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## Hispanics and/or Latinos in the United States: The Social Construction of an Identity

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**Abstract:** The meaning of the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ in the United States have been debated since their emergence. Some people who identify as Latino or Hispanic claim geographic origin is the identity’s defining characteristic, while others argue that internal and external racial perceptions of the group, lived experiences of oppression, or common cultural components are more relevant. This study examines the conception of these identities in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to understand part of their current meaning. It analyzes the population that the United States Census classifies as Hispanic/Latino, beginning with the social movements that arose during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to bring an end to discrimination and achieve legal and representative equality in key U.S. institutions. As time has passed and more people from Latin America and Spain have arrived in the country, the meaning of the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ have taken on new dimensions. Nevertheless, these terms refer to an identity that has always had a political component and has always brought together very disparate populations, which it continues to do today.

**Keywords:** Hispanics, Latinos, Latinx, identity, migration, panethnicity

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<sup>1</sup> Editors’ note: This is an English translation, offered by the Observatorio, of the Spanish original submitted by the author. See study 065-11/2020SP.



## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Civil Rights Movement took its own form among Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. Mexican American and Puerto Rican organizations mobilized to achieve equality before the law; to end discrimination; and to improve education, healthcare, and the infrastructure within their own neighborhoods. From the 1940s to the 1980s, the leaders of these organizations were involved in an associative process through which they would create a ‘Hispanic’ community in the collective imagination of the U.S. It was during these years that the current system of identity politics developed, as is clear from Congress, which in this era saw the emergence of groups such as the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, which promote the general interests of the ethnic groups they represent.

This study briefly outlines how the categories ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino/a’ arose.<sup>2</sup> The bibliography included here is not intended to be exhaustive; rather it focuses on key studies that aim to reconstruct how this process took place. My starting point is the theoretical perspective according to which ethnic and racial identities are not static, but rather respond to the type of social interactions that take place between individuals and social groups when they occur (Barth, 1969; Nagel, 1994; Cornell and Hartmann, 2006; Wimmer, 2008; Lamont, 2014). The panethnic labels ‘Latino/a’ and ‘Hispanic’ (Okamoto and Mora, 2014) encompass various ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> Up to section 6 of this work, the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino/a’ are treated as non-synonymous to facilitate an analysis of the differences between them.

groups under a single name and bring them together, emphasizing supposed shared characteristics: cultural and linguistic similarities as well as Latin American and/or Spanish origin. As we will see, these terms were coined despite the differences among their constituent groups, and they evolved in such a way that, depending on geographic area, socioeconomic status, internal and external racial perceptions, the number of generations a group had resided in the U.S., and immigration status, they have taken on different meanings which may encompass more or fewer people.

Migration from rural to urban areas of the U.S. was an important process in the creation of Hispanic identity in the 1940s and 1950s. Until 1950, the majority of the Mexican American population lived in rural areas. By 1970, 75% of the population lived in urban areas. This population movement would play a role in the establishment of panethnic groups (Moore and Pachón, 1985, p. 13): conglomerates of several Latin American nationalities living in cities for the first time, sharing urban spaces such as neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces.

Thus, Mexican American and Puerto Rican groups began viewing themselves as members of a broader identity with shared characteristics, and which existed in opposition to other groups that did not speak Spanish and came from other parts of the world. Furthermore, perceived by U.S. society as ‘Spanish speakers,’ these groups of mostly Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans (and, to a lesser extent, Cubans and other Latin American nationalities) organized to gain strength in numbers and political representation.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, the political mobilization of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans intensified. These mobilizations would lead to the creation of an ethnic identity built around the nationality of origin. Some Mexican Americans would recast themselves as Chicanos and some Puerto Ricans as Boricuas. But it was during the negotiation process unfolding between their

neighborhood organizations and the government that these ethnic and national identities expanded to encompass many other ethnic groups under a single panethnic umbrella term: 'Hispanic.'

Until the 1970s, the U.S. government referred to the 'Hispanic' population as the country's 'Spanish-speaking population.' This term was used to identify people of Latin American or Spanish descent living in the country and to know who used federal public services and how they were used. The term 'Hispanic' denoted a panethnic category that spanned many social groups that were supposedly very similar, but which had very different historic profiles. This study argues that 'Hispanic' and 'Latino' can have diverging connotations determined by factors such as the internal and external racial perception of the group's constituents, traditions of political struggle to end inequality and racial discrimination, geographic location within the U.S., and the number of generations since a given family member first arrived in the country.

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To better understand the polysemy of the terms 'Hispanic' and 'Latino/a,' I will begin by outlining the Chicano (Mexican American) and Puerto Rican social movements that, along with Cubans, will play a central role in creating this terminology. The initiative to name Spanish speakers 'Hispanics' can be traced back to the political sphere in the 1960s and 1970s. Organizations of Spanish-speaking populations in urban neighborhoods sought greater political representation to achieve equality and end discrimination. These movements would lead to the government adopting the term 'Hispanic' in the 1980 Census. Although the history of Spanish-speaking populations in the U.S. starts long before the 1940s, I will begin after the Second World War, as that was when, with the 1943 Los Angeles race riots, the notion of a 'Hispanic' identity began to take root. This study will examine these movements, their causes, and why the government adopted the term 'Hispanic' rather than 'Latino.'

## 2. Social mobilizations for equality

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People of Mexican and Puerto Rican origin mobilized alongside the Civil Rights Movement led by African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican Americans all fought to end ethnic and racial segregation and achieve equality before the law. These movements culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was proposed by President Kennedy and, following his assassination, signed into law by President Johnson. Many of the U.S.'s current sociopolitical community organizations and groups arose at that time to safeguard the civil rights of minorities in the U.S. An example of a well-known organization is UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza). Mexican Americans in the southwestern U.S. became involved in this context of national political mobilization after the signing of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the annexation of Mexican territories by the U.S., when the region's now-Mexican Americans' experiences of discrimination prompted them to organize in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One area where measures were taken to achieve equality was education. U.S. schools were racially segregated and white students attended those that offered a better-quality education and had greater resources. But in its 1954 decision *Brown v Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. However, more than a decade earlier, Californians of Mexican origin had fought for this same right in one of the most famous legal cases against segregation in education: *Méndez v. Westminster*. Filed in 1944, this lawsuit ended racial segregation in California public schools. Some considered this case as the basis for the later *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 (García Bedolla, 2014, pp.61-62). The events that led to the case started when Soledad Vidaurri, of Mexican American origin, attempted to enroll her children and those of her brother, Gonzalo Méndez, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Street School in Westminster, California. The administration accepted the two lighter-skinned children of the five, but denied

access to the three who had darker skin, arguing that they should go to the nearby Hoover School where Mexican American children attended. Soledad Vidaurri declined to enroll the children in either of the schools. After this incident, with the help of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a group of Mexican American parents sued various Orange County, California school districts where their children attended racially segregated schools. LULAC was founded in Texas in 1929 and had an active presence in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. At that time, it fought for school desegregation and an end to discrimination against Texans of Mexican origin (García Bedolla, 2014 pp. 64-67). After the case was decided in Vidaurri's favor, *Méndez v. Westminster* set a precedent and serves as an example of the struggle from within institutions that people of Mexican origin pursued in the 1940s and 1950s and which would intensify in the 1960s and 1970s.

In this scope of grassroots organizations defending civil rights in the Southwest, the Spanish-Speaking People's Congress emerged. Its leader, a woman of Guatemalan background, was the vice-president of a canning plant workers union. In 1939, she and other leaders met and approved a set of demands that included an end to housing, education, and employment discrimination, and the creation of Latino Studies departments at universities, demands that resembled those being made by other organizations. Furthermore, they demanded an end to the immigrant deportation campaigns that were on the rise in the 1930s (Gratton and Merchant, 2013). Many of these issues would be taken up again by the Chicano movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Many Mexican Americans participated in the American GI Forum (AGIF) during the Second World War. This organization of service members became one of the most influential Mexican American organizations in the U.S. Another important group was the Community Service Organization (CSO), founded in 1947 by Antonio Ríos, Edward Roybal, and Fred Ross in California, which would serve as training for

Chicano leaders such as Dolores Huerta and César Chávez, who in turn founded the United Farm Workers of America in 1962 (García Bedolla, 2014, p.68).

Thanks to these efforts, more Mexican Americans began winning seats in Congress. In 1962, the political network of *¡Viva Kennedy!* clubs helped get Roybal elected as a representative from California and González elected as a representative from Texas in the U.S. Congress. In order to focus on positioning their leaders in formal political structures and gaining representation in U.S. politics, Mexican American leaders formed the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASSO).

In addition to these selected examples of organizations in the southwestern U.S., after World War II, Mexican American university student organizations began emerging. At that time, Mexican American students were being admitted to universities in large numbers. The lawsuits their parents had filed alongside organizations such as LULAC, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American GI Forum, and the CSO in order to end racial segregation in schools and discrimination led to greater access to university for these young people. The students participated in protests in the 1960s and 1970s including, for example, the well-known Delano grape strike started by the United Farm Workers in order to achieve better working conditions for laborers.

Within these university organizations, the students, a majority of whom were of Mexican descent, reinterpreted what it meant to be Mexican American and coined the term ‘Chicano’ to refer to the Mexican American population living in the southwestern U.S. In the 1940s and 1950s, middle class sectors of the Mexican American population in California, Hispanics in New Mexico, Texans, and older Mexican Americans had despised the term ‘Chicano/a,’ which had derogatory connotations due to associations with recently immigrants from Mexico—that is, from

areas south of those annexed by the U.S. in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—whom they did not perceive as part of the Mexican American population (Moore and Pachón, 1985, p.12).

The university students changed the perception of the word ‘Chicano/a’ to a certain extent when they incorporated it into their organizations in the 1970s, at which point it became a symbol of pride and ethnic identity. As part of the repertoire of Chicano identity, students were inspired by narratives that included the Mexican Indigenous population. One example is the poem *I Am Joaquín*, by the ex-boxer and activist Rodolfo Gonzales, known as Corky Gonzales. The poem is an allegory of identity that emphasizes the Mexican American population’s Indigenous and European roots. This quasi-epic tale of survival poeticizes the discriminatory experiences lived by Chicanos throughout history. Chicano youth embraced the poem because they identified with the survival and struggle that Corky recounts, the latter serving to foster a feeling of ethnic pride: Chicano pride.

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In contrast with the other associations mentioned above, university student organizations used more direct and confrontational—though not violent—tactics, such as picket lines and protests, under the umbrella of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement initiatives. Of note among the university student organizations that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s are the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) and the La Raza Unida Party, which was founded in 1970.

These associations, like Puerto Rican associations, had two forms of action. Some used less conventional methods and, in some cases, actions that sought out confrontation in order to pursue their more revolutionary goals. These actions must be viewed through the lens of the era, during which anti-communist sentiment was widespread throughout the country. Accordingly, the U.S. government considered some of these groups to be communists in light of their adoption of symbols and images from Latin America, such as that of Ernesto ‘Ché’ Guevara. Other

organizations worked through the existing political structures to achieve equality through institutional means. Organizations such as LULAC and the GI Forum were emblematic of this second type of action. Indeed, they managed to use voter pressure to bring the needs of Mexican Americans to the attention of the Democratic Party.

All of these organizations formed the so-called Chicano movement, which was mainly active between 1963 and 1972. They worked separately in the Southwest, but occasionally came together to define specific objectives. Their legacy lies both in the creation of a positive Chicano and Mexican American identity as well as in ensuring that representatives of their communities were elected to political office. Arising from these organizations, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR)—now called UnidosUS—and student organizations such as the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (MEChA) [Aztlán Chicano Student Movement] emerged and remain active today.

During this same period, groups of Puerto Ricans, who had been U.S. citizens since 1917, settled mainly in New York and Chicago. Drawn by the growth of the manufacturing and service industries after the Second World War, they joined the workforce of these sectors in large numbers (Grosfoguel, 1999). As the Puerto Rican population was settling in New York and sharing the city's spaces with other Spanish-speaking groups such as Cubans and Dominicans, it started to consider itself part of a broader group with similar social circumstances. According to Moore and Pachón (1985), Puerto Ricans began using the term 'Latinos/as' to refer to themselves and other Spanish-speaking groups that lived around them at around 1950 (p. 12). To a certain extent, this provides evidence that a common social identity was being forged among the Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans living in the city.

In general, Puerto Ricans who moved to the U.S. in that era built their lives almost from scratch. With no support from the U.S. government or more prosperous sectors of their community, their position in 1954 was inauspicious: 50% lived below the poverty line, for which reason they could not access quality education. In addition, 87% of Puerto Ricans dropped out of school to work (Moore and Pachón, 1985, p.34). The struggles this community faced can be seen in the 1957 musical *West Side Story*, by composer Leonard Bernstein. The musical shows how employment in the city's manufacturing and service industries was not enough for these communities to achieve financial security and climb to the middle class. Based on the social and educational experiences of Puerto Ricans living in New York City (for example, their experiences learning Spanish), an identity-forging process emerged at that time, and this identity differed from that of Puerto Ricans living on the island (Grosfoguel, 1999, p.246).

Puerto Ricans found that their U.S. citizenship did not guarantee equal opportunity, and, in fact, found that they faced discrimination along social, economic, and racial lines (Sánchez, 2007). As on the West Coast, the community organized: leaders emerged in community organizations, which spearheaded movements to improve the condition of their neighborhoods, health, and education. One of these organizations was the Young Lords, originally a Puerto Rican gang in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood that was transformed by José Jiménez, known as 'Cha Cha,' who would become its president. During a brief stay in prison for drug possession, Cha Cha Jiménez met with members of the Black Panther Party, founded by African Americans in the San Francisco Bay area, and both shared the experiences of discrimination their communities faced. When Cha Cha Jiménez left prison in 1968, he restructured the Young Lords into an organization that fought for human rights and the liberation of Puerto Rico.<sup>3</sup> The Young Lords were militants who used confrontational practices and techniques in their protests. One of their main divisions

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://nationalyounglords.com/>

was in New York City, where the majority of Puerto Ricans had settled between 1940 and 1960 (Grosfoguel, 1999). The group achieved improvements that all New Yorkers continue to benefit from today, such as legislation that ended the use of lead in building structures and plumbing in the 1970s, which was achieved through the efforts of these young Puerto Ricans.

### 3. Cuban participation in the Hispanic configuration

This section will briefly address the Cuban case, which differs from that of the groups discussed above, but which was nevertheless a key part of negotiations with the government to determine what would become known as the ‘Hispanic’ population.

A large number of Cubans settled in Florida—and to a lesser extent in New York and New Jersey—before 1959. When the government of Fulgencio Batista fell that year, Cubans fleeing Fidel Castro’s revolution joined already-established communities in Florida. The U.S. government accepted these political exiles as refugees and, though they did experience discrimination in Miami, this status enabled them to receive benefits from the federal government to which Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans did not have access. The government helped Cubans to search for residence outside of Miami, provided financial benefits, and found employment for them. This generation of Cubans aligned with U.S. political interests at that time: namely halting the spread of communism and, in particular, the expansion of communism taking place in Cuba. The arrival of these Cubans took place in the middle of the aforementioned Mexican American and Puerto Rican civil rights movements.

The Cubans who arrived in the 1980s (known as ‘Marielitos,’ as they set sail for the U.S. from the Port of Mariel in Cuba), were not admitted to the U.S. as

refugees, but the established U.S. Cuban refugee community nevertheless welcomed them and helped them prosper (García Bedolla, 2014, p.139; Pew Research Center Reports, 2006). This reception in the country, and the ease with which they were able to start a life in the U.S., meant that Cubans differed from Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in regard to their circumstances. Today, the group's composition has varied and their political identity is less homogeneous (Stepick & Stepick, 2009; Noe-Bustamante, Flores & Shah, 2019). Cubans' political interests, which are generally in line with those of the U.S. government, allowed this community to take part in the process of conceiving what is 'Hispanic' through direct access to the country's political structure, even meetings with U.S. presidents. Meanwhile, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans had their sights set on the organizations of Cubans who emigrated later, in the 1970s, with a view to integrating them in their political movements.

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The origins of Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban political movements are important, as they reveal these groups underlying motivations. This history of fighting for rights and respect has led to an association between the term 'Latino' and the grassroots organizations led by Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. In contrast, the term 'Hispanic' would be understood by the leaders of grassroots organizations as a term supported by the U.S. government and not their own term. The U.S. government's adoption of the term 'Hispanic' will be addressed in the next section.

#### 4. Adoption of the term 'Hispanic'

The 1964 Civil Rights Act considered Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans as social minorities that deserved the federal government's assistance in order to prosper after having experienced discrimination. Minority status would be extended to all Hispanics once this panethnic term began to take root. After significant pressure

from the aforementioned groups, Congress passed the Roybal Act in 1969, which obligated a number of federal agencies to collect data on the Spanish-speaking population (Moore and Pachón, 1985, p. 51). In 1977, the Office of Management and Budget, which is in charge of the National Census, made standard the categories of ‘American Indian or Alaskan Natives’, ‘Asian or Pacific Islanders’, ‘Black’, ‘Hispanic’ and ‘White’. The category ‘Hispanic’ was defined as “a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.”<sup>4</sup>

Until 1980, censuses had referred to what were now ‘Hispanics’ as being of ‘Spanish origin’ or part of the ‘Spanish-speaking population.’ To identify who constituted this population and grant federal funds accordingly, the ‘Hispanic’ category was included in testing for the 1980 census. The term would finally be incorporated following a trial-and-error process that sought to identify the greatest number of ‘Hispanics’ possible. In the 1970s, this process prompted a debate on the meaning of ‘Hispanic’ that continues today.

The choice of the term ‘Hispanic’ was not simple; Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban leaders could not agree on which term best encompassed them all. Language was not a common characteristic, as not all spoke Spanish, and the classification of Cubans, who had entered the country under very different circumstances than the other groups, was controversial.

In the 1970s, President Nixon saw an opportunity to win votes in the ‘Spanish-speaking population.’ Therefore, in 1969, he created the Cabinet Committee on

<sup>4</sup> See directive number 15 adopted on May 12, 1977 (Directive No. 15 Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting).

[https://transition.fcc.gov/Bureaus/OSEC/library/legislative\\_histories/1195.pdf](https://transition.fcc.gov/Bureaus/OSEC/library/legislative_histories/1195.pdf)

Opportunities for Spanish Speaking People (CCOSSP).<sup>5</sup> It was a forum in which Cubans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans studied demands that the U.S. government might be willing to meet, such as access to quality education and financial and social support.

The committee pressured the federal government to hire more Spanish speakers in government agencies and held closed-door hearings with elected representatives and other high-level representatives from Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban groups from around the country. This committee also pushed for an end to the official classification of the Spanish-speaking population as white, as they considered this designation to limit study of the racial discrimination that Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans experienced. They promoted the term 'Hispanic' to differentiate this population from the 'White' category listed in the 1960 census.<sup>6</sup> In addition, it pressed for statistical information to be collected on Spanish speakers on the grounds that their socioeconomic status was different from that of the country's white European population.

All documents and items the committee produced, including reports and radio and television programs, emphasized that despite their differences, this population was united by a common language (although not all spoke it, as English is the language of schooling in the U.S.) and a common Hispanic heritage (Mora, 2014, p. 48). With this language that emphasized unity, the committee referred to what had been the 'Spanish-speaking population' as 'Hispanic' and had its sights set on federal agencies accepting this term for use in collecting data on this population. The committee attempted to promote these supposed similarities among a very diverse group of people in their pursuit of a strategy of gaining strength in numbers and attracting attention—and resources—from federal agencies. This emphasis on shared

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<sup>5</sup> For a Hispanic perspective on the Nixon era, see the video on the Richard Nixon Foundation webpage: <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2013/10/first-latino-president/>

<sup>6</sup> In the 1960 census, 'Spanish speakers' were designated as 'White' or 'Black' according to the census takers' racial perceptions.

yet diverse language and cultural traditions aimed to create unity in order to foster the concept of *Hispanidad* in the U.S. The work done by the Cabinet Committee on Opportunities for Spanish Speaking People and its predilection for the term ‘Hispanic’ among the committee members and the social strata they moved in ultimately resulted in the 1980 census classifying the Spanish-speaking population as ‘Hispanic’ for the first time.

The leaders of this process considered the term ‘Hispanic’ to be broad enough to encompass these very diverse populations yet specific enough so that communities of second-, third-, and fourth-generation immigrants would identify with a term that had a U.S.-national character, which contrasted with those that denoted foreign citizenship, such as the term ‘Latin American’ (Mora, 2014, p. 107). Through the Forum of National Hispanic Organizations—in which Cuban American, Puerto Rican, and Mexican American leaders were represented—the committee, the Office of Management and Budget, and groups of grassroots organizations promoted the term ‘Hispanic’ (albeit not without objections) so that it would be understood when it came time to complete the 1980 census. These organizations put aside the more radical demands of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans to focus on issues that federal agencies could address.

In 1971, the leaders of militant organizations, especially Mexican American and Puerto Rican organizations, came together to decide on an agenda of demands they wanted to pursue. The chosen demands dealt with the concession of lands that belonged to Mexican American families which they lost after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and Puerto Rico’s independence from the U.S.—demands which were difficult for the U.S. federal government to accept. This group argued that what united Latinos was not just a relationship to the Spanish language, but rather the experiences of discrimination and oppression they had been subjected to throughout

U.S. history, and which they associated with their lived experience as colonized peoples.

These two narratives represent the dichotomy that has accompanied the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ from their conception. On the one hand is the discourse that looks at *Hispanidad* with a focus on remedying past damages incurred to people who came from Latin America. This discourse fits with current parameters of the U.S. government’s status quo and, therefore, is considered by part of the Latino population to be of a conservative tone. On the other hand is a narrative that prefers the term ‘Latino/a’ over ‘Hispanic’ because it holds that the latter emphasizes a colonial identity, identifying Hispanic in relation to Spain—an identity they would like to do away with. These two discourses coincided with schools of thought that arose in 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America: that is, between ‘Indigenists’ and ‘Hispanists.’ Though they are not exhaustive (New Mexicans and Texans used the term ‘Hispanic’ prior to this process of forging a panethnic identity in the U.S.), both promoted equality before the law for ‘Hispanics’ and/or ‘Latinos’ as well as continued access to U.S. political, social, and cultural institutions. They also sought to safeguard continued compliance with the civil rights won in the 1960s.

The (admittedly partial) process by which the U.S. population internalized the term ‘Hispanic’ to refer to the Spanish language, Latin America, and Spain would not catch on until the beginning of the 1980s, when it became widespread among the population with the help of Spanish-language media. The media was operating on the local level beginning in at least the 1950s, but it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that conglomerates like Univisión and Telemundo began reporting Spanish-language news to the nation. The media chose topics of common interest to Latinos, such as labor and immigration issues, as well as education, health, well-being, politics, society, and culture. These topics were selected based on the interests of diverse ethnic groups now known as Hispanics. These media outlets also debated what physical image of a ‘Hispanic’ person they wanted to project, and which variant of

Spanish the hosts and reporters should use in order to be understood by the multitude of Spanish-speaking communities in the U.S. (Mora, 2014, pp. 119-154). However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ began to take on different meanings beyond this initial disjunctive. For example, many ‘Latinos’ had not been part of the historical experiences that had previously united this group. To them, the terms’ connotation was mainly geographic: they denoted people who came from Latin America. The term was not linked to a struggle for equality, with which these Latinos either were not familiar or did not identify. An identification that highlights geographic origin is more prevalent among recent arrivals, such as first-generation immigrations.

As stated above, the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ arose from a disagreement about what attributes of this population should be emphasized and uncertainty about how to identify a very diverse group. The terms’ origins can be traced to the Chicano political movements in the southwest of the country and the Puerto Ricans who settled in Chicago; New York; and, to a lesser extent, other places around the country. Cubans were also involved in these movements, although their circumstances differed from those of the other two groups. In an attempt to gain the support of the Spanish-speaking population, Nixon focused his attention on these three populations’ demands and created a cabinet committee to represent their interests. This committee embraced narratives of unity and highlighted linguistic and cultural similarities among Spanish speakers so that the newly-minted Hispanics would receive support that favored integration in the middle class and achievement of the ‘American dream.’ The main actors in these negotiations obviated more radical requests from Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans, but the leaders of the grassroots organizations did not.

## 5. Some considerations on terminology

Readers familiar with the Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban communities will note the quandary in the meaning of these terms: though in their broadest sense they attempt to unite all people of Latin American and Spanish origin, the differences between these populations are vast. Additionally, the non-Hispanic U.S. population occasionally uses the term Spanish in a synecdochic exercise that reduces the many meanings of the term: for example, equating Chicanos with a supposed Spanish origin and misting their relationship with Mexico and the U.S. Additionally, focusing on language, it is worth noting that although they are called ‘Spanish speakers,’ many Chicanos (as well as *latinos* and/or *hispanos* in general) do not speak Spanish. What’s more, if ‘Spanish origin’ is not taken literally but rather is used to refer to any place beyond the southern U.S. border (as non-Hispanics tend to do), we find ourselves in the same circumstance: not all populations south of the U.S. speak Spanish. Their migration to the U.S. thus further complicates the terms ‘Spanish speakers,’ ‘Spanish origin,’ and ‘Hispanic.’

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As a result, some—especially those in California; grassroots organizations; and academics—press for the use of the term ‘Latina/o’ instead of ‘Hispanic.’ Broadly, the California ‘Latino’ population considers the term ‘Latino/a’ to include identities not encompassed by the term ‘Hispanic.’ Furthermore, whereas ‘Latino/a’ is seen as a term chosen by the leaders of grassroots organizations and the communities they represent, ‘Hispanic’ in California is largely considered to be imposed by the U.S. government, even though, as noted above, ‘Hispanic’ was selected by the leaders of the Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban communities. The difference lies in that these leaders and the government had a similar perspective and accepted narratives that recognized Spanish heritage as part of their identity.

In regard to the political caucus created to represent these populations in Congress, Hayes-Bautista and Chapa (1987) observed that Mexican Americans

raised objections to naming the political caucus the Boricua caucus and Puerto Ricans opposed naming it the Mexican American caucus. What's more, Hayes-Bautista and Chapa added that they vetoed the term 'Hispanic' because, among other reasons, there were no Spaniards present (p. 65). Thus, after years of discussion, they opted to call their political caucus 'Latino.' As noted, they chose this term because it emphasized their intense lived experience as oppressed and colonized peoples. They searched for a term that denoted their specific heritage, which included Indigenous aspects, and which was not linked to Hispanic heritage. Regarding the issue of Indigenism, some authors today question whether the Indigenous population that arrived to the country from south of the border should be considered 'Latino,' as some Mayan populations in the U.S. do not view themselves as such (LeBaron 2012).

To illustrate the colonial ties between the term 'Hispanic' and people from Latin America an example on the colonial relationship between the U.S. English-speaking population and the United Kingdom is sometimes invoked. The logic is that if people from the U.S. do not designate themselves as 'Britons' why should Latin Americans be considered 'Hispanic'? Nevertheless, not all group members consider themselves a colonized people and not all Latinos identify with experiences of oppression and discrimination (Bernstein, 2015). In addition, the term 'Latino' as an apocope of 'Latin America' is also not free of a relationship to colonial or imperialist thought. Though the term 'Latin America' was used by Francisco Bilbao and Torres Caicedo in 1856 (and Chevalier and Poucet before them), Napoleon III directly promoted its use in order to create a common American identity that did not denote a relationship to Spain, thus making way for these people to identify with France (Torres Martínez, 2016), though the latter never took place.

Some sectors of the U.S. population prefer the term 'Hispanic' (López, 2013). These are mainly in the Southeast, Southwest, and South of the country—essentially

in Florida, New Mexico, and Texas—where identification with the term ‘Hispanic’ has deep roots, having been used in these states since they were Spanish territory, when people living there used the term to distinguish themselves from the Native American, White, and Black populations in these states. In addition, in New Mexico and Texas, they did not want to be related to Latin America for historic reasons (Oboler, 2008, p. 429). On the other extreme, there are sectors that do not identify with the terms ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latino’ and some have even proposed eliminating such panethnic labels (Giménez, 1989), alleging that a term used to refer a population with such varied origins does not reflect the diversity in the group.

## 6. Immigration and belonging

Immigration has always been present in Hispanic and Latino communities in the U.S. and has played a role in shaping Hispanic or Latino sentiment<sup>7</sup> throughout their history. During the Great Depression, deportations of both U.S. citizens and non-citizens of Mexican origin were on the rise (Gratton and Merchant 2013) and neighborhood organizations in the southwest of the country mobilized to halt them. At that time, people who formed part of the U.S.’s collective imagination and those who did not was reconfigured. It was a process with racial overtones, given that deportation policies had very different effects on U.S. populations of Canadians and Europeans than on people of Mexican origin, even when they were citizens. Whereas Europeans and Canadians were excluded from the “real and imagined categories of the illegal immigrant” (Ngai, 2003, p. 72), facilitating their assimilation as ‘white’ immigrants, Mexican Americans would become ‘illegal’ immigrants in the iconographic collective imagination of the U.S. (Ngai, 2003). This categorization follows Mexican Americans—and, by extension, all people of Latin American origin who are perceived by the non-Hispanic U.S. population as ‘Mexicans’—to this day.

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<sup>7</sup> From here on, I will use the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ interchangeably to refer to the same group.

This perception is based on stereotypical racial phenotypes of the imagined 'Mexican.' For example, Ortiz and Telles (2012) showed that Mexican Americans with darker skin have a greater probability of having experienced discriminatory treatment and conclude that, for people outside the group, skin color is a clear group identifier. Indeed, Mexican American men with darker skin (in contrast to men with lighter skin and women in general) affirm that they have discriminatory experiences and have been treated stereotypically as Mexicans more frequently. The more education a Mexican American person has (which is correlated with greater contact with the white population), the greater his or her exposure to racism and discrimination in the workplace or institutions of higher learning (p.54). At present, Latinos in non-Hispanic society's collective imagination are perceived as foreigners or immigrants instead of members of U.S. society who have contributed to the history of the country (Oboler, 2008), despite the fact that in many cases their first relative arrived in the country up to five generations ago (Telles & Ortiz, 2008).

The fact that the estimated number of undocumented immigrants was 11.1 million in 2014 (52% of whom were of Mexican origin) contributes to these stereotypes, though this number has leveled off for the first time since the Great Depression (Passel & Cohn, 2016). According to other calculations, the number of undocumented immigrants was 12.2 million in 2007, but decreased to 10.5 million in 2017 (Budiman, 2020). This decrease is due to a decline in the undocumented population of Mexican origin which was not entirely offset by an increase in the undocumented Central American and Asian population (Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2018; Passel and Cohn, 2016; Budiman, 2020).

The number of immigrants who requested protection under the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was 800,000, of which more than 600,000 were of Latin American origin (López & Krogstad, 2017). This program

grants legal protection from deportation and a two-year renewable work permit to young immigrants who arrived in the country as children.<sup>8</sup> Like many Mexican Americans, many Central Americans are also in a precarious legal situation, as they have temporary protected status that could be ended with limited advanced warning. These legal circumstances have created a situation in which nearly 5 million people under 18 years of age in the U.S. are in a family with mixed legal status (some members are either undocumented or have protection under DACA and some members are citizens), of which 4.1 million are U.S. citizens. The states where the majority of these minors live are California, Texas, New York, Illinois, and Florida (Capps, Fix, and Zong, 2016). The mixed legal status of many Latino families makes their internal and external relationships difficult, though they take measures to protect themselves from growing persecution by immigration authorities (Abrego, 2016).

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The number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. is so high for structural reasons. Since 1990, immigration laws have been hardened in such a way that it is easy to fall into constructed 'illegality' (De Genova, 2014).<sup>9</sup> That is, with the implementation of restrictive immigration policies (Kanstroom, 2007; Massey and Pren, 2012; De Genova, 2014; Abrego, Coleman, Martínez et al., 2018), the 'illegality' of the undocumented immigrant is a result of criminalizing the act of migrating without government authorization. This has made it so that both adults and children without legal migration status live in fear of the possibility that they or a family member will be deported (González, 2011; Gonzales and Chávez, 2012; Menjívar and Abrego, 2012). As in the Great Depression, being deported is once again a possibility for undocumented migrants and permanent residents. Although the threat of deportation is not limited to immigrants from Latin America, a large number of this population live with this uncertainty (Golash-Boza, 2016).

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<sup>8</sup> See the Department of Homeland Security memorandum here: <https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/s1-exercising-prosecutorial-discretion-ndividuals-who-came-to-us-as-children.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> The term 'illegality' is used as a social construct which is a matter of debate. The author does not support its use to refer to undocumented migrants.

Given the mixed immigration status of many Latino families, immigration forms part of their identity process and the way they perceive their place in the U.S., both from within the group and from points of view outside it. Even those born in the U.S. are sometimes thought to be ‘foreigners’ by part of the non-Hispanic population. The identification of Latinos as foreigners continues despite the fact that in 2008, 31% of U.S. Latinos were third- or fourth-generation and 29% were second-generation (that is, they were born in the country, but one or both parents were from another country). Therefore, it is clear that Latino identity continues to have political nuances and the groups represented continue to forge political alliances to strengthen their sense of belonging in the country (Oboler, 2008, pp. 437-439). This was clear during the 2006 movements by immigrants, friends of immigrants, and their families—a majority of whom were Latinas—against restrictive immigration policies (Bloemraad and Voss, 2011).

Another important factor in the evolution of Latino identity in the U.S. is the increasing representation of diverse Latin American nationalities. Though Mexican Americans continue to be the largest demographic within the category, Latinos no longer mainly encompasses the three most longstanding groups, but rather has come to include Nicaraguans, Ecuadorians, Salvadorans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, Panamanians, Peruvians, Venezuelans, Dominicans, Colombians, Argentinians, and Spaniards (Noe-Bustamante and Flores, 2019).

In conclusion, individuals who have recently arrived in the country do not understand Latino identity in the same way as those who have lived in the country for generations and have grown up in the U.S. education system. This has given rise to discrepancies among traditional groups, as we have seen. The meaning of Latino identity is blurred even more if the differences between their economic backgrounds and the internal and external racial perceptions of the group are also considered.

## 7. Racial and socioeconomic considerations

Latinos are not a race; rather, many races constitute the Latino category. Historically, this group included European or 'white' populations, Indigenous people, Asians, Africans, and people of mixed race. Therefore, Latinos' view of their 'race' (Rodriguez, 2000) is very different from the concept of race in the U.S., whose origins can be traced back to the 'one-drop rule,' which stipulates that one drop of Black blood categorizes a person as Black (Winthrop and Spickard, 2014). The current census characterizes Latinos as a panethnic, racially diverse group. However, the racial perception or self-identification of Latinos is important to the group's understanding.

As 'race' is a social construct that changes according to social norms and the historical moment (Omi and Winant 1994; Rumbaut, 2011), there is reason to believe that, in practice, a portion of the non-Latino population views Latinos as a non-white race. Some Hispanics have racial phenotypes that are ambiguous when it comes to categorizing them within the U.S. Black/White divide. One clear example is the polemic that arose following the U.S. news media referring to actor Antonio Banderas as a person 'of color' when he was nominated for an Oscar in 2020 for his role in the movie *Dolor y Gloria* [Pain and Glory], by Pedro Almodóvar. Immediately, sectors of the Latino population that do not consider Spaniards Latinos as they are European pressed for the 'error' to be corrected, arguing that the actor was born and raised in Spain.<sup>10</sup> The criteria used to classify Antonio Banderas as a person of color did not make sense in Spain; social, ethnic, and racial constructions on the Iberian peninsula conceive of Spaniards of European origin as 'white,' regardless of whether this 'whiteness' includes skin tones and physical features that would be considered 'non-white' in the U.S.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See the Los Angeles Times article here: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-02-07/oscars-antonio-banderas-person-of-color-latino-hispanic>.

<sup>11</sup> The author is aware there is also a Black European population.

Although this debate can be examined from many angles, what is of interest to this study is that, regardless of what members of the Hispanic/Latino group believe, the categorization of Antonio Banderas as a person ‘of color’ highlights the notion that people of his appearance, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are perceived as ‘non-white’ by part of the U.S. population, and they are therefore susceptible to ‘racial’ discrimination. Look no further than the fact that Antonio Banderas competed for the Oscar against Joaquin Phoenix, who was born in Puerto Rico, but whose parents are from the United States of European origin. That is, according to the census definition, both would be Latino/Hispanic, although the racial perception that U.S. society has of each of them is different: Phoenix is ‘whiter’ and society perceives him as white. What’s more, he speaks English without a foreign accent, so he does not have the continuous mark of a ‘foreigner,’ something which denotes others as ‘strangers’ in U.S. society, though they may have resided in the country for decades (Simmel, [1908], 1971).

The socioeconomic status of Antonio Banderas, like that of many Latinos in Miami, California, and Texas, distances him from more disadvantaged populations of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans who fought for Latinos to be categorized as non-white. Additionally, Banderas is Spanish, and the symbolic value of that nationality did not go unnoticed by some segments of the Latino population that, in an exercise of essentialism, equate ‘Spaniard’ with ‘colonizer.’ Mexican Americans’ and Puerto Ricans’ annoyance at Banderas being considered a person of color is understandable, given that, in the 1960s and 1970s, they fought for the U.S. government to consider them non-white in an effort to combat the erasure of discrimination against them.

Antonio Banderas did not live through this struggle and, in this sense, he is not ‘a person of color.’ But it is undeniable that a fair number of Spaniards are not

phenotypically different from many Latinos and are considered non-white or of color by the rest of the U.S. population. This is all the truer for Spaniards who are ‘*morenos*,’ as darker-skin Spaniards are known in Spain, among other phenotypes, and they speak English with a foreign accent. It is also irrefutable that many Spaniards and Latin Americans who appear European, Asian, or Black are not perceived as Latinos by the U.S. population (remember, too, that many Latinos do not speak Spanish). A notable example is Cameron Diaz, whose father was Cuban American, and the debate that arose around the Latinness of Kenyan-Mexican Lupita Nyong’o.

In general, many Latinos are systematically classified as ‘non-white’ by society as well as by themselves. Take, for example, statistics that compare ‘Hispanics’ (ethnicity), ‘Blacks’ (race), and ‘Whites’ (race), equating an ethnic category to a racial one. Furthermore, statistical data show that the experiences of discrimination lived by some Latinos are similar to those of Blacks and other minorities (Rodriguez, 2000; Godoy Peñas, 2020). An illustrative example of these experiences can be found in an article published in *The New York Times* entitled ‘Best of Friends, Worlds Apart’ (2000), in which Mirta Ojito described the lived experiences of two Cuban friends—one Black and one white—after they migrate to Miami. Their lives in Miami were the product of a social structure that physically separates people according to their race in the US, and these two people who were friends before live worlds apart. Although Latinos first identify with their country of origin and then with Latinness (López, Krogstad, and Passel, 2020), there are studies that show how the ‘non-white’ racial identity has a greater impact on their political participation, and in a positive way (Masuoka, 2008). This brings us back to the struggles of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in the 1960s and 1970s, which continue today. Linda Martín Alcoff (2000, pp. 34-35) offers an analysis of Hispanics’ rejection of U.S. racial nomenclatures, whose cornerstone is the ‘white’ and ‘Black’ racial dichotomy, when it is not so in Latin America in general; this can be observed through their choosing the ‘some other race’ Census category.

In the U.S., the ethnic identities of Europeans who emigrated during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (especially the Irish, Poles, Jews, and Italians) lost relevance as their socioeconomic status rose. In addition, these initial identities also had a racial component, given that whites treated these Europeans as ‘non-whites.’ The rest of society only began to consider these Europeans white as they rose from poverty to the middle class. This change in racial perception meant, among other things, that there was not a replenishment of immigrants from their countries of origin, as occurred in the case of Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants (Jiménez, 2008). Once they were considered white and middle class, these immigrants had the option of choosing a ‘symbolic’ ethnic identity that referred to their countries of origin. That is, they did not draw from ethnic culture or organizations in their day-to-day, but rather they extolled symbols of their ethnic past, as the Irish do with the celebration of St. Patrick’s Day or the Jews with Hanukkah, because they were now more distanced from the discrimination and prejudice (Gans, 1979, 2012; Waters 1990; Alba 1990). However, not all Latinos pass as ‘white,’ due not just to their socioeconomic status, but also because they are visibly ‘non-white.’

Having arrived at this point, the question arises of who Hispanic whites are. In a recent study, Vargas (2015) showed that while 40% of Latinos self-identify as ‘white,’ only six percent affirm that they are classified as white by people outside of the group. The odds of being externally identified as white is higher for those who have lighter phenotypes and higher socioeconomic statuses. However, individuals with lighter complexions and lower socioeconomic statuses have a decreased probability of being identified as white by people outside of the group when compared to the former (this also occurred among Irish immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example).

Vargas' results confirm the suspicion that both factors—skin color and social class—play a role in delineating the subset of Latinos who self-identify as white. They also indicate that only a small percentage of Latinos 'pass' as white at present, unlike the populations of European origin mentioned above. Vargas concludes that the only indication that the limits of 'whiteness' are beginning to include Latinos is that some dark-skinned Latinos with exceptionally high salaries (higher than those of many whites) state that they are perceived as white. However, Vallejo (2012) has demonstrated the way in which Mexican Americans can join the middle class and acquire symbolic ethnicities as 'non-whites.'

Though debates on the ethno-racial configuration of Latinos continue, it is undeniable that the Latino identification process has racial dimensions which in turn align with social class and the geographic or urban context in which they live. What's more, these same Latinos police what Latinness means, as seen in the case of Antonio Banderas. Tomás Jiménez (2010) describes how Mexican immigrants monitor the 'Mexican' authenticity of Mexican Americans through their fluency in Spanish and cultural knowledge of and ties to Mexico. However, the U.S. population also polices Mexican Americans through their use of English and historical, social, and cultural knowledge of the U.S. In other cases, people internal and external to the Latino community use accent and racial perception, rather than origin, to determine who is Hispanic and who is not. José Soto-Marquez (2019) indicated that Spaniards living in New York navigate the limits of 'whiteness,' *Hispanidad*, and Latinness according to whom they are dealing with. Soto-Marquez shows, among other things, how Dominicans and Puerto Ricans delimit the Latinness of Spaniards and focus on their *Hispanidad*. Ironically, no Spaniards were consulted when the term 'Hispanic' was created. Likewise, Soto-Marquez states that Spaniards in New York are considered 'white' but different from Europeans, and 'Hispanic' but different from 'Latinos,' and that they navigate social contexts in which they experience a 'bifurcated ethnicity' typical of European immigrants (Waters, 2014). This bifurcated ethnicity of Spaniards has the pillars of a 'Whiteness' that is in many cases symbolic

and a racial identification as Hispanic that is imposed on them by Latino and non-Latino groups.

In conclusion, ‘Hispanics’ do not constitute a racial group, but on many occasions are compared to the ‘White’ and ‘Black’ racial categories. The process of racialization they undergo takes place around socioeconomic, geographical, and linguistic factors, and it is influenced by individual phenotypes that act as racial markers. However, the rest of the population’s racial perception has of ‘Latinos’ leads some Latino groups to take on Latino identity as a ‘race.’

## 8. Conclusion

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This study has incorporated the aspects I consider key to clarifying the ‘confusion’ currently sounding the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino.’ To understand the polysemy of these panethnic categories, we must know their origins, given that the quandary about who these terms identify emanates from it. Panethnic identities in the U.S. arose as a political strategy to empower minorities within the U.S.’s idiosyncratic power relationships.

Against this backdrop, the term ‘Hispanic’ emerged from a political will to increase Latinos’ power in the country’s political structures and to end discrimination. Therefore, the leaders who took part in the process, both from the government and related organizations as well as radical grassroots organizations, seconded panethnic terminology that could unite a population conceived of as highly varied from the very beginning. Latino identity, whatever its meaning, is represented by U.S. politicians and groups of representatives and interest groups brought together in caucuses of Hispanic politicians, according to the country’s identity politics. Even

so, the 2020 election has again laid bare the diverse political values within this broad identity (Hernández and Moreno-Fernández, 2018).

In the beginning, these leaders had to account for intergroup diversity (among Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans) and intragroup diversity (based on social class, race or racial perception, geographic location, and immigration status). This diversity would only increase with the increasing arrival of Latin American immigrants from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to today. In the last twenty years, a significant number of Central Americans, Mexicans, South Americans, Spaniards, and people from the Caribbean have arrived in the country, enriching the U.S. Hispanic/Latino cultural repertory. The Latino identity comprises a vast diversity of historical, ethnic, and racial profiles, as well as diversity of nationalities, cultures, and geographic areas where Latinos take on that identity and transform it to such an extent that it is no surprise that the identity's unity and meaning are the subject of debate. This diversity of groups and meanings is all the more evident if the term is analyzed beyond the U.S. context.

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To some Latinos, the category of 'Latino/a' only identifies people whose forebearers came from Latin America or the Spanish-speaking populations of the Caribbean. However, the U.S. Census Bureau, which follows the directives of the Office of Management and Budget, uses the terms 'Hispanic and Latino' to encompass all people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and South or Central American heritage, as well as those from other cultures of 'Spanish' origin, regardless of race. It also includes Spaniards on its list of nationalities or regions of origin (U.S. Census Bureau). Therefore, beyond the regional or national identity that a given individual may want to claim, the Census promotes a structural dimension through a definition that makes all people 'Latinos' and/or 'Hispanics' if they would like to identify as such.

The structural dimension created by the Census definition deserves reflection over its virtues and limitations, and its objectives. In an exercise of imagination, and without declarative motivation, if we exclude Spaniards from ‘Latino’ identification and consider them merely ‘Hispanics,’ would we be promoting unity among ‘Latinos’ who prefer the term ‘Hispanic?’ That is, would Spaniards, New Mexicans, Texans, Cubans, and all who identify as Hispanics and not as Latinos form a ‘Hispanic’ group? Who, then, would be Latino? My intention is not to answer these questions but simply to raise the issues that arise in the debates engendered by these terms within the group.

If we consider some external perspectives that non-Hispanics have of the group, the racial perception on who is Latino gains relevance. Who constitutes the ‘Latino/Hispanic’ ‘race’? Would it be those with dark skin because they are subjected to racial discrimination? Would lighter-skinned people be excluded from the group? Is it a good idea to conceive of Latinos/Hispanics as a race, thus equating them with the white, Black, or Asian races? What implications could such a conception have? Given the non-Hispanic population’s racial treatment of the group and Latinos’ own racial self-identifications, especially their preference for indicating ‘Some other race’ on the Census, the U.S. Census Bureau has recommended combining the race and ethnicity question on the 2020 census, although that recommendation has not been implemented. This recommendation is based on the fact that 97% of Hispanics identified as ‘some other race’ category on the 2010 census (Cohn, 2017).

Cohn (2017) proposes an alternative for the Census: ‘Latino, Hispanic or Spanish,’ a category which merges ethnicity and race and identifies this group with nationalities. Indeed, in 2020, Hispanics generally continue identifying themselves just as they did in 1985. That is, first they list their nationality, then whether they identify as Hispanic or Latino, and finally, their status as U.S. citizens or residents. Fifty-one percent of Latinos do not have a personal preference regarding the terms

Hispanic or Latino, 32% prefer Hispanic and 15% prefer Latino (López, Krogstad, and Passel, 2020). However, there is a clear trend: 50% of people of Hispanic origin stop identifying themselves as such after four generations have passed since the first person in a family immigrated. This is in contrast to the 97% of first-generation immigrants who identify as Hispanic.

Given the current sociopolitical circumstances in the U.S., especially the marked socioeconomic and racial inequality and the restrictive immigration laws now in place (Piketty, 2013; Parker, Horowitz, and Mahl, 2016), Latino identity retains its political nature, and some authors affirm it as a fundamentally political identity (Oboler, 2008). The current socioeconomic inequality that aligns with racial and immigration factors could drive Latinos to categorize themselves in new ways, given that these factors form the basis of the processes of social inequality and social identity building in the U.S.

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Perhaps in advance of these processes of change, the terminology that identifies Latinos has again taken an innovative path in the last decade. The continuous arrival of immigrants from Latin America has made the landscape of Latinness much more varied than in past decades. Both this diversity and the spirit of our times has centered issues regarding sexuality and gender, Indigenism, and immigration status, along with existing studies on ethnicity, race, and social class. Just as Mexican American and Puerto Rican youth in the 1950s adopted the terms ‘Chicano’ and ‘Boricua’ and took pride in this identity, young Latinos in universities now call themselves ‘Latinx.’

The term ‘Latinx’ in English arises from the sociopolitical idiosyncrasy that some Latino students experience in this cultural context, given their frequent bilingualism and relationship to English. Thus, although it is possible, the term may not be adopted beyond the linguistic and sociocultural context of the U.S. and its current identity politics. The ‘x’ in ‘Latinx’ represents inclusiveness of populations

that are not normally represented from the Latino viewpoint: the LGBTQ+ collective, Afrolatinx populations, Indigenous communities, and Asian-Latinx populations. Some of us professors embraced this term, but who are we but students ourselves in the formation of these panethnic categories and identities? The term 'Latinx' has now existed for a decade, though few outside of the academic world have heard it or used it (López, Krogstad, and Passel, 2020). However, its importance cannot be denied: all social identities evolve, and the term 'Latinx' could indicate that the meaning of Latino identity is embarking on a new path. For now, however, it suffices to understand the meanings invoked by the terms 'Hispanic' and 'Latino.'

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