

Hispanics, Latinos, or Americanos: The Evolution of Identity

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This essay identifies and categorizes terms used to designate the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States. It provides an analysis framing the process of ethnic self-designation within an ethnopolitical and psychosocial context. The analysis concludes by presenting mestizaje and transculturation as processes involved in the evolution of Latino identity.

• Latino identity • Hispanics • Latinos • Americanos

Identity is the number-one national problem here. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 262)

One of the fastest growing ethnic minority groups in the United States is in search of a name. Or so it appears, given the multiple terms used for its designation. Historically, such an amalgamation of people was referred to as Spanish speaking, a current misnomer, given that a significant segment of this population is English dominant. Hispanics, Latinos, Hispanos, Latins, Central Americans, or South Americans—to name a few—are some of the general terms used to designate this diverse ethnic collage. Many individuals prefer to politically affirm their ethnic identity by using terms such as Chicanos, Xicanos, Ricans, or Boricuas, whereas others affirm their national origins by using

terms such as Mexicans or Mexican Americans, Cubans or Cuban Americans, Colombians, Dominicans, Peruvians, Salvadorans, or Venezuelans, among many others.

Encased within historical eras, ethnic self-designation reflects the dialectics between dominance and self-determination. Because the systematic negation and oppression of people of color result in pervasive identity conflicts (Fanon, 1967), Latinos' power to name themselves advances liberation by rejecting colonization (Castillo, 1994). Searching for a name to designate this heterogeneous group can be a challenging and confusing ordeal. Because self- and other identification is a developmental process, naming evolves in response to psychosocial and geopolitical factors.

In this essay I present a brief taxonomy

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of terms in an attempt to clarify the complexity of ethnic identification. Such presentation is situated within the current historical and political context. As Hispanic/Latinos bear a plural identity, ethnic names that are appropriate today may be obsolete or even offensive tomorrow. The mediating factors in self-designation are gaining a voice and power to name one's identity and define one's reality. I conclude with a discussion of the evolution of the Latino identity.

A Taxonomic Panorama

I offer a taxonomy of ethnic terms used to designate the generic Hispanic/Latino population in addition to specific names used to designate distinct groups. Besides the references cited, the interested reader can consult Internet resources, such as the Chicano-Latino Network (CLNET), accessible through the University of California, Los Angeles gopher server (gopher.ucla.edu 70), the Encyclopedia.com, and The Hispano Crypto-Jewish Resource Center (located at the Ira M. Beck Memorial Archives, University of Denver Main Campus, Penrose Library Special Collections, Denver, Colorado), and other related links.

Generic Terms

Hispanic

The generic term *Hispanic* was officially created by the United States Bureau of the Census to designate people of Spanish origin who identified themselves as such in the 1970 census (COSSMHO, 1986). Often used to refer collectively to all Spanish speakers, it connotes a lineage or cultural heritage related to Spain. Indeed, the term Hispanic can be related to internalized colonization because it is strongly supported by politically conservative groups who regard their European ancestry as superior to the conquered

indigenous peoples of the Americas (Falicov, 1998). An example of identity imperialism, the term Hispanic is inaccurate, incorrect, and often offensive as a collective name for all Spanish speakers or Latinos. Many millions of Spanish-speaking people—such as Native Americans—are not of true Spanish descent, and millions of Latin Americans do not speak Spanish or claim Spanish heritage (e.g., Brazilians), therefore, they are not Hispanics.

Latino(a)

Recognizing the diversity of this ethnic minority group, *Latino* (male) or *Latina* (female) is used to refer to people originating from or having a heritage related to Latin America. Acting as a superset of many nationalities, *Latino* is preferred by many over the term Hispanic because it excludes Europeans such as Spaniards from being identified as ethnic minorities in the United States while it includes Brazilians, who do not qualify as Hispanics because their mother tongue is Portuguese. Many politically correct people prefer Latino because it reaffirms their native pre-Hispanic identity (Falicov, 1998). The term *Latin* comes into use as the least common denominator for all peoples of Latin America in recognition of the fact that some romance language (Spanish, Portuguese, French) is the native tongue of the majority of Latin Americans. Shorris (1992) argued that the term Latino is linguistically correct in Spanish because it has gender, contrary to the term Hispanic that follows the English usage of nongendered grammar. However, as the current term used to designate the vast majority of this ethnic group, Latino(a) is not appropriate for the millions of Native Americans who inhabit the Americas.

La Raza

La Raza (literally meaning “the race”) is a widespread term in use among Spanish-speaking and Spanish-surnamed people in the United States. *La Raza* emerges as a designation acceptable to many Latino, Carib-

bean, Chicano, and Mexican Americans born in the United States or Latin America.

The term *La Raza* has been intricately involved in political activism. In the 1960s and 1970s, The Brown Power grew politically active, demanding equal opportunities and rights. Cesar Chavez organized the United Farm Workers in 1962, obtaining victories against large California growers. Although *La Raza Unida*, a party formed in 1970, has won local elections, greater political success has come to Mexican Americans in mainstream U.S. political parties.

Hispano(a)

The term *Hispano* or *Hispana* comprises those individuals who trace their history to the Spanish conquistadores and settlers who arrived in 1494 and occupied and dominated what is known today as Mexico, California, Texas, Florida, New Mexico, and Arizona in the 1600s to the 1800s (COSSMHO, 1986). Comprising the Creole Spanish–Native American race, *Hispanos* tend to identify with their Spanish heritage as opposed to the Mexican settlers. A traditionally closed and conservative group, evidence suggests that many *Hispanos* may be descendants of persecuted Jews who fled Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries seeking refuge in what were then the farthest reaches of the known world. They survived by minimizing their contact with outsiders and by hiding or disguising their religious and cultural identities as much as possible. They are what historical researchers call “cryptic or crypto Jews,” meaning hidden Jews (Bloom & Bloom, 1993).

“Spanish People”

This term is frequently used in the United States to refer indiscriminately to any person who speaks Spanish. As an ethnic term, “Spanish people” is imprecise and often inappropriate in that it includes people from the Americas continent, the Caribbean, and Spain. The term, however, is a proper designation for the people of Spain, as some

Spaniards or native people of Spain do reside in the United States. Nonetheless, some of the “Spaniards” living in the United States, such as Basques, Catalonians, and Spanish gypsies, do not consider themselves *Spaniards*. As an illustration, Basques and Catalonians each have a different culture and language from Spain, in addition to separatist political movements to become independent republics. The originators of flamenco, *gitanos* or Spanish gypsies, do not consider themselves *Spaniards*, and many call themselves the Roma people.

Americano(a)

This term is traditionally used to designate Americans who are not of Hispanic/Latino extraction. However, it has been used recently to designate Latinos living in the United States. The term *Americano* embraces and celebrates the diversity and energy of the contemporary Latin American community wedded through a wealth of nationalities (Olmos, Ybarra, & Monterey, 1999). Moreover, *Americano* describes a group people bound together by their languages and traditions, as varied as America itself.

Specific or National Terms

Mexican

The nationality of the inhabitants of Mexico, *Mexicans* is the term used appropriately for Mexican citizens who visit or work in the United States. However, it is an ineffective name to designate those people who are citizens of the United States—either born in the United States or naturalized citizens of the United States who are of Mexican ancestry. Some *Mexicans* maintain strong family ties in Mexico (by visiting periodically and by investing economically and emotionally in Mexico), and they usually intend to return to Mexico provided they can become economically secure. Therefore,

these people maintain and nurture their offspring in their language, religion, and culture.

Mexican American

Following the pattern sometimes used to identify the extraction of other ethnic Americans (African American, Italian American, etc.), Mexican American refers to those individuals of Mexican descent who are U.S. citizens. This term is acceptable to many Mexican descendants, with the exception of those who do not identify with a Mexican heritage but rather with a Spanish heritage (such as *Hispanos*). Also, for those who do not view themselves as "Americans" by choice, this designation is problematic, and still others reject a hyphenated identity.

Chicano(a)

Used to describe Mexican Americans, *Chicano* (male) and *Chicana* (female) was originally pejorative. Brown Power movement activists of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States adopted this designation with a sense of pride. One theory of its etymology traces its origin to the 1930s and 1940s period when poor, rural, indigenous Mexicans came to the United States as seasonal migrant workers. The term seems to have come into first use in the fields of California in derision of the inability of native Nahuatl speakers to refer to themselves as "Mexicanos" and instead spoke of themselves as "Mesheecanos," in accordance with the pronunciation rules of their language. Another theory of the etymology of *Chicano* is that in vulgar Spanish it is common for Mexicans to use the "ch" conjunction in place of certain consonants to create a term of endearment. Among some Mexican Americans, the term still retains an offensive connotation, particularly because it is used by activists and by those who seek to create a new identity for their culture rather than to subsume it under the mainstream culture.

Xicano(a)

Like *Chicano(a)*, the word *Xicano* derives from the Nahuatl pronunciation of *Mexica* or *Mexicanos*, the group of indigenous people commonly referred to as the Aztecs. In using *Xicano*, which replaces the "ch" in *Chicano* with the "x," the person affirms his or her indigenous heritage (Castillo, 1994)

Boricua

This Taíno name refers to the inhabitants of Borinquén, the island that became Puerto Rico, a colony of Spain, in 1493. Neither a state nor a republic, Puerto Rico is a free-associated state, an American commonwealth, whereby political power remains with the United States government (Comas-Díaz, Lykes, & Alarcón, 1998). The island has limited political self-determination because of its colonial status. The terms used by Puerto Ricans for self-designation tend to reflect an identity crisis borne by their country's uncertain political status. *Boricua* emphasizes a political identification with a Spanish-speaking Latin American identity, as opposed to an English-speaking United States one. During the late 1960s and 1970s, the phrase "*Boricua, defiende lo tuyo*" (*Boricua, defend what is yours*) was used as a revolutionary cry. *Boricua* is also an endearing expression used by Puerto Ricans to designate each other.

Nuyorican

This term refers to Puerto Ricans born in the continental United States, particularly in New York City. A separate ethnic identity from island Puerto Ricans who are members of a majority group, many Nuyoricans' identity is colored by being an ethnic minority population (Algarín & Piñero, 1975). Indeed, some Nuyoricans are politically radicalized within their experiences as people of color in the United States society. Continental Puerto Ricans are also born outside of New York, therefore, the collective term used to designate them is Ricans. As an il-

illustration, whereas a Nuyorican is a Rican born and raised in New York, a Chicagoric is a Rican born and raised in Chicago.

Rican

Rican refers to the second- and third-generation Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland. Like Nuyoricans, many Ricans maintain close contact with island Puerto Rican communities through migration and reverse migration. Regardless of their birthplace, Puerto Ricans are United States citizens since 1917. Ricans embrace a cultural identity different from Puerto Ricans. Like Spanglish, Rican culture synthesizes Puerto Rican and United States cultures into a brand new one. For instance, contrary to the dominant ideology on Puerto Rico, which has deemphasized the role of slavery in Puerto Rican history and the presence of African traits and cultural elements, many Ricans tend to underline their debt to Africa, affirming their Black heritage (Klor de Alva, 1997).

LatiNegro(a)

This term was coined to designate the African Latino(a) who is perceived beyond any doubt as Black by both the North American and the Latino communities (Comas-Díaz, 1994). This term avoids the partial or total negation of the Latinness in African Latinos by the Latino community. The offspring of African American (Caribbean or North, Central, and South American) and Latino parents, some LatiNegros are immersed in the African American community. Also known as Afro Latinos, this segment of the Latino population bears a racial identification based on the combined and class discrimination they experience from the mainstream society as well as from the Hispanic/Latino community.

Caribeño(a)

This term refers to the Latinos from the Caribbean. Acknowledging that the Caribbean region provides a specific worldview, many

Spanish-speaking Caribbean groups, such as Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans, are additionally using this self-designation, recognizing their emotional-geographic locale. The term Caribeño(a) also embraces the psychology of being an islander.

Epilogue or Prelude: La Raza Cósmica/ The Cosmic Race

The Latino mosaic reflects a plural, dynamic, and evolving transformation. An apt metaphor for the development of the United States, Latino identity evolution offers a parallel to the collective identity redefinition. Historically, some Latinos were indigent to this land, whereas others arrived searching for the immigrant golden dream of opportunities, and still others continue to be washed up on American shores searching for freedom and political asylum.

The high rates of Latin American immigration, Latino birth, and growing numbers of mixed marriages accentuate the emerging Latino preponderance in the United States. Not longer "strangers among us," Latinos transform the North American ethnic makeup and economy (Suro, 1999). As both outsiders and insiders, many Latinos live in the hyphen (Stavans, 1996), creating a space whereby transculturation changes both the Latino and mainstream cultures. The concept of transculturation involves an adaptive, dynamic, evolutionary, and dialectical process (Comas-Díaz, 1987). It differs from acculturation in that it gives birth to a distinct culture emerging from conflicting cultural values (De Granda, 1968).

Likewise, Latino identity evolution underscores *mestizaje*, or the mixing of races to produce a new one. As early as 1925, José Vasconcelos (1997), a Mexican philosopher, presented his racial theory of the cosmic race—the future of humankind—as emanating out of the synthesis of Indian, White, "Mongol," and African races. Arguing that *mestizaje* promoted civilization, Vasconcelos believed that the Spanish Empire in Europe,

the Americas, and the Philippines connected, for the first time, all of the major racial groups. Contrary to other Christian religions, he asserted the Spanish Catholic Church enhanced racial unification by including the Indians through religious conversion and education.

Regardless of calling themselves Hispanics, Latinos, Americanos, or *la Raza Cósmica*, this ethnic group continues searching for the evolution of identity. As people of all colors, they transform every inch of the Americas' spiritual, physical, and emotional geography.

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