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THE MAKING OF A LATINO ETHNIC IDENTITY

The Latino press and Latino leaders claim that their group may well be the political movement of the 1980s. Estimates show that by the year 2005 those classified by the census as Hispanics will outnumber blacks to become the largest minority in the United States—politically, socially, and culturally—a demographic event of great significance. Within the group there are visions of a golden epoch where “now that we have the numbers” it will be easy to achieve greater political representation and national prominence: to become, in the words of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) president, Ruben Bonilla, “a truly visible political force.” The bold ones even envision transforming the United States into a bilingual nation.

This prospect has not escaped the attention of the media and of prominent politicians. Some, like California’s ex-senator S. I. Hayakawa, already see the specter of a linguistically divided nation in which a large percentage of its citizens, with ties to nations south of the border, will demand that Spanish be made the official second language in the states where they predominate. Others, like Colorado’s governor Richard Lamm, believing that the national spirit is fragmenting, and fearing a problem similar to that of Canada with Quebec, want action at the highest levels of the federal bureaucracy. Pluralists, on the other hand, many of them in New York, argue on behalf of this “different” migrant group and view the traditional three-generation European pattern of assimilation as the product of a

different era. Using the Afro-American experience as example, and bilingualism as a model, they question the integrative character of American society and the processes through which assimilation was presumably achieved. The cultural pluralists would expand the conventional boundaries in defining who and what are Americans.

Although there are millions of citizens who identify or are identified as Latinos, the existence of an organized Latino ethnicity can be questioned.¹ In many cases the assertion that a Hispanic ethnic culture exists is prompted by self-interest, fear, or, for administrative reasons, by the state.

We can see, however, a common Latino identity emerging in the United States. It is being haltingly erected by those who cross their “individual group boundaries and seek solidarity in a wider Latino unity.”²

But why is it that such a group has not fully emerged and made its social and political weight felt in the United States? The Latino presence is superficially strong in North America. Business and advertising recognize the importance of the Latino market. Most major corporations have devised special ad campaigns to capture what they consider the fastest-growing consumer segment in the country. Even the ultra-“American” (and anti-union) Coors Brewery has declared the 1980s the “Decade of the Hispanic.” But to explain the lateness of the group’s political and social assertion, we must first describe the constituent parts of the whole, stressing their dissimilarity

ties, in order to clarify the processes that foster the emergence of a Latino ethnicity.

Uneven processes in history, nationality, and migration account for the differences in the four components of the group: Mexican Americans or Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and the new migrants from other countries in Latin America (who mostly entered after the new immigration laws of 1965). The first three are the dominant groups, each having settled in a different part of the country and established for other Latinos patterns of settlement and relations with the dominant society where they predominate.

Of the three groups, the most numerous nationally, though the least prominent in New York, are the Mexican Americans, or Chicanos, some 8.7 million, or 60 percent of the 14.6 million officially counted Latinos in 1980. Chicanos are also the oldest Latino population in the United States because the Southwest and Texas were once part of Spain, and then of Mexico. Following the Mexican-American War of 1846, Chicanos moved rapidly from majority to minority status, suffering progressive pauperization through the loss of land, pressed into *barrios*, and victimized by segregationist policies.

The black civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s showed Chicanos the value of massive organizing for gaining equality. With the end of the *bracero* program, agricultural workers were able to organize for better conditions. Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers' (UFW) organizing efforts in California, and the land struggles of Reies Tijerina in New Mexico, combined standard organizing efforts and traditional cultural symbols, which attracted a wide spectrum of Mexican Americans. By the middle 1960s, Chicanos were aggressively asserting their separateness in a variety of organizations (grassroots or *barrio*, professional and university student organizations) and demanding a place within the general society.

The second-largest Latino group, 15 percent or two million and dominant among New York Hispanics, is made up of mainland Puerto Ricans. The main outlines of their situation are familiar to most other New Yorkers: U.S. citizens by birth, Puerto Ricans do not

encounter the migration and quota system that affects all other migrants; indeed, moving from Puerto Rico to the mainland is like any other internal move within the United States. The massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland began with the government's effort to industrialize the island during the late 1940s. Development schemes included encouragement to leave; migration was seen as both a social safety valve and an economic asset. Encouraged also by the availability of cheap air fares due to the surplus of airplanes after World War II (Puerto Ricans are the first airborne migrants in history), the Puerto Rican population on the mainland quadrupled between 1940 and 1950, and tripled again by 1960.

Puerto Rican political organization and ethnic identity in the United States was late developing. The legal status of Puerto Ricans, which facilitated their migration to the mainland, created a shifting population constantly going back and forth for personal and other reasons. The unresolved political status of Puerto Rico also encourages direct interest in its politics and affairs. Candidates for public office there campaign in New York for the support of those who might return to Puerto Rico at election time. The establishment by the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico of an office in New York interfered with the development of a local cadre of leaders. When New York politicians were confronted with a community problem, they consulted the representatives of the Commonwealth government instead of going to the *barrios*. Finally, the Democratic party, a white ethnic working-class party in the Northeast, showed no interest in organizing poor Puerto Ricans. Reform movements within the Democratic party, basically middle class with middle-class agendas, also showed little interest. But the black civil rights movement and the maturing of the Chicano movement served as an inspiration in the development of Puerto Rican political organization and identity. Another push to organize came from the Great Society federal antipoverty programs, which bypassed the local political machines and encouraged local leadership. However, unlike politically conscious Mexican Americans, who adopted the name Chicanos to announce their Mexican identity, mainland

Puerto Ricans still are in disagreement over how to view themselves—whether and how different they are from their relatives back on the island. Most do not accept the proposed term “Neorican.”

Cuban Americans, the third-largest group, add up to 800,000, or 5 percent of the total official Latino population. Cuban Americans entered the U.S. heavily with the official status of refugees following the Cuban Revolution of 1959. The class origin of most of these refugees differed markedly from that of other Latinos; most migrants from revolutionary Cuba came from the upper and middle classes (the bourgeoisie, the traditional middle class, and the “new” middle class). Many arrived in the United States with considerable capital. Many more of their leaders migrated with them than with the other groups; covert federal aid to overthrow the Cuban government gave Cuban exile leadership, old and new, a source of patronage.

By the late 1960s, when efforts to overthrow the revolution had failed, Cubans more or less began to settle in for a permanent exile and, especially in South Florida, entered the political arena. In the New York metropolitan area, Cubans are heavily concentrated in northern New Jersey towns and, to a lesser degree, in upper Manhattan and Queens. As is to be expected from refugees of “socialist” revolutions, Cubans are politically conservative (most belong to or vote for the Republican party) and also exhibit the highest conversion rates to U.S. citizenship of all Latino migrants.

Group Identity

Given these different and disparate migratory processes, what, then, unites Latinos? How do they constitute a group? I believe two things serve to induce the formation of the Latino ethnic identity. One, of course, is the perceived shared cultural background in contrast to the larger American culture, with the Spanish language at the center. The other is the structural position of most Latinos within American society, and, as its consequence,

their relationship to the state apparatus and politics.

The shared cultural background, even if it is a superficial construct that leaves out the heterogeneous nature of the groups, has a tremendous force in identifying Latinos across national boundaries. That background, nurtured in common values, is constantly reinforced in the mass media, both in the U.S. Latino press and in that of the separate countries of origin.³ The notion is further solidified by the immediate, traditional presence of the “colossus from the North” in the life of Latin America. The Spanish language serves as more than a *lingua franca* among the groups; it is the most visible and immediate mark of their shared distinction from the rest of the society. The language is also a *living* force since, unlike other migrants in the United States, Latinos are followed by a powerful and complex system of Spanish-language mass media. Today the Spanish-language media in the United States include sixty-five newspapers, sixty-five magazines, sixty-seven television stations, and 430 radio stations. Two television groups, Spanish International Network (SIN) and Netspan, are able to transmit coast to coast. Furthermore, most major Latino television markets have at least two competing Spanish-language stations.

The maintenance of Spanish and the ideal of bilingualism and formal bilingual education are, as recent surveys indicate, immutable tenets of identity for most Latinos.⁴ In 1980 eight out of ten Hispanics interviewed in the New York metropolitan area favored formal bilingual education. A nationwide survey found, irrespective of national origin and length of residence in the U.S., that bilingualism was the personal goal of most. Compared to previous surveys, there was “no sign of increased commitment to mastery of English at the possible expense of Spanish; the commitment to Spanish is stronger if anything.”⁵ In ordinary everyday discourse, even among fully bilingual or English-dominant Latinos, Spanish continues to preserve a special notion of self. Like Guarani among bilingual Paraguayans, it’s the voice of the soul; uttering a few words of Spanish signifies a separation from the dominant culture and a symbolic unity. The

force of Spanish among Latinos, in intraethnic and interethnic encounters, lies in its ability to compress many contradictory symbols in the search for power, reflecting exclusivity, nostalgia, and/or respect among speakers.

Especially important in the processes of creating a new ethnic identity are those occasions when shared "culture" leaves the remembrances of the old country and is used to adapt to and describe life in the present environment. Among migrants and their descendants, these are the creative moments of forging new interpretations and future traditions. Within the process of Latino ethnic formation, the music of composer-singer Rubén Blades and the poetry of Tato Laviera are examples of the use of expressive culture in forging a new unity based on common traditions and a present similarity within the new polity. Blades, the most popular Latino singer of the moment, sings to a unified Latino group in America, composed of those from the "south," of a different color, of a strange tongue, united by both a common origin and their present situation in the United States. For Blades, those situations are generally the products of exploitation, discrimination, and poverty (both here and in Latin America). In the song *Siembra*, he urges Latinos to use their *consciencia*, in this case their identity and pride, to improve their situation. He warns assimilated Latinos of the pitfalls in their quest for the American dream; the song *Plástico* categorizes those who unequivocally assimilate into the complacent middle class as shallow, "plastic" individuals preoccupied with the latest fashions and willing to mortgage their future in the name of "social status." Both *Siembra* and *Plástico* urge Latinos to unite and through education, hard work, and the inner strength of the group create their own better future.

Like Blades, Tato Laviera also speaks of and about a new environment. Laviera's work is bilingual, parts in Spanish, parts in English. He is looking for a new medium of expression to describe the current situation. It is no longer the poetry of "salvation in the tropics from this alien society" (of concrete jungles). In his

latest book, *American Folklore*,⁶ Laviera moves out from his "Neoricano" and New York ghetto reality to reach the deeper cultural roots that unite groups, as in the poem "Vaya Carnal." The *carnal*, or full brother, is the street Chicano, whom the street "Neoricano" has discovered as his brother. Their brotherhood emanates from a similar past and a common popular street culture. Laviera ends the poem calling both himself and his *carnal* "*chicano-riqueños*," hoping that this unity will create a future *totalmente nuestro* (totally ours).

As expressed by both Blades and Laviera the uncertainties lie not between assimilation and the maintenance of the traditional culture, they do not present two or more static, all-or-nothing cultures, but interaction and creativity within new situations. They speak of poor, working-class and street Latinos who are forging a new consciousness out of their shared past and present condition.

Political Life

But we will better understand the unity of the Latinos when looking at their structural similarities within American society and at their relations to the state. It is in this sphere that they unite to organize politically. Latinos in general, Cuban Americans being the exception, occupy the lower rungs of American society and suffer job discrimination due to the ethnic segmentation of the work force. It is in dealing with state programs like affirmative action, the welfare system, the criminal justice system, the schools, and the electoral system that Latinos become homogenized, both from above and from below. They began to organize politically as the American state began to tackle problems of racial and social inequality in response to the black civil rights movement. In that sense, in their relations with the state, Latinos differ markedly from previous ethnic groups. When they entered the wider American scene in large numbers, they were able to benefit from the New Deal and Great Society agendas. Organizing for collective action to demand rights and benefits from the state became one of the ways they could mobilize their shared cultural values and gain recognition as an entity.

At first, most organizing was sectarian, within "national" lines. Thus Puerto Ricans in New York City at the beginning of the civil rights movement separated from other Latinos, most of whom were not citizens and could not vote, establishing their own parade as a symbol of their political aspirations and their strength. Politicians, who previously catered to the Spanish-speaking population, began to address most Latino problems in terms of the Puerto Rican population. Federal program funds and student scholarships were distributed only to Puerto Ricans.

Such organizing along national lines began to change significantly in the 1970s, as the "new migrants" began to accept their permanence and interest in the local political process, and as the state began to manage its minorities (and the funds destined for them) across intra-Hispanic divisions. The emergence of a wider Latino identity and the birth of organizations promoting their political and social enfranchisement began with their daily interactions in the neighborhoods of New York or Chicago, or any other city where two or more Latino groups interact.

Manhattan's Upper West Side, for example, had been a working-class Irish and middle-class Jewish neighborhood, until, in the late 1960s, large numbers of working-class Puerto Ricans and then Dominicans moved in. Today it serves as home to the largest Dominican population in New York City; like most multi-ethnic neighborhoods, it is spatially segregated.

Dominicans began migrating to the United States in large numbers after the 1965 change in the immigration laws. The change also coincided with the American invasion of the island and the establishment of the repressive Balaguer government. One of the first acts of the Balaguer regime was to dismantle the local popular organizations that had flourished under the social democratic regime of Juan Bosch. Those *barrio* leaders who could escape migrated and eventually, looking for jobs, found their way to New York City.

Once here they took control of most Dominican voluntary associations and clubs,

and founded branches of the Dominican opposition parties. All their activities centered on Dominican politics, human rights violations, and the defeat of the Balaguer government. At the same time, taking advantage of the open-admissions policy of the City University of New York, many became professionals. When in 1978 the social democratic party, the *Partido Revolucionario Dominicano* (PRD), triumphed, a massive homecoming of Dominicans ensued. To their surprise, however, there was no place for them back home: the economy was in shambles, with Gulf & Western controlling virtually all activity; political cadres who had stayed were occupying the bureaucratic posts; and their professions brought little economic remuneration.

Members of this group, with a long tradition of political activism and a strong internationalist ideology centered in the Dominican Republic, now realized that their only place was in New York, where they now began to organize and seek alliances with Puerto Rican leaders at the local level. Puerto Ricans in the middle 1970s were experiencing a series of stunning defeats in the city's political arena. Their defeat over the control of a community school board, in a district where they were the absolute majority, left them searching for new solutions to the problems of ethnic politics in New York.

In their alliances, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans founded a series of organizations (most prominent among them the Latino Urban Political Association [LUPA] designed to wrest control from the Jewish minority of the district. Focusing on the fact that all of the dilapidated and overcrowded schools were in the Latino section of the neighborhood, they organized and in 1986 gained control of the community school board. Also in coalition with the Puerto Ricans (and with the crucial help of Puerto Rican lawyers and citywide elected officials), Dominican voters registered for the Community Development Agency elections (CDA controls the municipal allocation of antipoverty funds into communities). Their slate, a mixture of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, fell one vote short in 1984 of gaining control.

Today, while Dominicans and Puerto Ricans still have their separate social clubs, and some continue to follow the politics "back home,"

