

ANNALS OF ETHNICITY

E PLURIBUS HISPANIC?

From Miami's Calle Ocho to the Los Angeles barrios, Hispanics have established a vivid presence in American life. Although Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others are now eight percent of the U.S. population, they are still groping for a collective Hispanic identity. As Peter Skerry argues, their future—and the nation's—will be strongly influenced by whether they emerge as a racial minority, an ethnic group, or some combination of the two.

by Peter Skerry

In the summer of 1987, the surprise success of *La Bamba*, a film about teenage singer Ritchie Valens (born Valenzuela), inspired a news media celebration of the role of Hispanics in our national life. But several ironies surrounding the film went unnoted. For example, the writer and director of this commercial success was Luis Valdez, former director of the agitprop-inspired Teatro Campesino and professor of Chicano studies at Berkeley. Valdez had once denounced "the subversive onslaught of the 20th-century neon *gabacho* [gringo] commercialism that passes for American culture" and rejected "efforts to make us disappear into the white melting pot, only to be hauled out again when it is convenient or profitable for *gabacho* . . . politicians." Yet *La Bamba* paints a very typical picture of American life, one of aspiration and assimilation. It is a bittersweet success story of a clean-cut Mexican-American kid who loved his family and his Anglo

girlfriend, sang his way to rock 'n' roll stardom, and died young in a 1959 plane crash. And this young man who grew up in a migrant labor camp, whose big hit was a Mexican folk song, *La Bamba*, in fact spoke little Spanish.

To complicate matters, in the film Valens was played not by a Mexican American but by a young actor, Lou Diamond Phillips, who was born in the Philippines and raised in Texas, and who describes his background as a mixture of Filipino, Hawaiian, Chinese, Scotch-Irish, and Cherokee. A Puerto Rican, Esai Morales, played Valens's half brother. The next year Phillips again portrayed a Mexican American, in *Stand and Deliver*, a film about Jaime Escalante, the math teacher acclaimed for his work with East Los Angeles high-school students. Bolivian-born Escalante was played by Mexican-American actor Edward James Olmos, who grew up in East Los Angeles. The film was co-written and directed by Ramon Menendez, a Cuban-born graduate of

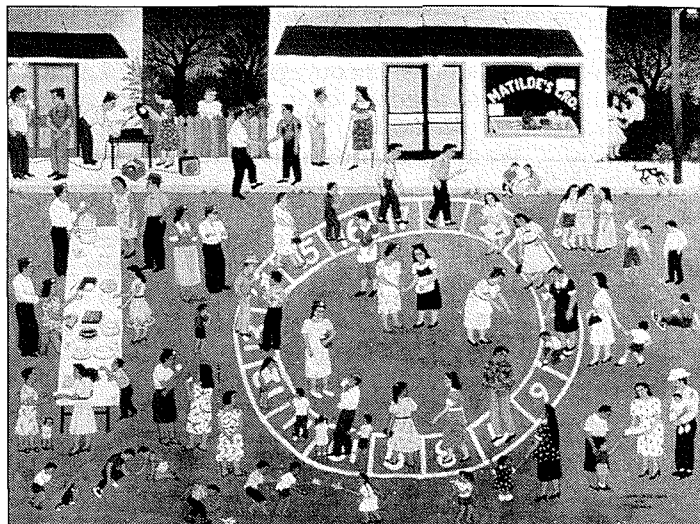
The paintings accompanying this essay are by Carmen Lomas Garza, who lives in San Francisco, California. These and other works are part of a travelling exhibition that originated at The Gloria Arts Museum in Austin, Texas in October 1991. The exhibition is currently at the Mexican Fine Arts Center in Chicago through October 4, 1992, before continuing on to Los Angeles's Leband Art Gallery (November 1–December 12, 1992) and The Oakland Museum (January 9–March 27, 1993).

the UCLA film school.

This tale of two films suggests how problematic the term "Hispanic" can be. Both movies, which brought so much positive attention to Hispanics, were actually about Mexican Americans. At the same time, they were projects on which Hispanics of diverse backgrounds collaborated, suggesting the possibility of an emergent pan-ethnic Hispanic culture. In these ways, the films raise the question: Does the term "Hispanic" have any real substance to it, or is it merely the creation of media moguls and political entrepreneurs?

Alejandro Portes, a Cuban-born sociologist who teaches at Johns Hopkins, is one of those who takes the latter view. He argues that "'Hispanic' ethnic solidarity is quite fragile because it is ultimately a political creation, rather than one based on the real experiences of the groups so labelled." Yet the difficulty with this formulation is that what begins as "a political creation" often ends up defining "real experiences." Earlier in this century hundreds of thousands of European peasants left their villages thinking of themselves as Sicilians, Calabrians, and the like, but after arriving here they gradually came to regard themselves as they were regarded by Americans—as Italians and, eventually, as Italian Americans. As Greek philosophy long ago taught, the essence of politics is the shaping and perfecting of "natural" social ties through human artifice and convention. It would therefore be a mistake to dismiss the term "Hispanic" as a mere political contrivance. A closer look at it tells us as much about the conventions of contemporary American politics as it does about Hispanics themselves.

More precisely, the term reflects the pervasive tendency in the United States to encourage members of these groups to define themselves in divisive—and not wholly appropriate—racial terms. At the same time, the vagueness of a term that subsumes Indian peasants from Central Amer-



"Cakewalk," by Carmen Lomas Garza

ica and the grandchildren of Portuguese immigrants may moderate these divisive tendencies, enabling Hispanics to stake a claim on our nation's immigrant ethnic tradition. The substantial historical, social, and economic differences among the various Hispanic groups are continually played out in the media, in marketing, and in politics. Nevertheless, the very ambiguity of the pan-ethnic term serves to blur these distinctions, making it politically useful and assuring its longevity.

Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Cuban* leaders often denounce the term "Hispanic" as a stereotypic label concocted during the 1970s by ignorant government bureaucrats intent on cramming diverse groups into one ill-fitting category. And one is tempted to agree, since only eight percent of "Hispanics" use the label to identify themselves. Yet these same leaders resort to "Hispanic" when it suits their purposes. Bureaucrats did not found the Congressional *Hispanic* Caucus in 1976. Nor did bureaucrats stretch the term to include then-Representative Tony Coelho (of Portuguese descent) and the non-voting

*Precision would seem to require the use of terms such as "Mexican American" and "Cuban American." But even these are not precise, because they typically refer to aggregates that include both the assimilated members of the group and recent immigrants for whom the suffix "American" is, arguably, inappropriate. For the sake of conciseness, therefore, I use the terms "Mexicans" and "Cubans."

congressional delegates from the Virgin Islands and Guam.

Nor have bureaucrats encouraged the debate among these leaders over which pan-ethnic term is preferable, "Hispanic" or "Latino." Wading through arcane analyses of these terms, one despairs of finding any meaningful distinction. At the moment, "Latino" is in the ascendancy among those seeking the least "Eurocentric" designation. As Berkeley social scientists Charles Henry and Carlos Munoz write, "The term ['Hispanic'] implicitly underscores the white European culture of Spain at the expense of the nonwhite cultures that have profoundly shaped the experiences of all Latin Americans..." Yet the same could be said of "Latino," which is after all a Spanish word meaning "Latin." Indeed, for much of this century "Latin American" was the euphemism used by assimilationist Mexicans to obscure their ties to Mexico (as when Mexicans in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1929 formed the League of United *Latin American* Citizens). But circumstances change, and today the animus against "Hispanic" undoubtedly stems from the perception that it was coined by federal officials. Finally, because it is Spanish, "Latino" is felt to be the more politically assertive word.*

Whatever the term used and however strained its interpretation, there *are* significant similarities among the various national-origin groups. The first and most obvious is socioeconomic status: Whether they are Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago, or Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, or Dominicans and Puerto Ricans in New York City, most Hispanics belong to the lower or working classes.

Yet class similarities are less striking than cultural ones. For most Hispanics, the Spanish language is the most visible and charged symbol of their common cultural heritage. This is true even though about

*In this article, I follow the lead of the Washington-based advocacy group, the National Council of La Raza, and use the two terms interchangeably.

one-fourth of all Hispanics do not speak the language of their forebears.

Latinos also share a long and ambivalent relationship with the Catholic Church. In part, the ambivalence reflects the Church's history of alliances with European-oriented Latin American elites and its distance from the concerns of the indigenous populations. Because Hispanics generally have not brought their own clergy with them to the United States, this gap has persisted in this country, particularly since the American Catholic Church has been dominated by Irish clergy with very different notions of the faith. Hispanic cultures also emphasize *personalismo*, which in the religious context translates into a reliance more on ties to individual clerics or patron saints than to the institutional Church. Among Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in particular, this longstanding ambivalence has led to steady defections to various Protestant churches, especially small fundamentalist sects. Sociologist Andrew Greeley estimates that the defections amount to about 60,000 individuals each year. One can sit in any barrio rectory and hear rumors flying about who has "turned Protestant." Today, only about 70 percent of Hispanics are Catholics.

Finally, Hispanics share an emphasis on family life. For example, while 70 percent of non-Hispanic households are maintained by families, more than 80 percent of Hispanic households are. To be sure, as researchers Frank Bean and Marta Tienda note, Hispanics experience separation and divorce as frequently as non-Hispanic whites. Moreover, a higher proportion of Hispanic than non-Hispanic families are female-headed (23.8 versus 16.4 percent). Yet Hispanics (with the exception of Cubans) also have larger families than non-Hispanics. Furthermore, two-parent Hispanic families are much more likely than their non-Hispanic white counterparts to include a grandparent or other adult relative. Social scientists debate whether these family characteristics reflect cultural values or social and economic forces. What is not de-

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batable is that Hispanics see themselves as much more family-oriented than non-Hispanics.

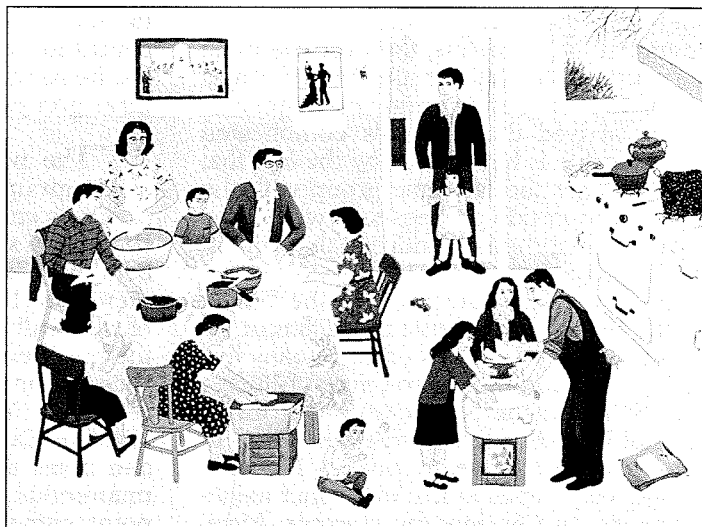
All of these cultural similarities do not mean, however, that a cohesive Hispanic identity is emerging in the United States. Often, these shared characteristics lead to friction among the groups. Strong family ties, for example, can hinder development of the impersonal, instrumental relationships needed to forge stable political organizations. As a result, the national-origin groups are often factionalized internally, and such problems will likely afflict organizational efforts among groups.

A common religion is likewise no guarantee of cohesion, especially since Latinos from different countries often worship different saints and manifestations of the Virgin. Nor is the Spanish language the unifying force it is typically assumed to be. "The way we speak Spanish" tops the list of items that Hispanics polled by Daniel Yankelovich said are significant differences among them; fully one-third cited it. In Los Angeles's Pico-Union district, for example, the director of a childcare center serving Mexican and a variety of Central American immigrants notes that the idiomatic differences among them are so great that composing Spanish-language materials acceptable to parents and staff usually requires heated negotiations.

The question of whether Hispanics are one group or several also arises in the marketplace. In the 1980s, McDonald's launched a successful pan-Hispanic campaign featuring a celebration which to non-Hispanics looked like a birthday party, but which all Hispanics recognized as a *quinceañera*, a party marking a young woman's coming-of-age on her 15th birthday. On the other hand, an insecticide company blundered badly when it mounted a pan-Hispanic campaign promising that its product would kill all "*bichos*"—which means bugs

to Mexicans, but the male genitals to Puerto Ricans. Other problems have arisen, literally, from differences in taste. Goya Foods, one of the largest Hispanic-owned firms in the nation, grew with the post-World War II influx of Puerto Ricans, and has since developed a loyal customer base among them and other Caribbean Hispanics in the Northeast. But its recent effort to develop a line of Mexican foods for the Southwestern market failed miserably. As an embarrassed Goya executive admitted to the *Wall Street Journal*, "Nobody here knew anything about Mexican food."

Such episodes reflect not just cultural differences among Hispanics but social and



"Tamalada" (Making Tamales)

economic ones as well. Cubans are, by virtually all socioeconomic indicators, the most successful Hispanics. (See table, p. 67.) They have the most education, the lowest unemployment, the highest family and household income, the lowest proportion of individuals and families living below the poverty level, the highest rate of home ownership, and the lowest proportion of female-headed households. Puerto Ricans, by contrast, have fared least well and are by some measures worse off than blacks. Mexicans generally fall between the Cubans and Puerto Ricans.

Such socioeconomic differences reflect the distinctive history of each group and the circumstances of its arrival in the

United States. Cubans have come here in the wake of Castro's revolution, and even though (with the exception of the Marielitos) they have arrived relatively well endowed with financial and educational resources, they have, as refugees, received substantial help from the federal government. Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, have come to the mainland with fewer advantages, having been pushed off the land and out of the cities by rapid post-World War II industrialization on the island.

Mexicans present a more complicated story. Many are longtime U.S. residents, and some can trace their ancestry back not only to the time when the American Southwest was part of Mexico, but to the millennia before the arrival of Europeans on the continent. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of Mexicans in the United States today are recent immigrants, most of whom arrived illegally. This complicated group profile is highlighted by the fact that Mexicans are the Hispanic group with the highest proportion of illegals, as well as the highest proportion of individuals born in the United States.

Following separate paths to the United States, these groups settled in different regions. Almost two-thirds of all Cubans live in Florida; more than two-thirds of Puerto Ricans live in the Northeast; about three-fifths of Mexicans live in the West. Even in cities that are home to several Hispanic groups, each tends to live in distinct neighborhoods. In Chicago, for example, Mexicans are concentrated in the Little Village and Pilsen districts, while Puerto Ricans are clustered in Logan Square and Humboldt Park. Intermarriage among Hispanic groups similarly appears to be infrequent, except perhaps among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Central or South Americans in New York City.

Such historical and socioeconomic differences are obviously important, but their *political* significance is not readily apparent. Each group certainly has its own unique relationship to the American political system. The Cubans are the smallest group (constituting less than five percent of all Hispanics), but they are the most powerful politically. As refugees, they have long dreamed of overthrowing Castro

and returning home. Yet at a time when this dream seems closer to realization than ever, its appeal has begun to diminish, particularly among younger Cubans born and raised here. It is in any event striking that Cubans have a significantly higher naturalization rate than Mexicans, whose long and complex history in the Southwest has translated into one of the lowest such rates among all groups in the United States. This helps explain why Mexicans have yet to wield political power commensurate with their numbers, which make them the largest Hispanic group (accounting for 63 percent of all Hispanics). Puerto Ricans, by contrast, are U.S. citizens at birth, but their circular migration between the island and the mainland, along with the fact that they constitute only about 11 percent of Hispanics, helps make them the weakest of these three groups.

The political interests of the three groups are as varied as their power, as can be seen in the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. Founded with five members in 1976, the Caucus has grown to 13 members (10 voting and three non-voting), of which all but two are Democrats. Most of the members are Mexicans; two are Puerto Ricans; one Cuban. Congressional Quarterly's *1991 Guide to Congress* contrasts the Hispanic Caucus with its black counterpart and notes that the former "rarely took a unanimous position." The Caucus's high point came in 1983-1984, when it succeeded in blocking action on the controversial Simpson-Mazzoli immigration reform legislation. Yet as then-Representative Manuel Lujan (R.-N.M.) observed, "Everyone [in the Caucus] is opposed to the Simpson-Mazzoli bill, but each of us has different reasons." In fact, the Caucus was unable to agree on alternative legislation, and Simpson-Mazzoli ultimately passed, albeit in altered form.

Bilingual education and the Voting Rights Act are two issues around which the Caucus has been able to come together. Yet there are plenty of other issues where Hispanic interests do not very neatly converge: Cubans have focused on anti-Castro initiatives; Puerto Ricans have been preoccupied with the statehood question; and Mexicans and Central Americans (the fastest growing

Hispanics Compared

	Non-Hispanics	Blacks	Hispanics	Mexicans	Puerto Ricans	Cubans	Cent. & S. Americans
Population (in millions)	227.4	30.9	21.4*	13.4	2.4	1.1	3.0
Median household income (in dollars)	30,513	18,676	22,330	22,439	16,169	25,900	23,568
Percent households with income of \$50,000 or more	25.4	11.9	13.4	11.6	11.9	19.8	15.7
Percent households maintained by families	69.6	70.0	80.1	81.7	77.8	78.8	82.5
Percent female-headed households	11.4	47.8	19.1	15.6	33.7	15.3	21.5
Percent urban households	72.8	N/A	91.8	90.5	95.2	95.7	97.0
Percent households owning or buying home	65.8	42.4	39.0	43.5	23.4	47.3	22.2
Percent completed high school	80.5	66.7	51.3	43.6	58.0	61.0	60.4
Percent with four or more years of college	22.3	11.5	9.7	6.2	10.1	18.5	15.1
Percent unemployed	6.9	12.4	10.0	10.7	10.3	6.4	10.3
Percent of individuals below poverty level	12.1	31.9	28.1	28.1	40.6	16.9	25.4

*Not shown in the table are 1.6 million people in the category "other Hispanic."

Source: Various Current Population Reports, 1991 (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

Hispanic group, having increased by more than 250 percent from 1980 to 1990) have emphasized immigration issues.

Any convergence of interests among Hispanic groups is equally difficult to find at the local level. At one extreme is Washington, D.C., unique among American cities in that none of the three principal Hispanic groups—Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans—predominates numerically. The

largest group, Salvadorans, has only recently arrived, during the 1980s. The capital's Hispanic population is small—only six percent of the city's total, and barely one percent of the electorate. It is also extremely diverse—the metropolitan area sustains no fewer than 17 Spanish-language newspapers. This demographic fragmentation, along with the refugee and illegal status of many newcomers, has stymied efforts

at political organization and hindered the emergence of effective leadership. These problems were highlighted in the aftermath of a riot in the city's Mount Pleasant neighborhood that made national headlines in the spring of 1991.

Washington Latinos, still in a largely "pre-political" mode, flex their organizational muscles planning for the annual Hispanic Festival, which has in recent years been marked by intense bickering over the management of the event. One such dispute—between a Panamanian building contractor, a Spanish newspaper publisher, and a Puerto Rican radio-station owner—got so heated that the League of Women Voters was brought in to resolve it. Until very recently, this acrimony has benefited Puerto Ricans from New York, who, as citizens and Anglophones, enjoyed an advantage in negotiating festival arrangements with city and federal officials.

Puerto Ricans—with leaders like Herman Badillo, Robert García, Fernando

Ferrer, and José Serrano—have also dominated Hispanic politics in New York City, but for different reasons. There they are the most established and largest Hispanic group, constituting about 50 percent of all Hispanics. With Cubans and Mexicans each accounting for only three percent, Dominicans are the other major Hispanic group in New York. They share with Puerto Ricans both Caribbean origins and a racial mixture that includes many blacks. Residential and intermarriage patterns also suggest that the two groups are in much closer contact with each other, and with black Americans, than with other Latino groups in New York. Politically, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans have at times cooperated but at other times competed. The severe fragmentation of Washington is generally not apparent. But neither is a pan-Hispanic coalition. One reason is that, while Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, many other New York Hispanics are not, and the latter remain more focused on the politics of their homelands.

Then there is Miami, where Cubans to-



"Sandia/Watermelon"

day constitute about 62 percent of the city's Hispanic population, with Nicaraguans and "other Hispanics" from Central and South America accounting for another 32 percent. Yet the city's first Hispanic mayor, Maurice Ferré, was a Puerto Rican, elected in 1973 by an anti-Cuban coalition of Anglos, blacks, and Puerto Ricans (who constitute only five percent of the city's Hispanics). Miami's first Cuban mayor, Xavier Suarez, was elected in 1985, when Ferré lost his black support. The Hispanics of Miami are a long way from the pre-political state of their counterparts in Washington, but, like former San Antonio mayor Henry Cisneros, Suarez has been the beneficiary not of any pan-Hispanic political coalition but of the overwhelming predominance of a single group.

As in Miami, Latino politics in Los Angeles has been dominated by a single group—not Cubans, who constitute about one percent of the city's Latinos, but Mexicans, who account for about 67 percent. Most of the remaining Hispanics (31 percent) are "other Hispanics," which in this instance means Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans who flooded into the city during the 1980s. Aside from whatever attention was sporadically paid to them by activists criticizing U.S. foreign policy in Central America, these predominantly poor and illegal immigrants have had no visible presence in Los Angeles politics.

Yet in the immediate aftermath of the recent riots in Los Angeles, signs of change were evident. Mexican leaders, who up to then had been quite willing to represent Central Americans as part of one enormous and growing Latino constituency, were quick to contrast the destruction in the Pico-Union district, just west of downtown, where Central Americans have crowded into dilapidated apartment buildings, with the calm that prevailed in the Mexican neighborhoods of East Los Angeles. At the same time, these leaders, always concerned that blacks get attention and resources at the expense of Latinos, expressed outrage that the riots were being defined in black and white terms, and could be heard claiming, "These were our riots, too."

The one city with some signs of an Hispanic coalition is Chicago, where Mexicans constitute about 65 percent of Hispanics,

and Puerto Ricans about 22 percent. Through efforts like the Latino Institute, a nonprofit advocacy and research institute founded in 1974, and the *Latino Studies Journal* at DePaul University, local Hispanic leaders have tried to forge a unified Latino political agenda. But such efforts seem to reflect the long-term goals of activists and intellectuals more than on-the-ground realities. Not only do Puerto Ricans and Mexicans live in distinct neighborhoods, the latter are more likely than Puerto Ricans to live among Anglos. These residential patterns are reflected, not surprisingly, in politics. Puerto Ricans, for example, have been much more supportive of Harold Washington's and Jesse Jackson's electoral bids than Mexicans. As one Latino community activist says about efforts to build a Latino-black coalition in Chicago: "Mexicans have been passing [as whites] for years. They have lived in white neighborhoods. There are more black Puerto Ricans, so there is much stronger support [for the coalition]."

If the outlines of an emergent Hispanic identity or agenda are not obvious in politics, they might be more evident in the mass media. After all, immigrant Latinos do not become citizens or voters immediately, but they do become consumers. Latino markets are among the fastest-growing in the nation, and three Spanish-language television networks—Galavision, Telemundo, Univision—have emerged to serve them, recently joined by a Spanish-language version of CNN. The rise of these networks now presents the possibility of these different groups coming together in a way that was not possible for earlier, European immigrant groups.

Yet one problem with this scenario is that Spanish-language television generally is ignored by young Hispanics, who overwhelmingly prefer to tune in to CBS, MTV, and other mainstream offerings. As Henry R. Silverman, then president of the Telemundo Group, told the *New York Times*, "There is no question that teen-age Hispanics are not watching Spanish-language programs." The continuing influx of immigrants undoubtedly helps these networks offset this generation gap. But this same influx also further complicates pan-Hispanic marketing strategies. Guillermo Martinez,

executive news director for the Univision Network offers this explanation: "The only power we [Spanish-language broadcasters] have now is at the local level. We know that. But it is difficult to influence three different groups—Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans—in the same way."

Sergio Munoz of Los Angeles's Spanish-language daily, *La Opinion*, is among those who have faulted Univision and Telemundo for trying "to appeal to a hypothetical homogeneous Latin American community." But such criticisms are the least of it. The Spanish-language media have also been the stage for rancorous disagreements among Hispanic groups. In 1990, for example, Carlos Alberto Montaner, a Cuban-born commentator on Univision, caused a furor by pointing to the high incidence of female-headed families among Puerto Ricans as a cause of the group's disastrous poverty rate. Angry Puerto Rican leaders were further outraged when the president of Univision, the Chilean American Joaquin Blaya, refused to fire Montaner.

There have also been conflicts over who controls, and profits from, the Spanish-language media. Here Cubans are frequent targets, for two reasons. First, they have the education and resources necessary to take advantage of the growing Hispanic market. Second, Spanish-language production facilities have become concentrated in Miami, which is the nation's second largest Hispanic market and, unlike Los Angeles, has low, non-union production costs.

Mexicans in particular tend to resent Cuban influence. Apparently in response to such discontents, Los Angeles-based Galavision recently established itself as a national network; yet it does not even plan to have outlets in Miami and New York. The president of the network's parent company puts it forthrightly: "You cannot satisfy all Hispanic tastes. Ours is not a smorgasbord programming menu like that of the two other networks. Our fare caters to the growing Mexican and Central American population, while the Caribbean and Cuban migration is basically over."

Although seldom reported, similar tensions are evident among Hispanics in the political arena. In Chicago, for example, a Mexican activist who advocates a Latino political agenda nevertheless cautions:

[W]e need to be concerned with the term Latino or Hispanic because that includes everybody. It includes the Cubans, the Central and South Americans, and I have always felt the struggle has been a Chicano-*Boricua* [Puerto Rican] struggle. I have worked with the city in other capacities and I've always seen how they like to impose upon us a Cuban or a South American to positions of power to keep the Chicanos and the *Boricuas* divided.

Within the Republican Party, there have been debilitating tensions between Cubans and Mexicans. Possessing considerable organizational skills and financial resources, Cubans have attained leadership positions within the party without playing the Hispanic card. In the early 1980s, for example, a Cuban surgeon from Los Angeles, Dr. Tirso del Junco, became state party chair on the basis of his fund-raising efforts. When del Junco subsequently focused his efforts on the Republican National Hispanic Assembly, he encountered stiff opposition from Mexican Republicans who did not share his ideological conservatism and resented his domination of Republican Hispanic politics. The Cubans, in turn, regard the small businessmen and struggling entrepreneurs who typify Mexican Republicans as poor relations, embarrassments among affluent Anglo colleagues, and ideological weaklings with all-too-recent ties to Democrats. Mexicans who ally themselves with Cubans are reviled by fellow Mexicans as "stooges." The resulting battles within Hispanic Republican circles have hindered the party's efforts to reach out to Mexicans, the largest and one of the fastest growing Hispanic groups.

Tensions among Hispanic groups are not usually so acrimonious. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, for example, have not experienced the class and ideological animosities rife among Latino Republicans. But the ever-present possibility of ill feelings encourages efforts to de-emphasize or even ignore differences and to emphasize the similarities among Hispanics. This tendency is especially strong among non-Hispanics. As one education administrator explained to me, the "Hispanic" category is indispensable to foundation executives who, by setting up programs designated

broadly for Hispanics, avoid the problems that would arise if they targeted specific groups. Better to establish an umbrella program, the thinking goes, and let the various groups fight it out among themselves. Government bureaucrats and politicians apply the same logic, and so do Hispanics themselves. A Chicana activist accustomed to dealing with colleagues from different parts of the nation uses the term "Latino" and explains, "It avoids problems."

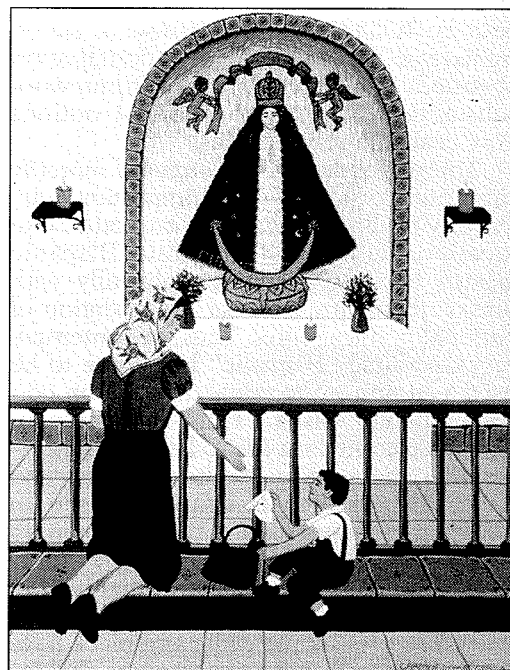
For such leaders, though, the strongest reasons for adopting the "Latino" label are not merely defensive. Those most likely to refer to themselves or others as Latino or Hispanic are the most cosmopolitan and nationally oriented politicians. In Washington, "Hispanic" has certainly been the term of choice for some time, as suggested by the names of many Washington-based efforts: the Hispanic Caucus; *Hispanic Link*, a weekly newsletter culling news of interest to all Hispanics; *Hispanic* magazine, a general interest English-language monthly; or the National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations. Former Congressman Robert García, a New York-born Puerto Rican, put it well: "When I first came to Washington I saw myself as a Puerto Rican. I quickly realized that the majority society saw me as a member of a larger group called Hispanic."

As García suggested, being "Hispanic" allows these leaders to increase the size of the constituencies they represent. It also helps specific groups reposition themselves in the political marketplace. Cubans, for example, constitute a small and steadily shrinking proportion of all Hispanics, but as "Hispanics" they become part of a rapidly expanding national presence. As *Los Angeles Times* editorial writer Frank Del Olmo (a Mexican) writes: "The term 'Hispanic' allowed other Latinos to use a large and growing Mexican-American population to increase *their* influence." Given Cuban foreign-policy concerns and the consequent role they seek to play in Washington, this factor has been critical to their political aspirations.

Mexicans have become "Hispanics" for different reasons. Historically, they have felt ignored and isolated in the Southwest, at the farthest possible remove from the centers of the nation's economic and political

power. But as "Hispanics," Mexicans are part of a group spread all over the United States, including Puerto Ricans in the Northeast and Cubans in Florida. Though hardly oblivious to the importance of their growing numbers, Mexican leaders are keen to avoid having their interests and problems dismissed as those of a regional group and understand the importance of being regarded as a *national* minority group.

The same goal of raising themselves above the status of a regional group also induces Cubans and Puerto Ricans to adopt the "Hispanic" label. And as with Cubans, becoming Hispanic allows Puerto Ricans to tap into whatever clout accompanies the huge and still growing Mexican population. Yet more to the point, Puerto Rican leaders embrace the pan-ethnic label to moderate the popular impression that Puerto Ricans have sunk into the underclass. Manuel A. Bustelo, former executive director of the National Puerto Rican Forum, makes the point in the negative: "The use of 'Hispanic' rather than specific ethnic groups has distorted reali-



"La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos"

ties. In many instances, this has served to convey a more positive picture of overall advancement, while concealing the fact that the Puerto Rican communities in the mainland are worse off than in previous years."

Complex though these dynamics are, they comprise only half of what is encouraging these leaders to call themselves "Hispanics." For if becoming "Hispanic" allows each group to become a *national minority*, it also allows each to become a national *minority*—that is, a group that has experienced racial discrimination and is therefore in need of special help and programs. As "Hispanics," each group can stake a stronger claim of this kind on the nation's conscience than it could on its own. Clearly, the path being followed is that of black Americans, who (as Hispanic leaders continually remind themselves) captured the nation's attention in the 1950s and '60s by making racial discrimination more than just a "Southern problem." By shifting the source of redress to Washington, blacks gained the help of more sympathetic, nationally oriented elites, particularly the media. But the black struggle for equality fundamentally altered American politics. It hastened the demise of states' rights and the consequent nationalization of American politics. This new framework substantially limits the political options now available to Hispanics.

Therefore, the phrase *national minority* captures two sides of a very important coin. Only by trading on that coin can otherwise locally oriented and disparate Hispanic groups hope to compete politically with blacks, their only rival for the attention of national political elites. Thus, in contemporary discourse "Hispanic" has come to be used as a non-white racial designation corresponding to "black." Think for a moment how accustomed we are to hearing, and repeating, the phrase "whites, blacks, and Hispanics," which is routinely used in newspapers, government reports, opinion polls, and scholarly journals. The litany rolls so readily off our tongues that we forget that these are not in fact mutually exclusive categories. While white and black have generally come to be accepted as distinct racial categories, Hispanic—at least until

quite recently—has been regarded as an ethno-cultural designation. Yet today, the Census Bureau is virtually alone in maintaining this distinction: The small print at the bottom of its tables continually reminds us that "Hispanics can be of any race."

Even as the transformation of "Hispanic" into a non-white racial category proceeds in Washington, individual Hispanics offer a more complicated picture of themselves. On the one hand, about 52 percent of all those belonging to Hispanic groups told the 1990 census they were "white." About three percent defined themselves as "black." On the other hand, most of the remaining Hispanics—about 43 percent—designated themselves as "other race." Moreover, this "other race" category has grown since 1980. In other words, these figures challenge the ready assumption that *all* Hispanics are non-white. But at the same time, they point to the emergence of a distinct non-white racial identity among *some* Hispanics.

This confusion, or ambivalence, over racial identity is at the core of the emergent "Hispanic" category. In emulating the political example of blacks and claiming status as a racial minority group, Hispanics run the risk of being stigmatized as a group beyond help or hope. In fact, this may already be happening to Puerto Ricans in the United States. Yet as "Hispanics," Puerto Ricans can also identify themselves (and be identified) with a more positive aspect of the American experience—immigrant aspiration and upward mobility. For this is how, to varying degrees, Cubans and Mexicans are perceived. Yet many Mexicans also see themselves as members of a racial minority deserving of the same extraordinary help that has, despite much controversy, been afforded black Americans. Even Cubans, who despite their evident prosperity qualify (as Hispanics) for affirmative action benefits, find it useful to be part of a group which includes Puerto Ricans and others who fit the profile of an impoverished urban minority. Thus, depending on the specific context, Hispanics can claim to be an immigrant ethnic group in the classic American pattern, or, alternatively, a minority group suffering racial discrimination.

To observers such as Alejandro Portes, this confusion underscores the artificiality of the term "Hispanic." Yet the complaint misses the point: Imprecision is what makes the term so politically useful. On the most mundane level, it gives activists the option of throwing their opponents off-guard by insisting on the inappropriateness of the "label." More fundamentally, "Hispanic" speaks to the critical concerns of any disadvantaged group that seeks support from the modern welfare state. On the one hand, all such claimants must establish the legitimacy of their demands on the public sector. Largely because they follow in the wake of the black civil-rights movement, Hispanics today must base this legitimacy on claims of racial disadvantage and discrimination. On the other hand, claims must also be based on evidence that the group is worthy of help and yet not so disadvantaged that it is beyond hope. The old distinction between the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor endures in today's welfare state. The two facets of "Hispanic"—immigrant ethnic group and racial minority—meet the divergent requirements.

Despite the many social, cultural, and economic differences among these national-origin groups, the term "Hispanic" does have political substance. Today much of that substance derives from the notion of a nonwhite racial identity. Not without grounding in the way Hispanics see themselves, this identity is nevertheless exaggerated by leaders encouraged by our post-



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civil rights regime to compete with blacks as a racial minority. This strategy clearly solves short-term political problems for these leaders, but if it works and Hispanics begin to see themselves exclusively as a minority group, America's racial problems will have acquired a new and troubling dimension.