Inventing Hispanics

A Diverse Minority Resists Being Labeled

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Thirty years ago immigrants from Latin America who settled in the United States were perceived in terms of their home nation—as, for example, Cuban Americans or Mexican Americans, just as European newcomers were seen as Italian Americans or Polish Americans. Today the immigrant flow from Central and South America has grown substantially, and the newcomers are known as Hispanics.

Hispanics are particularly important for understanding the future of diversity in American society.

Some observers have expressed concern that efforts to make Hispanics a single minority group—for purposes ranging from elections to education to the allocation of public funds—are further dividing American society along racial lines. But attempts, both incidental and ideological, to forge these American immigrants into a strongly defined minority are encountering an unanticipated problem. Hispanics by and large do not see themselves as a distinct minority group; they do see themselves as Americans.

Hispanics and the Census

Hispanics are particularly important for understanding the future of diversity in American society. Already they have overtaken African Americans to become the nation’s largest minority, and immigration patterns ensure that the number of Hispanics will continue to grow more rapidly than that of African Americans.

U.S. race relations have long been understood in terms of black and white. Until recently, many books on the subject did not even mention other races, or did so only as a brief afterthought. Now recognition is growing that Hispanics are replacing blacks as the primary minority. But whereas blacks have long been raising their political consciousness, Hispanics have only just begun to find their political legs.

Recent increases in minority populations and a decline in the white majority in the United States have driven several African-American leaders, including Jesse Jackson and former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, along with a few Hispanics, such as Fernando Ferrer, a candidate for the 2002 mayoral election in New York City, and some on the white left (writing in The American Prospect) to champion a coalition of minorities to unseat the “white establishment” and become the power-holders and shapers of America’s future. The coalition’s leaders are systematically encouraging Hispanics (and Asian Americans) to see themselves as victims of discrimination and racism—and thus to share the grievances of many African Americans. Whether they will succeed depends much on how Hispanic Americans see themselves and are viewed by others.

Hispanics and African Americans

Hispanics and the Census

For several decades now, the Census Bureau has been working to make Hispanics into a distinct group and—most recently—into a race. In 1970, a 5 percent sample of households was asked to indicate whether their origin was Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish. But it was only in 1980, that “Hispanics” became a distinct statistical and social category in the census, as all households were asked whether they were of “Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent.” Had no changes been made in 1980, we might well have continued to think of Hispanics as we do about other white Americans, as several ethnic groups, largely from Mexico and Cuba.

The next step was to take Hispanics, who were until recently multiple ethnic groups that were considered racially white, and make them into a unique, separate group whose members, according to the census, “can be members of any race.” This unusual status has had several notable results. One is the flurry of headlines following the release of new census data in March 2001 announcing that “California Whites Are a Minority”—even though 59.5 percent of Californians, including many Hispanics, chose white as their race. The only way for whites to be proclaimed a minority in California is for no Hispanics to be counted as white—even those 40 percent, or more than four million people, who specifically marked white as their race on
the census form. Another curious result is the awkward phrase "non-Hispanic whites," by which the media now refer to the majority of Americans.

Because of their evolving status in the census, Hispanics are now sometimes treated not as a separate ethnic group but as a distinct race. (Race marks sharper lines of division than ethnicity.) Often, for example, when national newspapers and magazines, such as the Washington Post and U.S. News and World Report, graphically depict racial breakdowns on various subjects, they list Hispanics as a fourth group, next to white, black, and Asian. Much less often, but with increasing frequency, Hispanics are referred to as "brown" Americans, as in a Newsweek article that noted a "Brown Belt" across America. The result is to make the country seem more divided than it is.

Should one mind the way the census keeps its statistics? Granted, social scientists are especially sensitive to the social construction of categories. But one need not have an advanced degree to realize that the ways we divide people up—or combine them—have social consequences. One may care little how the census manipulates its data, but those data are what we use to paint a picture of the social composition of America. Moreover, the census categories have many other uses—for college admissions forms, health care, voting, and job profiles, government budget allocations, and research. And the media use the census for guidance. In short, the census greatly influences the way we see each other and ourselves, individually and as a community.

This is not to suggest that the Census Bureau has conspired to split up the nation. The recategorizations and redefinitions reflect, in part, changes in actual numbers (large increases in the nation's Hispanic population might arguably justify a separate category); in part, efforts to streamline statistics (collapsing half-a-dozen ethnic groups into one); and, in part, external pressures to which all government agencies are subjected. To be sure, the Census Bureau is a highly professional agency whose statistics are set by scientific considerations. But there is as yet no such thing as a government agency that has a budget set by Congress, that needs public cooperation for carrying out its mission, and that is fully apolitical. Likewise, the Office of Management and Budget, which sets the racial categories, is among the less political branches of the White House, yet still quite politically attuned.

**Hispanics in Their Own Eyes**

How do Hispanics see themselves? First of all, the vast majority prefer to be classified as a variety of ethnic groups rather than as one. The National Latino Political Survey, for example, found that three out of four respondents chose to be labeled by country of origin, rather than by "pan-ethnic" terms such as "Hispanic" or "Latino." Hispanics are keenly aware of big differences among Hispanic groups, especially between Mexican Americans (the largest group) and Cuban Americans, the latter being regarded as more likely to be conservative, to vote Republican, to become American citizens, and so on.

America has, by and large, dropped the notion that it will tell you what your race is, either by deeply offensive blood tests or by examining your features and asking your neighbors (the way the census got its figures about race until 1950). We now allow people to indicate which race they consider themselves to be by marking a box on a census form. Many Hispanics resist being turned into a separate race or being moved out of the white category. In 1990, the census allowed people to buy out of racial divisions by checking "other" when asked about their racial affiliation. Nearly 10 million people—almost all of them Hispanics—did so.

When the Census Bureau introduced its "other" category, some African-American leaders objected because, as they correctly pointed out, the resulting diminution in minority figures both curtails numerous public allotments that take race into account and affects redistricting. So the 2000 census dropped "other" and instead allowed people to claim several races (but not to refuse to be racially boxed in). The long list of racial boxes to be checked ended with "some other race," with a space to indicate what that race was. Many of the 18 million people who chose this category, however, made no notation, leaving their race as they wanted it—undefined.

Of those who chose only "some other race," almost all (97 percent) were Hispanic. Among Hispanics, 42.2 percent chose "some other race," 47.9 percent chose white (alone) as their race, 6.3 percent chose two or more races, and 2 percent chose black (alone). In short, the overwhelming majority of Hispanics either chose white or refused racial categorization, clearly resisting the notion of being turned into a separate race.

**A Majority of Minorities**

As I have shown in considerable detail in my recent book, The Monochrome Society, the overwhelming majority of Americans of all backgrounds have the same dreams and aspirations as the white majority. Hispanic and Asian immigrants and their children (as well as most African Americans) support many of the same public policies (from reformed health insurance to better education, from less costly housing to better and more secure jobs). In fact, minorities often differ more among themselves than they do with the white majority. Differences among, say, Japanese Americans and Vietnamese Americans are considerable, as they are among those from Puerto Rico and Central America. (Because of the rapid rise of the African-American middle class, this group, too, is far from monolithic.)

Interracial marriage has long been considered the ultimate test of relationships among various groups in American society. Working together and studying together are considered low indicators of intergroup integration; residing next to one another, a higher one; intermarriage—the highest. By that measure, too, more and more Hispanic (and Asian) Americans are marrying outside their ethnic group. And each generation is more inclined to marry outside than the previous ones.

In the mid-1990s, about 20 percent of first-generation Asian women were intermarried, as compared with slightly less than 30 percent of the second generation and slightly more than 40 percent of the third generation. Hispanic intermarriage shows a similar trend. More and more Americans, like Tiger Woods, have relatives all over the colorful ethnic-racial map, further
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binding America into one encompassing community, rather than dividing it along racial and ethnic lines.

In short, there is neither an ideological nor a social basis for a coalition along racial lines that would combine Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans against the white majority to fashion a radically different American society and creed.

Diversity within Unity

Immigrants to America have never been supra-homogenized. Assimilation has never required removing all traces of cultural difference between newcomers and their new homeland. The essence of the American design—diversity within unity—leaves considerable room for differences regarding to whom one prays and to which country one has an allegiance—as long as it does not conflict with an overarching loyalty to America. Differences in cultural items from music to cuisines are celebrated for making the nation, as a community of communities, richer.

Highly legitimate differences among the groups are contained by the shared commitments all are expected to honor: the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, the democratic way of government, peaceful resolution of conflict, and tolerance for differences. These shared bonds may change as new Americans join the U.S. community, but will do so in a largely gradual, continuous, and civil process rather than through rebellion and confrontation. I write "largely" because no country, the United States included, is completely free of troublesome transitions and we have had our share.

No one can be sure what the future holds. A prolonged downward turn in the economy (a centerpiece of most radical scenarios) would give efforts to enlist new immigrants into a majority-of-minorities coalition a better chance of succeeding. But unlike some early Americans who arrived here as slaves, most new immigrants come voluntarily. Many discover that hard work and education do allow them to move up the American economic and social ladders. That makes a radicalization of Hispanics (and Asian Americans) very unlikely. As far as one can project the recent past into the near future, Hispanics will continue to build and rebuild the American society as a community of communities rather than dividing it along racial lines.

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