends to the present, and anticipates the future, their “story.” Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 14. Though I will discuss all three institutional sources of strategic capacity (deliberative processes, resource flows, and accountability), I will here primarily focus on one personal source--personal identity. The other two personal sources of strategic capacity (a person’s relations or “social network” and tactical repertoires) will only be referenced indirectly within my discussion of Chávez’s identity. Ganz, 10. My focus upon Chávez’s telling of his story (his autobiography) is meant to prepare the way for my interpretation of his normative vision of equality. My intention is not to imply that his relations (social network) and tactical repertoire are unrelated to his identity, or that they did not significantly impact his strategic capacity (motivation, salient knowledge, and heuristic practices). Rather, my goal here is to highlight the autobiographical context of his moral vision of equality, rooting his moral vision in his self-understanding or “identity.”

²⁶ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 6, 31-37, 79-80. For Chávez’s connection to the Cursillo movement, see García, *Católicos*, 284.

²⁷ For a thorough analysis of Chávez’s rootedness in Mexican-American popular Catholicism, see Chapter 2, “Homespun Religion,” in Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*.

impoverished people is good for other impoverished people and for society as a whole), but also in his theological and moral vision, in a sense of “calling.”²⁸

Chávez was born in Arizona in 1927, nearly eighty years after “el norte” of Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos became “the southwest” of the United States of America. As a person of Mexican descent in this land, the young Chávez experienced the harshness of multilayered and intertwined disparities in the U.S.A. Already the child of Mexican immigrants, at age ten Chávez became the child of migratory farm workers and a farm worker himself. After young César’s family farm was foreclosed on due to the unscrupulous actions of a bank president, the Chávez family moved to California in 1938 to do migratory seasonal farm work.²⁹ Historians Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard A. García describe Chávez’s life as a migrant farm worker as one of “wretched migrant camps, corrupt labor contractors, meager wages for backbreaking work, [and] bitter racism.”³⁰ At ten years old, Chávez knew what it was like to work in row crops with his parents and siblings, often missing school to do backbreaking work and sleeping outside because his family’s earnings did not cover the cost of dilapidated and overcrowded farm worker housing.³¹ Moral theologian Frederick John Dalton describes in this way Chávez’s childhood experiences as a migrating farm worker amid racist segregation:

Chávez lived in shacks without electricity, heat, or plumbing; at times a garage or a tent was home. The most miserable winter of his life was sleeping outside “between the dirt and the sky” with his younger brother Richard in the cold

²⁸ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 157, 162-163.

²⁹ Dalton, 12.

³⁰ Richard Griswold Del Castillo and Richard A. Garcia, *César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 11.

³¹ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 63.

drizzle of the coastal Ventura County town of Oxnard while the rest of the family squeezed into a tent surrounded by a sea of mud. It was a time when his older sister Rita stopped going to school because she had no shoes. As migrant workers, his family was deceived about wage rates, cheated out of wages earned, charged exorbitant fees, and abused in numerous other ways by labor contractors and growers up and down the state of California. Chávez felt the sting of the cold, the blast of the heat, and the ache of stooping, twisting, kneeling, and crawling through furrowed fields for endless hours. Yet, at the end of the day, the week, or the year, despite arduous labor, the Chávez family remained poor. In a perverse irony common to farm workers, they were too poor at times to afford to buy food. César and his brother searched out mustard greens to eat while their father fished with a pitchfork in an irrigation canal. Added to the physical hardship and material poverty were the feelings arising from being denigrated and denied because he was a Mexican, not worthy of equal respect and treatment, never mind equal protection of the law.³²

Chávez's experiences as a migrant and seasonal farm worker spanned more than a decade, including after serving honorably in the U.S. Navy during World War II, which he pursued to escape the bodily and psychic violence of the fields but later described as the worst years of his life.³³ Upon returning from the Navy, married and with a growing family, Chávez left a job in a lumberyard to begin work as an organizer with the Community Service

³² Dalton, 6-7.

³³ Dalton, 6-7. For Chávez's low regard for his years in the military, see Rick Tejada-Flores and Ray Telles, *The Fight in the Fields: César Chávez and the Farmworkers' Struggle*, documentary film (Independent Television Service, 1997).

Organization (CSO) in 1952. While he had participated in farm worker strikes with his parents, it was not until he worked with the CSO that he began learning community organizing skills and studying labor history. Chávez went on to become the CSO's national director but left its relative comforts in 1962 to form the Farm Worker Association (FWA) when the CSO refused to organize farm workers into a labor union.³⁴

From an early age, including while experiencing the relative freedom and security of proximity to extended family and life on the family farm, Chávez faced bitter bigotry and racism, such as this incident as a child in Arizona:

In class one of my biggest problems was the language. Of course, we bitterly resented not being able to speak Spanish, but they insisted that we had to learn English. They said that if we were American, then we should speak the language, and if we wanted to speak Spanish, we should go back to Mexico. When we spoke Spanish, the teacher swooped down on us. I remember the ruler whistling through the air as its edge came down sharply across my knuckles. It really hurt.

Even out in the playground, speaking Spanish brought punishment.³⁵

Thus, one of Chávez's earliest and most vivid memories of inequality did violence to both his body and his psyche and came at the intersection of multiple inequalities: culture, law, and social representation (in the form of educational leadership and policymaking). Analyzing Chávez's comments, Dalton discusses the significance of language and culture in the construction of U.S. social membership and domination. Together, he and Chávez observe the double paradox that a Spanish-speaking citizen is incorporated yet unequal, foreign yet lacking autonomy:

³⁴ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 85.

³⁵ César Chávez, "Chávez Blames Fatal Bus Accidents on Greed: 'Inhuman Treatment of Farm Workers Must End,'" *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 1974, sec. A7.

Born in the United States to Spanish-speaking parents, school taught César that he was an outsider, a foreigner, less-than others, a Mexican. He learned that others defined being American by what language one spoke. Speaking English made one an American; speaking Spanish did not. César was living in two worlds—home and school—and one of those worlds would not accept him as he was. “It’s a terrible thing when you have your own language and customs, and those are shattered. I remember trying to find out who I was and not being able to understand. Once, for instance, I recall saying I was a Mexican. The teacher was quick to correct me. ‘Oh, no, don’t say that!’ she said. But what else could I say?” César remembered that the teacher told him he was an American, but that didn’t make sense to him because his experience told him something else. “There were too many reminders, too many times I would be called a Mexican in tones of ridicule or contempt.”³⁶

As a member of farm worker communities in California, Chávez also came to recognize that his life was connected to the long-suffering of Mexican *campesinos* throughout history and to their struggles for justice on both sides of the U.S.A.-México border.³⁷ *La causa*, the struggle for farm worker equality, resonated deeply with the story of Chávez’s Mexican people and with his own theo-ethical vision, sustaining him amid the challenges of short-term sacrifices and threats to his life. Further, according to Ganz, Chávez’s identity as a Chicano Catholic struggling for God’s

³⁶ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 11. Cf. Jacques E. Levy and Barbara Moulton, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 78.

³⁷ Dalton, 63.

justice on earth contributed to the UFW's strategic capacity, its organizational ability to generate streams of effective strategy.

In his organizing, César Chávez placed great emphasis on the importance of social equality, framing his discourse around "equality" and embodying concern for equality within the UFW and as an urgent pursuit in society.³⁸ Chávez promoted a faith-based culture of equality within a "union community" by inviting voluntary actions, demanding the exercise of egalitarian responsibilities, and institutionalizing certain egalitarian relationships. The co-founder and president of the union, Chávez could be found in the union hall's kitchen, preparing food or washing dishes.³⁹ He was known to forgo or to accept extremely low wages for his organizing work, in order to keep the fledgling organization alive and as an indication of his solidarity with impoverished farm workers.⁴⁰ He similarly kept staff salaries far below going union rates and relied heavily on volunteer organizers, in attempts to foster shared sacrifice and solidarity between striking farm workers and union staff. He also allocated within the organization's structures some decision-making power for paid organizers, believing that they were entitled to some control over their labor and the organization they worked for.⁴¹ This was a departure from

³⁸ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 10-14, 89-90. While many in the United States affirm the importance of "equality," significant disagreement exists when persons consider the precise meaning and ethical requirements of this affirmation. For more on this, see George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (New York: Viking Press, 2007).

³⁹ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 30.

⁴⁰ Dalton, 85.

⁴¹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 102.

the Saul Alinsky model of organizing, which generally regarded union staff as employees rather than stakeholders entitled to participate in major institutional decision-making.⁴²

The importance of group culture is highlighted in one of Chávez's clearest definitions of a union, which he gave in 1963 after the association established itself as a national organization (the NFWA) and moved toward becoming a labor union. Emphasizing the importance of institutional culture, he declared, "A union is not simply getting enough workers to stage a strike. A union is building up a group with a spirit all its own . . . a union must be built around the idea that people must do things by themselves, in order to help themselves."⁴³ More than the basic institutional capacity to execute political tactics, Chávez sought to embody, spread and institutionalize what some have called a culture of collective "self help," meaning mutual aid at the most local and non-governmental level. This culture, typified by the organization's motto, "Si se puede," permeated a union that increasingly understood itself as a farm worker community within a broad civil rights movement. This movement, inspired by its family-based "self help" or mutual support culture, created structures for the provision of essential services (e.g., burial insurance), cooperatives (e.g., a credit union and auto-repair shop), and educational initiatives.⁴⁴ Yet these efforts were intended to advance the proximate goal of building the capacity to win a recognized labor union, which could then negotiate collectively bargained labor contracts.⁴⁵ This culture, these mutual support initiatives, and the goal of union recognition and collective bargaining were all for the purpose of promoting well-being and equal social participation.

⁴² Ganz, 89, 103. See also Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 103.

⁴³ Ganz, 89.

⁴⁴ Ganz, 84, 103. See also Dalton, 103.

⁴⁵ Ganz, 105, 116.

Chávez took seriously the importance of institutional mechanisms and took great care in establishing the structures of the union that would largely determine the culture of the “union community.” Although Chávez did not always live up to his egalitarian ideals, instead increasingly responding to pressures on the UFW by making anti-democratic leadership decisions within the union,⁴⁶ his positive actions and egalitarian vision are nonetheless significant and represent vitally important aspects of U.S. Catholic promotion of social equality in the 20th century.

César Chávez and Social Equality

I now turn to Chávez’s leadership decisions and discourse in order to interpret his particular understanding of equality. The purpose of this section is to elevate one liberating element of Chávez’s thought and legacy, which contributed to the UFW’s past successes. At times, Chávez abandoned his egalitarian commitments, instead making anti-democratic leadership decisions within the UFW. Nevertheless, his efficacious vision and actions for equality are one reason that people continue to study his legacy and are important aspects of U.S. Catholic promotion of social equality in the 20th century. This analysis does not romanticize Chávez’s legacy, but rather seeks to describe a positive thematic contribution to the discipline of social ethics from this 20th century U.S. figure, before considering related insights that emerge from Chávez’s leadership failures.

Though Chávez had a coherent religious-moral vision that shaped his social philosophy, his moral vision and ideology were not as systematic as one expects from professional ethicists or social theorists. “Chávez was never clear philosophically or ideologically about what he

⁴⁶ Ganz, 243-248.

wanted,” Griswold del Castillo and García write.⁴⁷ Chávez did not systematically theorize a vision of social justice or his approach to social equality, yet these scholars note that his desires and instincts were always centered on justice for impoverished persons. They describe Chávez’s moral vision as a “Christian ethos” and a “culture of social justice.”⁴⁸ This aligns with what Mark Day, a Franciscan priest and Chávez supporter and friend, wrote in 1971 when he noted Chávez’s “deep reverence for human life” and characterized him as “both a mystic visionary and pragmatist, with a heavy accent on the latter.”⁴⁹ Thus, we can consider Chávez a practitioner or artist of an egalitarian vision of justice—an egalitarian pragmatist—rather than a systematic theorist of equality. Nevertheless, Chávez’s actions and words offer implicit and explicit responses to central theoretical questions concerning social equality, while also providing a basis for critiquing Chávez’s anti-egalitarian leadership failings on his own terms.

Again, this examination of Chávez’s egalitarian vision will be framed by the following questions: 1) *Why* is social inequality harmful and morally objectionable? (Why is equality socially and morally significant?) 2) *What particular types and levels* of inequality are harmful and morally objectionable? (Specifically, what equalities are morally desirable?) 3) *Who* ought to be included or excluded from prescriptive efforts to ensure equality? Put differently, toward

⁴⁷ Griswold Del Castillo and Garcia, *César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit*, 110. See also Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 81.

⁴⁸ Liberal academics have significantly downplayed the faith-based character of Chávez’s social vision and activism, contributing to the dominant portrayal of him as a secular social activist. Equally problematic, though less dominant, is the portrayal of Chávez as an ethno-racial separatist by some Chicana scholars and activists. For a thorough treatment of Chávez as a “mystic-reformer” in the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi (mediated by Mexican/Chicano popular Catholicism) see Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, “Holy Activist, Secular Saint: Religion and the Social Activism of César Chávez,” in Espinosa and García, *Mexican American Religions*, 106–124.

⁴⁹ Mark Day, *Forty Acres: César Chávez and the Farm Workers*, 1st ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 112.

whom should wealth and power redistribution be directed and from whose resources should they be taken? (Equality of whom?) 4) *How* ought equalization to be achieved?

Why is socio-economic inequality harmful and morally objectionable?

This first question entails descriptive elements concerning which social disparities Chávez deemed worthy of attention and why he deemed these disparities significant. Chávez's descriptive and moral discourse concerning social inequalities, and injustice generally, can be organized around three recurrent themes: material impoverishment, racism, and the instrumentalization of human labor.⁵⁰ The question also entails normative considerations, concerning why Chávez saw these disparities as morally objectionable, that is, as "inequalities." Though it is not always easy to separate Chávez's descriptive claims from his normative claims concerning social disparities, this analysis will begin with the descriptive considerations, followed by the normative aspects.

First, Chávez regularly spoke about "poverty," usually focused on material impoverishment and bodily wellbeing. *El Plan de Delano*, the UFW's early farm worker manifesto written by playwright Luis Valdez in consultation with Chávez, describes profound bodily suffering endured by farm workers who experience "starvation wages, day hauls [inconsistent employment] ... forced migration, sickness, illiteracy, camps and sub-human living conditions," making "other men rich" through "stoop labor."⁵¹ These wages and living

⁵⁰ While Frederick Dalton does not categorize Chávez's vision of justice in this way, I have gleaned these categories from patterns I recognize within his analysis of Chávez's moral vision. Hints of these three categories can be seen in Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 68, 78-79. Dalton speaks of racism and economic exploitation specifically, though not in a sustained discussion of Chávez's vision of structural justice.

⁵¹ César Chávez, "The Plan of Delano" (English and Spanish versions [1966], in César Chávez, *The Words of César Chávez* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 16-21.

conditions are endured by workers in order to survive and preserve the possibility of survival for their families.

Throughout his life, Chávez exhibited concern for various types of material inequalities relating to food, water, health, shelter, and financial means to secure these. He initiated efforts to alleviate the gravest symptoms of material impoverishment among farm workers, yet designed these efforts to enhance the collective organizational capacity of the union, to promote an equality of power, so that workers could directly secure greater material sufficiency and well-being for themselves through compensation for their labor.

Second, Chávez spoke of “racism,” often emphasizing its cultural or ideological dimensions that justify diverse manifestations of institutionalized white supremacy. *El Plan de Delano* repeatedly refers to “racism” and defends “the Mexican race” and “minority races,” indicating the centrality of resisting racist inequalities for the union’s mission. At times, Chávez used the word “racism” to describe personal attitudes perhaps better described as xenophobic or ethnocentric bigotry.⁵² However, he primarily discussed racism in a manner consistent with the U.S. construction of racism, that is, according to the ideological construction of skin-color meanings that justify the unequal distribution of social power.⁵³ Chávez’s attention to race named an important aspect of the complex reality of California agribusiness domination, where mostly white men dominate dark-skinned workers, primarily Mexicans, Chicanxs, and Filipinx. His race consciousness also exposed the white supremacist underpinnings and implications of seemingly race-blind arguments used against the UFW. In so doing, Chávez described a significant aspect of the cultural contribution to U.S. social inequality, one that functions not

⁵² Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 70.

⁵³ Dalton, 65-71.

only to justify the dominant social position of most whites but also to keep working class people divided among ourselves. Chávez's attentiveness to racist ideology and racist social stratification revealed the situation of California farm workers while fostering links within the Civil Rights Movement, both organizationally and in the public imagination.⁵⁴

Third, Chávez denounced the treatment of workers as “instruments” or farm implements by those with greater structural power, tools to be used and discarded at their “master’s” whim.⁵⁵ He frequently cited Pope Leo XIII, who is the source of this theoretical category in Chávez’s own thought.⁵⁶ *El Plan de Delano* refers to the pope’s words directly, stating: “Everyone’s first duty is to protect the workers from the greed of speculators who use human beings as *instruments* to provide themselves with money. . .” Instrumentalization, in Chávez’s thought, was opposed to human dignity and to human agency, the capacity to carry out one’s desires.⁵⁷ In its extreme, instrumentalization results in vile servitude and forced labor. Instrumentalization or “objectification,” like impoverishment, entails structural causes that incapacitate persons or categories of people from carrying out their aims within the *polis*. One can be instrumentalized, reduced to the status of a controllable object rather than respected as a free person, when relationships are unequally structured, thereby allowing for the suppression of the subordinate person’s agency. Though a person/group with greater power may not in all circumstances choose

⁵⁴ The relationship between the UFW and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is particularly noteworthy in this regard.

⁵⁵ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 50, 78-79.

⁵⁶ Despite egalitarian developments in Catholic social teaching around the time of the Second Vatican Council, Chávez drew more heavily on the early papal encyclical tradition because it directly spoke to the plight and rights of impoverished workers amid capitalist industrialization.

⁵⁷ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 78-79.

or even be able to quash the agency of a subordinate person or group, institutionalizing certain equalities helps ensure equal treatment between persons or groups.

I now turn to the normative aspects of Chávez's vision. Although Chávez did not articulate a systematic understanding of the overlapping and interconnected inequalities of material impoverishment, racism, and daily instrumentalization, he referred to them collectively as "injustice" and sought to alleviate these dehumanizing indignities through the organization and strategic deployment of material, structural, and symbolic power.⁵⁸ In abstract terms, equality matters for Chávez because social inequalities harm people in ways that fail to recognize and respect persons or groups of people as inherently equal in ultimate worth.⁵⁹ Chávez was particularly concerned about dehumanizing farm wages, subhuman working conditions, and inhumanely long working hours, which degrade humanity and result from a complex mingling of material, structural, and cultural-symbolic inequalities.

Chávez's vision of equality, like his larger moral vision, was centered on a commitment to the equal dignity or value of each person. In this vision, each person represents the fundamental good. Chávez's commitment to equally dignified human lives was grounded in his theological vision of each person as created and equally loved by God.⁶⁰ Therefore, bearing God's image, through God's creative and loving action, each person is equally dignified. The UFW's struggle for dignified human life and social justice, with social equality as a constitutive element, was the struggle for life consistent with the fundamental equal dignity of every farm worker with other human persons.

⁵⁸ Dalton, 25.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 2, "Human Dignity," in Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*.

⁶⁰ Dalton, 78-82.

Chávez's theological anthropology arose from his experience of people, interpreted through the popular wisdom and practices of Mexican/Chicanx Catholicism and later through Catholic social teaching, especially papal teachings.⁶¹ In the midst of immense human suffering caused by oppression, Chávez experienced and maintained faith in the equal value of all people. What official Catholic social teaching describes in the general and abstract terms of a "commitment to human dignity," Chávez experienced daily with actual suffering, dark-skinned, Spanish- and Tagalog-speaking workers, with light-skinned, English-speaking people who were business owners or UFW allies, and with many other people. In dedicating himself to farm workers in their struggle for liberation and political-economic equality, Chávez embodied a faith-based conviction in their fundamentally equal value.

Defending human dignity, Chávez seemed to place his greatest tactical focus on combatting instrumentalization, the stifling of capacity to act purposefully. In opposition to it, he declared "Sí se puede" and organized available community power to soften the blows of material and cultural-symbolic inequality while using newly organized resources to leverage institutional changes at various levels of U.S. governance, thereby making new forms of structural power available to be organized and deployed. Chávez did not view the relationship of these forms of power in a unidirectional way but sought to help people see the importance of combining and deploying their available material, symbolic, and structural resources to secure more equal shares of these forms of power.⁶²

⁶¹ Dalton, 46-52. The preamble to the earlier FWA constitution cited a passage from *Rerum Novarum*, a papal encyclical frequently also cited in the union's newspaper, *El Malcriado*. See Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 89.

⁶² Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 25.

For Chávez, social inequality entailed diverse bodily, psychic, material, and structural disparities, all of which constitute denials of equal human dignity.⁶³ The negative effects of these disparities ripple through the families and communities to which subordinated workers belong, causing further harm. Thus, for Chávez, a life consistent with a person's inherent dignity is a life in community marked by respect and equality.⁶⁴ There are no dignified lives apart from life in a just society. From this perspective, structural justice is essential to the protection and promotion of dignified human life and equality is inherent in the meaning of structural justice. Structural inequalities violate human dignity by subordinating or excluding some members of the community, thereby harming the community that enables all members to realize their full humanity.

What particular types and levels of inequality are harmful and morally objectionable?

Chávez described the criterion of *equality* in a variety of overlapping and conflicting ways. These criteria typically addressed both human bodily needs and structural/institutional equality, typified by Chávez's common use of the metaphor "bread and justice," borrowed from the rhetoric of the Mexican Revolution to describe what the farm workers were seeking via their social movement.⁶⁵ As I noted earlier, Chávez often spoke of the desire for workers to have equal possession of or access to basic goods necessary for sustaining the human body and mind. At other times, he spoke of the desire for liberation and freedom, such as control over one's labor or

⁶³ Dalton, 2.

⁶⁴ Dalton, 2.

⁶⁵ Roger Bruns, *César Chávez: A Biography* (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 52.

over determining its market value.⁶⁶ Perhaps most fundamentally, he objected to unequal civil rights, such as rights concerning worker association and to union representation.⁶⁷

Chávez and the UFW regularly expressed the goal of achieving equality with other U.S. workers.⁶⁸ They commonly focused on the denial of legal equality, citing farm workers' exclusion from the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which had provided protections and fair procedures for U.S. workers who desired to form labor unions. Chávez wanted legislative reform because he recognized union recognition and collective bargaining rights as the keys to transforming the structural relationship between land/business owners, labor contractors, and laborers. Altering this relationship would enable more adequate and equal compensation, working conditions, and workplace participation. This was a quite modest egalitarian goal, as even the formal right to a union election was no guarantee of a fair election or of protection from anti-union tactics, let alone more dignified terms of employment. Nevertheless, Chávez saw equal labor rights (and their enforcement), comparable to those of other workers, as the necessary preconditions for widespread success in unionization, which would enable the achievement of other egalitarian outcomes.⁶⁹

The fact that Chávez and the UFW emphasized *legal* equality with other *U.S. workers* does not imply that such narrowly defined equality was Chávez's ultimate goal or the full extent of his moral vision of social equality. Nor does it imply that Chávez looked upon the U.S. state as the fundamental authority for defining the moral standards of social justice. Rather, Chávez's

⁶⁶ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 84.

⁶⁷ Dalton, 67, 162.

⁶⁸ Chávez, "The Plan of Delano."

⁶⁹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 234-238.

his modest goal of formal legal equality between workers was a publicly palatable and feasible proximate goal—though one unpopular to this day—that would make further advances possible. Chávez and the UFW’s discourse advanced this proximate goal by revealing the hypocrisy of farm worker exclusion from what the U.S. government deemed socially just for most other U.S. laborers.

Related to Chávez’s concern for “liberation” and labor “freedom,” his cultural-symbolic affirmations, with particular attention to language, indicate that his vision of equality exceeded formal equality in the realm of U.S. labor law. Chávez recognized assimilationist practices and policies as assaults on cultural equality that also had detrimental material and structural implications.⁷⁰ Thus, he emphasized the importance of a group’s cultural authority over its social space. Chávez conducted union business primarily in Spanish; *El Malcriado*, the union newspaper, was first published in Spanish, and the union’s meetings and popular education were carried out primarily in Spanish.⁷¹ Even when the union bore witness to the struggle within the larger U.S. society, such as during pilgrimage marches, symbols like Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Mexican flag were displayed prominently alongside the U.S. flag.⁷² Such expressions often came from the initiative of workers themselves, not union staff.⁷³ Deploying these symbols and practices was not merely a useful organizing tactic, though it did increase effectiveness with

⁷⁰ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 68-71.

⁷¹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 103-104. Chávez can be criticized for not having attended adequately to the ethno-religious symbols and practices of Filipinx and other workers within the union. See Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 68-71, 95, 153. While, for a labor union leader, Chávez exhibited an uncharacteristic sensitivity to the religions and cultures of union members, he gave disproportionate preference to Mexican/Chicanx and Roman Catholic symbols and practices.

⁷² Dalton, 95.

⁷³ Dalton, 35.

Mexican and Chicana workers. It was also a way of educating the larger society about the identity of the movement while embodying affirmations of the equal dignity of Mexican-descended people.

One might interpret the absence of a clearly stated criterion or “utopian vision” of equality, in the UFW’s struggle, as a lack of moral or political direction. UFW leaders may have had no clearly imagined “final destination” in their march toward equality. However, this should also be recognized as evidence of a highly pragmatic and flexible movement operating in an unstable social environment. Union leaders sought greater equality of access to basic material goods and more equal freedoms, and greater equality under the law as a mode of achieving these ends.

Who ought to be included in or excluded from prescriptive efforts to ensure equality?

Chávez’s advocacy focused primarily on non-migrant seasonal farm workers. These fairly settled workers were primarily U.S. citizens and authorized residents, though unauthorized residents were also welcome within the UFW. While farm workers who were citizens and authorized residents were most certainly among the most impoverished workers in U.S. society, their political status afforded them certain securities not available to transitory workers, who also tended to lack authorized residency status. Though the UFW under Chávez commonly failed to account for political-economic solutions necessary for migratory and/or unauthorized workers, Chávez’s strategizing often took them into account, as union members, impoverished “brothers and sisters,” and potential adversaries.⁷⁴ Thus, I argue that Chávez’s advocacy represented a type

⁷⁴ Dalton, 14-15, 74-75. For Chávez’s treatment of undocumented workers as adversaries, see Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams*, 340.

of trans-state egalitarianism, whereby the long-term interests and well-being of impoverished citizens and non-citizens alike were given priority.⁷⁵

Chávez believed, based on available evidence, that increasing the number of unionized farm workers would exert positive effects on farm workers throughout the labor market, regardless of their union status.⁷⁶ While he encouraged UFW members to serve persons even poorer than themselves, his mindfulness of the overall labor situation of farm workers indicates that his concern for migrant workers went beyond mere almsgiving. UFW members would “lift as they climbed” by directly assisting those with greater needs than their own and by striving for union contracts that created beneficial ripple effects throughout the farm labor market, for citizens and non-citizens alike.⁷⁷ An increase in unionized workers within a sector of the labor market increases wages and improves working conditions throughout that sector, as employers compete for workers while making concessions to dissuade unionization. This is especially true in farm work, where the immobility of land dissuades job “outsourcing” when worker unionization appears imminent. Additionally, increasing the power of some farm workers relative to their employers through unionization not only decreases the power of the agribusiness owners relative to other farm workers, it also increases the relative power of non-farm workers throughout the agribusiness owner’s supply chain. Though Chávez focused his energies on the more settled citizen and authorized resident “locals,” who were easier to organize and mobilize

⁷⁵ Admittedly, this argument is complicated by the UFW’s opposition to the exploitative bracero program, under Chávez’s leadership. See Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 83-84.

⁷⁶ Ganz, 240.

⁷⁷ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 76-77.

than migratory workers, he nevertheless envisioned the UFW as a national organization and considered the impact of the UFW's actions on the broader labor market.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that some workers, especially migratory (often unauthorized) workers, were harmed in the short term by particular decisions made by the UFW, as it sought to build a union with more stable local residents and to improve conditions throughout the farm labor market.⁷⁹ While migratory workers were helped in the long term because the labor market was becoming more worker-friendly, particular lives were also significantly disrupted by UFW control of particular locales. For instance, UFW regulation of labor in a particular locale meant that work was allocated according to seniority of union membership.⁸⁰ Building seniority required forgoing a migratory livelihood, which might result in a lower annual income than year-round migratory work. It also often meant that family members could not labor together, as they might not all have the same seniority status or be needed to work on a given day. Thus, while UFW advances brought short- and longer-term benefits directly to UFW members and indirectly to other farm workers, some farm workers were negatively impacted in the short term.

In addition to considering the impact of non-migrant farm worker organizing on migrant (often undocumented) farm workers and labor contractors, analyzing Chávez's relationship with

⁷⁸ Chávez's legacy of responding to the needs of unauthorized resident farmworkers is mixed and warrants a sustained treatment that is not possible in this article. Given contemporary uses of anti-immigrant rhetoric deployed by Chávez, it is worth noting that the UFW has long advocated immigration reforms that would reduce the vulnerability of unauthorized resident farmworkers and thereby strengthen the bargaining power of all farmworkers. One noteworthy attempt by a religion scholar to engage this topic is Luis León, "Misusing César Chávez in Immigration Debate," *Religion Dispatches*, December 5, 2010, <http://religiondispatches.org/misusing-César-Chávez-in-immigration-debate/>.

⁷⁹ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 74.

⁸⁰ Dalton, 74-75.

prominent Mexican-American political organizations offers further insight into the scope of Chávez's concern for equality. For example, amid a UFW strike and a tightened agricultural labor market, the Mexican-American Political Association (MAPA) and other organizations, along with the U.S. Department of Labor, helped agribusiness employers locate and recruit replacement workers.⁸¹ Chávez protested MAPA's actions, arguing that this assistance to agribusiness owners and their political allies made it more difficult to leverage business owners into recognizing the union. Chávez was interested in mobilizing workers to make effective claims on their recruiters, not in strengthening the hand of business owners by helping them find low-wage workers, even if these newly employed people were of Mexican descent. Chávez's goal was not merely to make a larger proportion of jobs go to persons of Mexican descent, but rather to make all jobs have better wages and working conditions and to make them available to people in an equitable manner. This incident with MAPA represents an interesting contrast between ethnicity/race-based class conflict and ethnicity/race-based assistance to capitalists. Chávez wanted to change the agribusiness system, not simply to secure a better position within the unjust system for his ethno-cultural community.⁸² His efforts sought to eradicate structures that impoverish persons and to do so in ways that responded to the needs of ethno-cultural and citizen-based communities while also transcending their boundaries in pursuit of freedom and justice for all.

Chávez was clearly concerned with the well-being of Mexican and Chicanx workers. However, he was not willing to advance their short-term interests by sacrificing their long-term interests and those of workers from other communities. This was not a privileging of color-blind

⁸¹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 109-110.

⁸² Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 74-75.

anti-classism over racial concerns, so much as a privileging of long-term (and race-conscious) anti-classism over short-term ethno-racial group interests that undermined the common good. Chávez and the union were not interested in helping serve more crumbs from the proverbial “American pie” to people of Mexican descent. Instead, they rejected the contents of that economic pie, opposed the exclusion of Mexican-Americans/Chicanxs from the decision-making process that determined the pie’s contents, and questioned the unequal size of the pie’s pieces. At the height of NFWA/UFW activity, the protest of MAPA shows that Chávez had little interest in helping Mexicans and Chicanxs secure more equitable employment relative to other ethnic communities if that “equality” also resulted in worsened poverty overall or if it intensified inequalities between workers and owners as a result.⁸³ Here we see, despite union rhetoric, that Chávez’s vision of equality was more expansive than mere equality with other U.S. workers. His desired social equality at the expense of agribusiness owners’ dominance and privileges, not by undermining the wellbeing and power of other impoverished workers.

How ought equalization to be achieved?

Specifically, the UFW sought to promote greater social equalities by undermining the farm labor contracting system, which Chávez viewed as the linchpin of the oppressive agribusiness system.⁸⁴ This required workers to collectively bargain the terms of their employment rather than contracting individually with contractors. When the labor-contracting portion of the agribusiness system was undermined, control over the contracting of workers would pass from labor contractors (agents of the employer) to union leadership (agents of the workers). Because labor contractors were given incentives to deliver the lowest possible wages,

⁸³ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 109-110.

⁸⁴ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 72-73.

they often pitted workers against one another through all manner of manipulation and favoritism.⁸⁵ This system effectively lowered wages and minimized worker grievances. When workers collectively bargained to create union hiring halls operated through their union infrastructure, jobs were allocated according to agreed-upon processes such as union seniority.⁸⁶ Under these more predictable employment conditions, workers could better guard against the labor contractor manipulation that commonly undermined worker solidarity, compensation, and safety. Union hiring halls disrupted employer hiring and management privileges and inhibited employers' ability to violate criminal and labor laws with impunity.⁸⁷

In an indirect way, the redistribution of social power from employers to local resident farm workers undermined the small privileges and livelihood of labor contractors who mediated the business owner-worker relationship. Calling contractors "middlemen" can be deceptive, because they are not really "in the middle": their compensation is much closer to that of farm workers, while their loyalties reside with agribusiness owners. Labor contractors commonly receive higher pay (relative to farm workers) and other workplace privileges in exchange for suppressing worker organizing and demands.⁸⁸ Contractors' improved compensation relative to farm workers is a direct function of their willingness to assist the agribusiness owner in suppressing the greater "threat" of worker demands and unionization. Although labor contractors are often not paid much better than farm workers, and are often former farm workers themselves,

⁸⁵ Dalton, 73.

⁸⁶ Dalton, 73-75.

⁸⁷ Dalton, 72-73.

⁸⁸ Dalton, 74-75.

they are agents of agribusiness owners and an integral part of the oppressive agribusiness system.⁸⁹ The prescriptive aim of the UFW was to make contractors' jobs obsolete.

More generally, Chávez sought to achieve material, cultural-symbolic, and structural equality by means of organizing and strategically employing available power. Social resources or power were the primary means of advancing his larger vision of “the good life,” which was persons living in loving (nonviolent) service consistent with their equally dignified humanity.⁹⁰ Power is the means by which equality is achieved. Specifically, Chávez and the UFW sought to redistribute power within the agribusiness system by using collective bargaining to replace the labor contract system with union-controlled hiring halls.⁹¹ Engaging in collective bargaining required first securing union recognition, which was primarily attained through the enactment of nonviolent power via strikes and boycotts, because farm workers were excluded from federal legislation designed to ensure fair union election processes.⁹²

For Chávez, “being political” was not simply about voting or asking politicians for legislative changes, as important as these actions were. Rather, “being political” was about organizing and deploying any structural, material, or cultural-symbolic power available in order to achieve just outcomes. Power was not an evil for Chávez, though he lamented having to use it to secure justice.⁹³ Rather, it was the necessary means to achieve either evil ends or the material

⁸⁹ Dalton, 74-75.

⁹⁰ Dalton, 142.

⁹¹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 166, 194.

⁹² Ganz, 105, 116.

⁹³ Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 25, 76.

necessities of well-being, equitable cultural space, and greater structural equalities. He recognized the dangers of unequally distributed power, but did not view power as itself an evil.

The redistribution of structural power brought by the UFW's union recognition and collectively bargained labor contracts was the central catalyst for producing greater social equalities for California farm workers. Union recognition and labor contracts enabled workers to enjoy greater compensation, protections, and participation in labor-related decision-making.⁹⁴ The structural, material, and cultural-symbolic gains achieved through unionization and collective bargaining represented new forms of power available to be mobilized for the sake of further promoting equality with land/business owners and within the myriad governmental bodies that established labor and employer rights and agricultural policies. Through the greater power (structural, material, symbolic) obtained by means of bargained contracts, farm workers were able to continue their concerted efforts to meet basic daily needs. Gains from these contracts also enabled them to advance their struggle for even more favorable contracts, for more labor rights, for less harmful agricultural policies, while also challenging the legitimacy of certain employer rights.⁹⁵

Organizing power, like all political activity, is a teleological venture. What farm workers needed was a union, collective bargaining, and hiring halls, which would enable them to attain the compensation, work hours, working conditions, and decision-making participation they sought. In order to gain union recognition (structural power), farm workers first needed to use what resources they already had to maximize the size, resources, and solidarity within their organization. They achieved this by providing basic services, organizing consumer and financial

⁹⁴ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 240-241.

⁹⁵ Ganz, 241.

cooperatives, developing educational initiatives, registering voters, and securing outside funding.⁹⁶ In this way, they recognized material and already-present structural power as potential sources of additional power. Similarly, Chávez employed a wide range of nonviolent ethno-religious symbols and practices to advance his short- and long-term goals. He prayed regularly, participated in Catholic masses, engaged in grueling fasts, and led pilgrimage marches to achieve the union community's proximate goals, which advanced its larger egalitarian goals.⁹⁷ He and other organizers and farm workers frequently drew upon their faith-based cultural resources to sustain the union community and to bear witness to their struggle for dignified life.⁹⁸

Equality and the United Farmworkers of America

The UFW and its predecessor organizations (the FWA, NFWA, and UFWOC) made greater egalitarian advances in the lives of farm workers than any labor organization in California history, although the organization's transformative power declined from the early 1980s onward.⁹⁹ In 1966, following a grueling seven-month strike and organizing campaign against Schenley Industries, a major liquor distributor and grape production owner, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) gained formal legal recognition by successfully negotiating a legitimate union contract (without need of a formal election process), the first in California farm labor history.¹⁰⁰ Later that year, the NFWA won the first union representation election in

⁹⁶ Ganz, 84, 103. See also Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez*, 103.

⁹⁷ Dalton, 40-46, 61, 132-137.

⁹⁸ See Lloyd-Moffett, "Holy Activist, Secular Saint."

⁹⁹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 7, 240-241, 248-249.

¹⁰⁰ Ganz, 4.

California agricultural history, overcoming violent collusion between the DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation and the Teamsters Union.¹⁰¹ In 1966, the NFWA also absorbed the AFL-CIO's Agricultural Worker's Organizing Committee (AWOC), forming the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), and organization that would bring the entire California table grape industry under union contract by 1970.¹⁰²

Ganz summarizes the later accomplishments of the United Farm Workers of America, the union's official name since its AFL-CIO membership began in 1972:

By 1977 the United Farm Workers . . . had successfully negotiated more than 100 union contracts, recruited a dues-paying membership of 50,000, and secured enactment of the California Labor Relations Act, the only legislative guarantee of farm workers' collective bargaining rights in the continental United States. The UFW also played a major role in the emergence of a Chicano movement in the southwestern United States, recruited and trained hundreds of community activists, and became a significant player in California politics.¹⁰³

When the UFW and its predecessor organizations won contracts, farm workers received improved wages, benefits, and work conditions (such as cool water and toilets in the fields).¹⁰⁴ It also created union hiring halls, which fundamentally altered the structure of agribusiness by

¹⁰¹ Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams*, 22-30.

¹⁰² Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 6.

¹⁰³ Ganz, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Tejada-Flores and Telles, *The Fight in the Fields*.

replacing the exploitative practice of labor contracting with union-controlled allocation of field workers to job sites.¹⁰⁵ Ganz further comments:

From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, the UFW had a major impact on the lives of farm workers—and the Latino community in general. Farm worker wages, benefits, and working conditions steadily improved as the UFW won contracts and as non-union employers made improvements to preempt the union. Public advocacy by the UFW spurred the enactment of rural education, health training, and legal assistance programs. The UFW's readiness to demand accountability from public officials won the enforcement of local, state, and federal statutory protections and elected more responsive officials. Opportunities for farm workers' access to job, educational, and political mobility improved and at the same time facilitated a growing Latino political influence. And the UFW contributed know-how, inspiration, and alumni to the broader progressive movement, including union, civic, and political leaders who learned their craft in the UFW and whose networks encourage organizing in California and elsewhere to the present day.¹⁰⁶

For nearly two decades, the UFW thus not only shook the agribusiness system, it fed into the Chicano movement, a cultural renaissance and political movement that became a major force within and beyond California electoral politics.¹⁰⁷

How did the UFW achieve these advances for political-economic equality? Scholars and popular writers have offered an array of conflicting explanations for the UFW's successes,

¹⁰⁵ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 194.

¹⁰⁶ Ganz, 241.

¹⁰⁷ García, *Católicos*, 132.

proposing that the success was due to a unique political environment, or the UFW's compelling public narrative, or Chávez's charismatic leadership.¹⁰⁸ Many accounts, however, ignore significant socio-historical data concerning the institutional agency of actors like the UFW. Some scholars also fail to account for the ways in which the UFW helped create its favorable political environment or ignore the failures of other groups who operated under similar or more favorable environmental opportunities.¹⁰⁹ Often ignored are the UFW's formulation of effective strategies and, more importantly, the personal and organizational origins of these strategies.¹¹⁰

In *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement*, Marshall Ganz offers a compelling theory to explain how these advances were achieved amid diverse environmental opportunities and obstacles. His theory for “Why David sometimes wins” is heavily informed by both his research in social psychology and his earlier insider experiences as a former labor organizer and board member for the UFW—a unique combination of knowledge among authors who have interpreted the significance of the UFW. Ganz compellingly argues that the UFW's successes resulted from its capacity to produce superior streams of strategy, which he terms “strategic capacity.”¹¹¹ Strategic capacity consists of an organization's collective level of *motivation*, its *salient knowledge*, and the quality of its *heuristic practices*.¹¹² Ganz argues that an organization's strategic capacity has three personal sources (rooted in institutional leaders specifically): *personal identity*, *social networks*, and

¹⁰⁸ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 7-8.

¹⁰⁹ Ganz, 8-14.

¹¹⁰ Ganz, 5-8.

¹¹¹ Ganz, 8.

¹¹² Ganz, 8.

tactical repertoires.¹¹³ Further, an organization's strategic capacity is derived from three institutional sources: its *deliberative processes*, its *resource flows*, and its *accountability structures*.¹¹⁴

Ganz's theory, in particular its elaboration of institutional sources of strategic capacity, is drawn from his conclusion that the UFW was effective from the 1960s through the late 1970s because its leadership team regularly engaged in open and dynamic strategy deliberations, which channeled energy, knowledge, and practices of investigation (heuristics) that emerged from the identities, social networks, and tactical repertoires of the organization's leadership team, members, and partners.¹¹⁵ Early on, the UFW's engagement in deliberative processes that were regular, open, and authoritative synergized the motivations, knowledge, and investigation practices of team members, thereby developing collective energy and competencies greater than the sum of their parts and contributing to strategic successes.¹¹⁶ Through these deliberative processes, group members' motivation, salient knowledge, and practices of discovery could be enhanced, thus enabling effective strategizing.¹¹⁷

Within the UFW, Ganz argues, egalitarian goals were also pursued because workers provided and controlled the flow of resources that sustained the organization.¹¹⁸ Typically, an organization pursues the goals of its true constituency, those who fill its purse. From this view,

¹¹³ Ganz, 14-17.

¹¹⁴ Ganz, 16-19.

¹¹⁵ Ganz, 17-18, 90-91.

¹¹⁶ Ganz, 90-91.

¹¹⁷ Ganz, 17-18.

¹¹⁸ Ganz, 91.

the UFW was capable of advancing farm workers' egalitarian aims because its resources flowed primarily from farm workers to the organization's leadership.¹¹⁹ For example, in the early UFW, financial resources flowed primarily from farm workers (in the form of membership dues) to the organizational leadership, which rendered UFW officials highly dependent upon and responsive to the desires of the workers.¹²⁰ Resource flows determine the degree and quality of interdependence between an organization's constituents and its officials, and between the officials and allied groups, thereby impacting motivational "buy-in" and widening the breadth of salient knowledge and investigative practices absorbed by organizational officials.¹²¹

Further, Ganz argues, it is important that resources flowed into and out of the UFW in a wide network. While it was important that UFW officials were dependent upon farm workers, maintaining a broad resource base also provided a stability that is necessary for social movements, especially movements of people already targeted with systemic violence and the repression of dissent. Early on, Chávez rejected many forms of "outside" money for fear of undermining the agency of farm workers or undercutting the union's dependence upon them.¹²² However, over time, he recognized the value of expanding the union's base of support, which enabled it to channel new material resources and services toward the achievement of worker goals, thereby expanding the union's sphere of social influence.¹²³ Under Chávez's leadership,

¹¹⁹ Ganz, 91.

¹²⁰ Ganz, 91. By contrast, AWOC's primary financial resources had come to its officials from the AFL-CIO, making its leaders more dependent upon satisfying the AFL-CIO and more distant from and unresponsive to farm workers. Ganz, 66-67.

¹²¹ Ganz, 18.

¹²² Ganz, 85.

¹²³ Ganz, 103, 116.

the UFW increasingly (yet selectively) accepted government and private grants and other donations, which also enhanced the flow of relevant knowledge, usually to the benefit of farm workers.¹²⁴

Finally, Ganz argues that the UFW's early structures of accountability held union officials in relationships of reciprocity with one another and with farm workers, thereby enhancing the union's motivation, salient knowledge, and investigative practice.¹²⁵ Early on, farm workers, not outside labor organizations (like the AFL-CIO) or other socially dominant groups, legitimized the authority of UFW officials.¹²⁶ For example, UFW officials were elected by UFW members (or chosen by other elected UFW officials), which meant that the union's leaders received their legitimacy from "from below" and remained accountable to farm workers, unlike other organizations that had failed to effectively organize farm workers.¹²⁷

César Chávez and the Decline of the UFW

Unfortunately, over time, Chávez centralized control over the union's structures of legitimacy and accountability, eroding officials' accountability to farm workers, and also increasingly depended on external funding when membership dues declined.¹²⁸ Absent a high

¹²⁴ Ganz, 116. Unfortunately, when accountability to workers was later undermined and worker organizing ceased (thereby shrinking member dues), these outside resources provided leaders with alternative sources of legitimacy. Union officials had new primary constituents. This enabled the organization to continue despite no longer being dependent on the farm workers who had enabled its existence and growth in the first place.

¹²⁵ Ganz, 101.

¹²⁶ Ganz, 102.

¹²⁷ Ganz, 101-102.

¹²⁸ Ganz, 243-248. Ganz considers the wide availability of "outside" funding an enabling factor rather than a direct cause of Chávez's alteration of the UFW's structures of accountability. Ganz, interview by Cruz and McMahon.

degree of accountability to workers or material dependence on new member dues, the UFW ceased to be a major force for the unionization of farm workers.¹²⁹ The organization continued to exist (and even grew), but it was now increasingly dependent upon the cultural capital of Chávez (as a heroic symbol), which enabled it to raise funds and capitalize the assets necessary to feed the organization, even as its mission and priorities changed dramatically.¹³⁰

The UFW's significant victories for farm workers were short-lived. Though weakened by intensifying assaults from political opponents and from unfavorable social conditions, César Chávez, along with UFW leaders who enabled him, also diminished the union's structure and priorities.¹³¹ Chávez recognized the need to institutionalize the recent gains of the farm worker movement if these were to endure in a stable and long-lasting manner.¹³² However, he sought to carry out this task on his own terms, having grown suspicious of union leaders and allies who helped bring the UFW into existence in the first place.¹³³ Recently published histories of the UFW agree that Chávez exerted increasing control over the union's decision-making

¹³⁰ Ganz, 250-251.

¹³¹ Ganz, 239-243.

¹³² Marco Prouty mentions Chávez's leadership failures yet argues that Chávez failed to take corrective administrative action and was unwilling to see the organization transition from a "movement/union to a union/movement." See Marco G. Prouty, *César Chávez, the Catholic Bishops, and the Farmworkers' Struggle for Social Justice* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2006), 133. Ganz disagrees, arguing that Chávez recognized this need and usually took action, yet did so by destructively and inefficiently controlling the process of institutionalization. Marshall Ganz, interview by Jeremy Cruz and Sheila McMahon, via Skype, February 4, 2011. This is consistent with Miriam Pawel's account of the UFW's internal struggles. See Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams*.

¹³³ These increasing internal suspicions coincided with intensified external opposition to the UFW by civilians, legislators, police, courts, and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation. For a history of FBI surveillance of the UFW, see José Angel Gutiérrez, *The Eagle Has Eyes: The FBI Surveillance of César Estrada Chávez of the United Farm Workers of America Union, 1965-1975* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2019).

mechanisms and thereby undermined the more open and democratic ethos of its earlier years.¹³⁴ Between 1976 and 1981, Ganz argues, Chávez centralized the union's decision-making power, reduced transparency, quashed dissent, and alienated allies.¹³⁵ Many lawyers, legal workers, board members, organizers, negotiators, and other administrative staff were fired or dismissed, or resigned.¹³⁶ A district court ruling in 1981, the year Ganz resigned from the union's national Executive Board, even found that Chávez had acted illegally when he fired dissenting farm worker leaders who sought representation on the union's national board.¹³⁷ In a summative statement that Ganz would undoubtedly still affirm, he argued ten years ago, "Within just four years, the UFW stopped organizing, drove out most of its experienced leaders, and entered into a decline from which it has not recovered."¹³⁸

How substantial was this decline? Compared to the late 1970s, when it had 60,000-70,000 members¹³⁹ and 200 contracts, the UFW represented no more than 5,000 farm workers

¹³⁴ Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams*; Miriam Pawel, *The Crusades of César Chávez*; Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: César Chávez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (London: Verso, 2011); Matthew Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of César Chávez and the Farm Worker Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

¹³⁵ Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams*, 87, 144-146, 207-208.

¹³⁶ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 247.

¹³⁷ Ganz, 247.

¹³⁸ Ganz, 241.

¹³⁹ Some accounts estimate as many as 80,000 members. See Geoffrey Mohan, "The Longtime Head of the UFW Is Stepping Down: His Replacement Will Be the First Woman to Lead the Union," *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-ufw-president-20180828-story.html>.

and held roughly 33 union labor contracts, as of Ganz's publication in 2009.¹⁴⁰ From the late 1970s onward, a new version of the UFW was ill equipped to challenge increasingly powerful and effective political opposition at local, state, and federal levels. The union became largely uninterested in worker organizing and other forms of grassroots political resistance that had made it a dynamic social force in California for a decade and a half. In 2011, Ganz remarked that the UFW no longer operates primarily as a labor union, but rather as a network of non-profit organizations with assets of \$42 million and pension and medical plans worth over \$100 million but which cover fewer than 3,000 workers.¹⁴¹ The UFW has been able to survive not so much because of its resourcefulness, but rather because of "the depth of the political, economic, and cultural resources it had acquired during its heyday."¹⁴²

Following Chávez's death in 1993, the union attempted, mostly unsuccessfully, to resume some efforts at farm worker organizing under the leadership of Arturo Rodriguez, Chávez's son-in-law.¹⁴³ By then, the union lacked the strategic capacity that previously enabled successful strategizing and, in this regard, it remains a weaker union than it was in the late 1970s.¹⁴⁴ In 2000, the UFW began broadening its focus to the larger Latinx community and changed its constitutional mission to read "protecting and insuring" the rights of farm workers instead of

¹⁴⁰ While two other unions currently represent farm workers in California, they have even fewer members. Outside of California, most of the recent successes in farm worker organizing have come from organizations inspired in part by the UFW but autonomous from it, such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. See Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 240.

¹⁴¹ Ganz, interview by Cruz and McMahon.

¹⁴² Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 248.

¹⁴³ Ganz, 249.

¹⁴⁴ Ganz, 251.

“organizing” them.¹⁴⁵ Thus, today the UFW, while still a labor union, operates more like a non-profit organization, focusing on service provision, policy research, and legislative advocacy.¹⁴⁶

Linking the union’s decline to worsening of California farm worker circumstances overall, Ganz characterized the situation in 2009 as follows:

In real dollars, the nearly 40,000 farm workers employed today by California’s \$30 billion agricultural industry earn wages 20-25 percent below those paid in the late 1970s. In 2006, the most recent year for which such figures are available as of this writing, the average California farm wage of \$9 per hour was less than half of the average wage in construction. Annual farm worker earnings of \$7,000-\$8,000 were a quarter of factory worker earnings of \$30,000-\$35,000. The abusive contracting system that was in decline throughout the 1970s has made a major comeback and accounts for some 43 percent of farm jobs today. Most farm workers are still new immigrants, many of whom arrived long after the UFW stopped organizing and at least 60 percent of whom lack a legal status that could offer even minimal protection. Access to affordable housing, health care, and education remains far behind that of other workers, and with a public no longer

¹⁴⁵ Ganz, 250.

¹⁴⁶ Ganz, 250. The union remains hampered by internal strife, but there have also been some signs of renewal within the UFW in recent years. The union’s membership has increased to 10,238 members nationwide and its board, at the end of 2018, appointed union secretary-treasurer Teresa Romero, a Mexican/Zapotec immigrant woman, to succeed Chávez’s son-in-law, Arturo Rodriguez, as the next union president. See Mohan, “Head of the UFW Is Stepping Down.”

effectively challenged to pay attention, the harsh reality of their daily lives is rarely noted.¹⁴⁷

According to the more recent reporting, “The vast majority of the state’s seasonal farm labor force, estimated at 350,000-450,000, do not belong to a union.”¹⁴⁸

The UFW’s diminished capacity and its decrease in worker organizing campaigns have resulted in a union that lacks the power base and strategic commitments necessary to grow and to ensure that the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (CALRA) is fully enforced.¹⁴⁹ The law only functioned as farm workers had hoped during its first four or five months, according to Arturo Rodriguez, UFW President from 1993-2018.¹⁵⁰ After that, farm owners quickly found ways to circumvent the law and undermine its enforcement mechanisms. While this law remains the only state collective bargaining statute in the United States “to establish a comprehensive system for protecting the right of farmworkers to form unions and engage in collective bargaining,”¹⁵¹ it only functions as a vestige of its original intent.

Learning from Critics: From Heroic Virtue to Instructive Communal Failure

Formulating his theory of effective grassroots organizing based upon an accurate insider interpretation of the rise of the UFW—a rare moment where “David wins” against a historical Goliath—and upon an accurate analysis of the union’s decline, Ganz has provided rich insights

¹⁴⁷ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 239.

¹⁴⁸ Mohan, “Head of the UFW Is Stepping Down.”

¹⁴⁹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 240.

¹⁵⁰ Tejada-Flores and Telles, *The Fight in the Fields*.

¹⁵¹ Joseph Grodin, “California Supreme Court Upholds Mandatory First Contract Arbitration for Farmworkers.” *SCOCA Blog*, December 12, 2017, <http://scocablog.com/california-supreme-court-upholds-mandatory-first-contract-arbitration-for-farmworkers>.

for anyone interested in advancing social goals with oppressed and exploited peoples. He also provides valuable insights for egalitarian ethicists and other theorists of equality. His theorizing of the three institutional sources of strategic capacity indicates that some measure of equality among an organization's officials and between its officials and constituents enables its effective operation. Here, inclusive equality emerges not only an important goal but also a means toward the effective realization of organizational goals. Ganz's theorizing of institutional sources of strategic capacity is drawn from his conclusion that the UFW was effective in part, from the 1960s through the late 1970s, because its diverse leadership team regularly engaged in open and dynamic strategy deliberations, which channeled the motivation, knowledge, and investigation practices drawn from the identities, social networks, and tactical repertoires of the union's staff, members, and partners.¹⁵² Conversely, the union later declined as a major force for farm worker advancement because Chávez and his supporters were suspicious of and punitive toward colleagues who disagreed while reducing and controlling deliberative processes, thus creating a more stratified but less effective union.¹⁵³

In addition to providing a theory for effective community organizing and mobilization, Ganz has provided a model for transcending the temptation to uncritically elevate Chávez (or other religious and social leaders) as paradigms of heroic virtue. Instead, Ganz enables his reader to see that clear lessons can be drawn from honest engagement with both the historical achievements and the historical failings of others. His account of the union's survival well beyond its peak as a force of social transformation is a cautionary reminder of the hazards inherent in investing social leaders with outsized and static appraisals of moral virtue, especially

¹⁵² Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 17-18, 90-91.

¹⁵³ Ganz, 241.

when personal character is assessed in isolation from its communal and societal effects. For years, Chávez's leadership was honored and fortified on the basis of actions and achievements that were well behind him and that did not correspond to his present actions and the effects that they were having on colleagues, union members, and not-yet-unionized farm workers. This lesson should resonate with anyone who has been shocked by the harm caused by celebrated "moral leaders" or awakened to their own complicity and enabling behaviors that can serve to legitimize harmful leadership.

Chávez was able to drastically reverse the UFW's course because many union leaders initially deferred to his judgments and because union officials became increasingly less financially dependent upon organizing workers and securing new member dues, having already secured substantial resources through existing union contracts, government grants, external fundraising, and other forms of social capital. According to Ganz, successful fundraising, the capitalization of existing resources and greater stability brought by the CALRA, enabled UFW revenues to soar even while Chávez decimated the UFW's strategic capacity and UFW membership declined.¹⁵⁴ Chávez's institutional decisions, in the context of external political attacks on farm workers, produced UFW leadership that was increasingly distant from farm workers' priorities and dependent on promoting "the Chávez story" in order to procure outside financial support. Whereas the union had previously been able to respond effectively to external challenges, Ganz argues that it later declined because of its failure to address internal challenges effectively.¹⁵⁵ Chávez provides us with egalitarian ideas and examples of effective egalitarian action; he also provides us with an important lesson in the dangers of unaccountable leadership.

¹⁵⁴ Ganz, 243.

¹⁵⁵ Ganz, 254.

While acknowledging the countless social factors that have harmed farm workers and unions in recent decades, Ganz maintains that leadership decisions concerning the UFW's institutional structures negatively shaped the impact that a hostile political environment exerted on the UFW and farm workers generally.¹⁵⁶ He contends that leaders and institutions are capable of diminishing the impact of negative environmental factors and can even create new opportunities in the midst of such opposition.¹⁵⁷ Ganz insists that the UFW not only failed to respond effectively to new political challenges, but that it made detrimental decisions before the most deleterious political opposition began to mobilize in California and nationally.¹⁵⁸ Refusing to "blame the victim" or to ignore the harms caused by external actors, Ganz's analysis affirms that persons and groups have the capacity to respond to violence, pain, and continued threats in ways that bring survival, freedom, and life. This affirmation of human agency, acknowledging that we are not merely victims of history and that our destinies are not fully determined by our social systems and environmental circumstances, is the necessary precondition for any ethical evaluation and for collective ethical action.

Conclusion

At his best, César Chávez provides Christian ethics with an historical exemplar of sacrificial and transformative faith-based egalitarianism, both in thought and in action. His is an

¹⁵⁶ Ganz, 239-243.

¹⁵⁷ Ganz, 243.

¹⁵⁸ In contrast to the criticisms of Chávez's leadership during the UFW's period of disintegration, Catholic "labor priest" Monsignor George Higgins was a staunch defender of his leadership and attributed the UFW's failures to the increasingly hostile U.S. political environment and to the declining power of the labor movement overall. See Prouty, *César Chávez, the Catholic Bishops, and the Farmworkers' Struggle for Social Justice*, 134. Pawel's account of these events corroborates Ganz's claims over against Higgins's interpretation. See generally Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams*.

egalitarian vision that encompasses concern for basic human needs (over against impoverishment), deploys cultural and religious resources to affirm and narrate human equality (over against racist ideology), and attends to the social structures that foster human freedom (over against the instrumentalization of human labor).

However (as is often the case with ourselves), we learn as much or more from honest engagements with Chávez's moral failings as we do by attending to his words and remarkable achievements. This engagement with moral failure requires more from us than simply affirming, "No saint is perfect." Recent scholarly critiques of Chávez's actions as a union leader provide Christian ethicists, and anyone committed to advancing human equality, with opportunities to learn about the importance of cultivating and institutionalizing democratic and accountable leadership in our respective communities. Whereas scholars and historians of Christian ethics have not granted sufficient attention to Chávez's moral legacy, doing so in the present moment provides unique opportunities to engage urgent questions of institutional ethics, enablement, moral complicity, and communal harm reduction. Moreover, engaging Chávez's contradictory legacy invites us to wrestle with the ethics of our daily bread, and to understand why our daily sustenance remains interwoven with institutionalized agricultural violence, a reality that awaits social movements with the vision, faith, and strategy to slay Goliaths.