

# **LATINOS/HISPANICS . . . WHAT NEXT!**

## **Some Reflections on the Politics of Identity in the U.S.**

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It is fitting that, in an issue of *Cultural Logic* dedicated to the examination of "Post-Marxist Aporias," this critical assessment of identity politics be included. Among those aporias, the contradiction between the universal and the particular is perhaps one of the most striking. One of its manifestations is the contradiction between the rejection of metanarratives for the sake of enshrining localized "voices"/"identities," and the submission to the universalizing effects of the dominant "voice" inherent in the very process of attempting to escape it through the construction of difference.

I became interested in identity politics and its contradictions when I found out, some years ago, that I was included among the "minority faculty" in the university where I work. As I am a foreigner (I was born and grew up in Argentina and came to this country as an adult), I thought, naively, that the affirmative action office might have made a mistake. They informed me, orally as well as in writing, that I was a "Hispanic" and, therefore, they had the right to count me as a "minority." This was indeed a surreal and upsetting experience first because of the racism entailed in the denial of my identity and the imposition of a spurious "hispanicity" loaded with negative connotations, and also because of the administrative uses to which I was subject by becoming part of the statistics used to show compliance with the law. It was also absurd and even funny in a weird sort of way because, for anyone like myself, aware of the heterogeneity of the populations thrown together under the label, the idea is nonsensical, to say the least.

But this is no laughing matter, for labels have consequences and these became increasingly clear to me as I began to search for critiques of the "Hispanic" label. I thought I would find plenty, for I mistakenly considered that the problems inherent in the label were obvious, but I was wrong: I found only a handful of articles which, critical of the "Hispanic" label, suggested that "Latino" was more historically and politically adequate. Upon reflection, I concluded that neither label was acceptable for reasons I will outline as follows:

These labels are intended to identify a "minority group"--i.e., a population which the "majority" considers inferior, which has been historically oppressed for generations, and which, objectively, is socially rejected, economically excluded, and lacks political power. The invention of the "Hispanic" label erases the difference between the historically oppressed populations of Mexican and Puerto Rican origin and newly arrived immigrants from Central and South America. Moreover, it does not differentiate between those populations and people from Spain. Altogether this blurring of distinctions has many negative implications for members of local minorities, for arriving immigrants, and for the average American, whose relative ignorance about the world beyond U.S. boundaries is strengthened by labels that stereotype practically the entire world. The bombardment of the population with statistics that constantly stress the differences among whites, Asians, Blacks, and "Hispanics," together with ethnic/racial politics and practices that minoritize everyone who is not from Europe must contribute to the strengthening of racial stereotypes and an oversimplified view of the world, especially among the very young, the uneducated and the prejudiced, for whom the world might easily now appear to be populated primarily by minorities.

Both "Hispanic" and "Latino" carry contradictory meanings: positive when linked to culture (understood in terms of ways of life or as concrete cultural/artistic productions) by, for example, minority leaders, educators, and politicians; and negative when placed in the context of what the mass media and the average person associate with them: drug abuse, low income, high incidence of AIDS, high fertility, school dropouts, criminal behavior, high rate of poverty, high proportion of families headed by women, large numbers of welfare recipients, and so on.

Let's examine the positive side first. In the context of the present politics of identity and public concern with multiculturalism, the labels are viewed by many, especially those in the intellectual and artistic elites, as sources of cultural pride. But, exactly what are the major components of that all-encompassing culture they seem to have in mind? Which components of the culture should people be proud of? And whose culture? Mexican? Mexican American? Puerto Rican? Colombian? The culture of Spain? When travelling in Central and South America, I was struck with the differences between Argentina and the other countries; when I visited Spain and Italy, I was amazed at how much more at home I felt in Italy than in Spain. Divisions in terms of national origin, social class, ethnicity, race, length of stay in the U.S., and so on make it exceedingly problematic to find common cultural denominators in this population beyond the language. And even the language itself divides, for each Latin American country has its own version of Spanish which is itself divided by region, class, ethnicity, race, etc. Just as heterogeneous are the

populations of Mexican, Puerto Rican and Spanish descent living in this country, in which the younger generations have at best a superficial knowledge of Spanish. Here one runs into a concept of culture as a thing that somehow should be preserved and passed on from one generation to the next. But culture is not a thing; it is the outcome of the lived experience of people, and it changes as that experience changes, subject to the processes that are constantly changing the society as a whole. To gloss over the living nature of culture, to posit instead some objective "Hispanicity" common to everyone remotely connected to Spain or born in a Spanish-speaking country, while glossing over the historical cultural differences that divide this population is a state-imposed hegemonic project that culturalizes economic exploitation and political oppression.

These populations and a large proportion of immigrants from Central and South America are where they are, politically and economically, not because of their "Hispanic" or "Latin" culture but because of their class location in the economic system. I would argue that, culturally, the labels distort reality and create false perceptions which deepen the ignorance of the average person about the "real" culture of these populations. For example: to throw together the cultural productions of Spain; Central and South America; the immigrants of those countries who live in the U.S.; and the many different populations of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent who live in this country under the "Latino" or "Hispanic" label can yield only mystifications. It is as enlightening to say that Borges and Cervantes are "Hispanic" writers as to say that Shakespeare and Faulkner are "Anglo" writers.

When examining the negative side of labeling, the first thing to catch one's attention is that the labels hide more than they reveal. For example, they hide the fact that a large proportion of these populations are of Native American and of European descent. The labels perform neat tricks; they "minoritize" foreigners from Spanish speaking countries (many of whom are of European descent), make Native Americans disappear under the pseudo-European veneer of "Hispanic," or transform all "Latinos" into Native Americans because, as a Chicano scholar noted, the real reason why populations of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Spanish descent have been historically subject to racist practices had nothing to do with their "Spanish" culture but with the fact that a large proportion had Native American blood. The minoritization of foreigners--especially of middle class, professional and technical workers--creates misleading evidence of progress in affirmative action recruiting. The minoritization of the "brain drain" of the Third World is legal because all the labels used to identify "minority" populations make no distinctions in class or national origin. While that might seem good, the implications for populations who have been excluded and oppressed for generations are far from desirable.

I cannot end without restating some of my personal views on these matters. What I have written would seem to indicate my rejection of the "Hispanic" and the "Latina" labels. That would be a correct inference. It makes sense to me to consider myself, besides Argentine, Latin American. These are descriptions of myself, partial aspects of my historically developed identity. They give me a partial understanding of who I am and were I to adopt them as alternatives or negations of the racial/ethnic labels currently in use I would be falling in the trap set by their "ideological interpellations." As Althusser

(1972) argued, the main function of ideology is the constitution of individual subjects and these, in turn, are who they are in dialectical relationship to the interpellating Subject (God, the State, the Nation, the Race, etc.). Acquiescing to this interpellations means agreeing to the support of the status quo even as we believe we are challenging it or changing it. The labels "Hispanic," Latina/Latino are, from my standpoint, adaptations to U.S.-imposed conditions of political discourse which disable rather than enable the populations so labelled. Why? Because, in the last instance, these ethnic/cultural labels are euphemisms for referring to important sectors of the U.S. working-class. The kinds of political issues which concern the men and women who self-identify as Latino/Latina tend to be working-class issues, common to all working-class people regardless of cultural heritage and skin color: jobs, good wages, housing, schools, safety in the streets, health care, etc. But the politics of class has been silenced while the politics of identity flourish. It has become legitimate to state political claims only as members of ethnic/racial minorities or majorities, not in terms of class locations. As long as this situation is not challenged, these labels will continue to shape our perceptions, strengthening the racial/ethnic divisions among people and, therefore, strengthening racism itself. On the other hand, even though the "Latina" label does not resonate with me, personally I consider it more acceptable than "Hispanic" for it grapples with the historical links between people who, while living both north and south of the U.S. border between the U.S. and Latin America, do have a common history. The "Hispanic" label, on the other hand, seeks to obscure that history while stressing the links to the former colonizer, in fact granting the former colonizer cultural hegemony over its former subjects.

Ultimately, how we call ourselves is our own business, although whatever we do as individuals, we are powerless to change the way others label us. As a sociologist, I am aware that insofar as the politics of identity remain "in command," critiques cannot change the status quo. Labels can be abolished only through political practices aimed at rejecting the "victim" status the system imposes upon people as the indispensable precondition for listening to their grievances. People, men and women, cannot at this time voice their grievances as workers but only as victims of their gender or their race or their ethnicity. In a process of reaction formation, people may embrace these victimized identities as banners of struggle, thus, for example, positing "Latino" against the state-created "Hispanic." But while there might be short-term gains in embracing these general identities that cut across class differences, class divisions have a way of reasserting themselves, as those individuals able to experience upward social mobility are then denounced, accused of having renounced their race, while they themselves do not understand why they are put down for their success. These contradictions should alert us to the need to be aware of the many meanings of culture, so that we can differentiate culture as the expression of free creativity and self-expression, from the culture which is the expression of state-imposed ethnicity or from the use of "Hispanic" as a code word to replace the "culture of poverty" standby explanation of the effects of social exclusion and economic exploitation.

In the end, clarity about the sources of common grievances, needs, and aspirations matters more than labels. When that clarity is achieved, a clarity that necessitates a return

to the discredited "metanarrative" that illuminates the crucial commonalities underlying the multiplicity of "identities" that today divide us, we are likely to realize that unity and strength can emerge more quickly from the frank recognition of differences despite our underlying class-based commonalities than from the often instrumental adoption of panethnic identities.

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