"Don't call me 'Hispanic', I'm Cuban"[1]

How 'Hispanic' and 'Latino' became a race in the United States and what it can teach us about the importance and limitations of state-recognized identities

In Europe, we don't utter the word 'race' (Roig 2016). But in the United States race is, and has always been, extremely relevant in almost all socio-economic and political contexts. Far from being unspoken, it is the primary lens we use to understand American life.

However, race and identity are not viewed on a continuum but as discrete and finite values. There are only a few races recognized (1) by the general population and even fewer recognized (2) by the government. Of the latter, an average American might casually recognize Black, white, Native American, Indian, Latino, Middle Eastern and Asian as 'races'. Of the former, only White or European American, Black or African American, American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Other Pacific Islander, and 'people of two or more races' exist on the US Census.

There is no 'Latino' race: respondents must select 'Hispanic or Latino' or 'Not Hispanic or Latino' as an 'ethnicity' to accompany each race option.[2, 3] This status is the first and only of its kind in American history.

Despite this official treatment, Americans increasingly use both terms to indicate race. This is almost exclusively understood as a brown person with classical markers of Latin American culture such as the Spanish language, strong familial ties to a country of origin, Spanish-language surnames, and strong cultural practices surrounding music, food, and religion. Today, as many as 25% of those who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino by ethnicity also use the same term to identify their race (Taylor, Lopez, Martinez, and Velasco, 2012).

In this paper, I will explain the historical reasons that the terms Hispanic and Latino originated in the United States and, from there, how it lead to an informal understanding of 'Latino' as a race. I will then briefly debate the consequences of the Hispanic pan-ethnicity. I will call for further work to be done to understand what pan-ethnicities can teach us about empowerment and socio-economic inclusion globally.

Recognizing Latinidad

[1] A popular bumper sticker in the 19XXs (Longoria 2021).

[2] According the Pew Research Center, about half of respondents indicated they have no preference for either 'Hispanic' or 'Latino'. This author is more accustomed to using 'Latino' when speaking of race and 'Hispanic' to refer both to ethnicity and to speak about a larger audience (i.e. white Cubans are Hispanic but not Latino). For the purpose of this paper, I will use these terms accordingly, though they are not necessarily indicative of cultural tides or preferences within the diaspora.

[3] "Latinx" is commonly understood to be complementary to race and is commonly intertwined with "Hispanic". Research shows that the "propensity to identify as Latino in comparison to Hispanic seems to be highly related to political ideology, immigrant generation, and birth cohort."(G Cristina Mora 2021)

As recently as the 1960s, the terms Hispanic and Latino were not widely used and there was no pan-ethnic term to group together those who share the cultural and linguistic patterns we now recognize to make up Latinidad (Longoria 2021).

In this pre-Latinidad era, the US Census consistently included options for white, Black, Native American and not much else. In the 1920 Census, a category was added exclusively for Mexicans, but later removed.[4]

Under this current system, all Latinos were classified as white, effectively hiding the evidence of adverse conditions for Latinos. US Latinos did then and continue today to face higher rates of poverty, lower rates of education, higher discrimination and incidents of racial terror.

As Spanish-speaking populations of Latin American descendants grew in the United States, the Census recognized the need to recognize its presence officially.

At the time there were three distinct regional populations in the United States advocating for solutions for their community: in the Southwest Mexican-Americans; in the Northeast, Puerto-Ricans; and in the Southeast Cubans. Each group faced a distinct set of issues and concerns.

Activists for policy solutions, such as Spanish-language job training and poverty programs targeted towards Latinos, were met with resistance from national administrations who argued these were regional issues, and did not warrant the intervention of the federal government. Activists understood that in order to gain national recognition, they must unify under one name.

In negotiations "Hispanic" became the most popular term. With it, came long-lasting implications for who was considered 'Hispanic' and who was not.[5,6] Today, over 61 million Americans identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

Blurring the line between ethnicity and race

While the Census continues to recognize Hispanic as an ethnicity, it has still failed to address the issue of racial diversity in the Latino community. Of those who self-identified, a full 37% of respondents checked 'of some other race', indicating they didn't feel the existing categories met their needs (Taylor et al, 2012).

A majority of Hispanics checked 'white' as their race; however, when a 2010 Census study conducted rounds of follow-up calls to these participants, they found only a very nominal

[4] This was protested against by the League of the United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a Mexican-American organization who argued they were 'white race […] Americans'. The Mexican government itself protested the category because Mexican citizens that lived in the American Southwest before the annexation were promised full citizenship, but were denied based on their skin color (Demby 2014).

[5] Today, Hispanic encompasses primarily descendants of Cuba, Mexico and Puerto Rico, though many other Latin American countries are included. Spanish, Brazilians, and Filipinos were not, and still aren't included.

[6] To this day, the options on the US Census under "Hispanic" has the option to check Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Mexican and 'another Hispanic or Latin origin'.

amount actually felt that they were ‘white in their daily life’. When asked why they selected white, they replied they ‘didn’t know what else to put’ (Demby 2014).

Combined with the beguiling nature of the options for race and ethnicity, Latinos who are neither white nor Black find that none of the options capture their real experience. While ‘Hispanic’ may describe their immigrant background (or often, their ancestor’s immigrant background) or the language they speak, it cannot do justice to a trait that none of us can hide: our skin color. Rather than to forfeit that consciousness, a growing number of Americans in and outside the diaspora began to see Latino as a race.

Did it help to form a pan-ethnic identity?

Today, the Hispanic community has the recognition the activists of the 1960s and 70s fought for. But the distinction caused almost as many problems as it created. While Hispanics are loosely aligned together, there is not necessarily a great degree of unity among them. For example, only around half of respondents think that they are a “typical American” with the other half saying they are “very different” (Taylor et al 2012).

There is a much greater diversity of opinion even when it comes to issues such as structural racism; while many Black Americans readily recognize deeply embedded racial inequalities, survey data shows that Latinos are less likely to demonstrate the same (Mora, Sandoval and Zamora, 2020). The community is often divided along degree of immigration status as well other factors such as race, education, and political views. In short, they are not a homogenous block, but are often (mis)treated as one.

It’s worth asking then: was it advantageous to form a pan-ethnic identity?

There isn’t a wealth of research in to the advantages of the Hispanic pan-ethnic identity, pan-ethnic identities globally (Okamoto and Mora, 2014) or if the Hispanic pan-ethnicity has aided in greater socio-economic development and inclusion over time. However, there are indications that political representation has grown for Hispanics over time. The 2020 election saw massive spending to court the Latino vote (Gomez, Martinez, and Mukherjee, 2020) and a record-breaking number of eligible Latino voters made it to the ballot box, indicative of higher civic engagement (Gamboa 2021).

In general, pan-ethnicities tend to form by one group uniting under a common and unique tension that inherently stands between the dominant group while also simultaneously maintains the subgroup division (Okamoto and Mora, 2014). In this case, Hispanics might feel unified under a common language and immigrant background.

It would be interesting to understand if pan-ethnic identities serve to alleviate issues relating only to their common shared tension while ignoring deep subgroup issues. In this case, job-training programs in Spanish and easier pathways to citizenship for immigrants, but not colorism within the community, for instance, Puerto-Rican statehood, or international relations between Mexico and the USA.

Further research needs to be conducted to understand what pan-ethnic communities have to gain and lose from forming a pan-ethnicity. The answer can inform not only efforts in the Hispanic community but other pan-ethnicities in the USA, such as the growing need to recognize MENA as an ethnic category (Measher 2020) or the voices of the Afro-Deutsche community in Germany to collect equality data on race where it is currently illegal to collect (Roig 2016).

Relief or tension?

While there seem to be many lasting consequences to the Hispanic pan-ethnicity in the USA, groups such as MENA Americans, Asian Americans, and Afro-Deutsche continue to fight for this type of state-sanctioned recognition of their race/ethnicity/identity, preferring it to post-racial or colorblind policies, knowing that it will not solve all their problems.

Choosing to fight for state recognition of race has always been at the heart of American movements in contrast to race-neutrality and post-racial attitudes that were often used as camouflage for racist policy (Cho 2009). While the American context is unique, the lessons it teaches us are applicable everywhere, especially in societies that attempt post-racialism and colorblindness: there is a clear and objective goal to recognition.

State recognition makes the invisible, visible. Through this visibility, activists have the power to unite a group of people for a common goal. It is not a stopping point but rather a starting point — to fight for power, for recognition, for duplicity of story, for rights, for data . . . for a movement.

Word count: 1650
Word limit: 1500 +/- 10% (150)

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