

A Companion to **Latina/o Studies**

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Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo

The New Latin Nation: Immigration and the Hispanic Population of the United States

Alejandro Portes

As of 2000, the Hispanic population of the United States reached 35.3 million (excluding the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico), representing 12.5 percent of the total. Hispanics grew in numbers by 57.9 percent in the last intercensal period, as compared with 13.2 percent for the national population (US Bureau of the Census 2001). Without its Hispanic component, the growth of the national population would have fallen into the single digits and a number of cities and states would have actually lost population. These facts are well known, as is the source of this rapid growth: sustained immigration.

I will revisit in the next section the numbers behind this massive demographic trend, but it is appropriate first to place it in context by noting five basic facts:

- 1 Immigrants from Mexico and Latin America, in general, have become a national presence and not one limited to certain states or regions.
- 2 During the last decade, Latin America in general and Mexico in particular consolidated their role as the principal reservoir of low-wage labor for the American economy.
- 3 Efforts to deter this inflow through new legislation and various new enforcement programs have consistently failed, indicating the flawed character of the theories underlying these policies.
- 4 Latin American immigrant communities have evolved from a barely noticed presence to a major structural factor in the economic and political development of their sending countries.
- 5 The Latin immigrant population is having a profound influence on the culture and the politics of the cities and regions where it concentrates. However, neither the culture nor the political orientations that these immigrants bring is incompatible with integration into American society.

National Reach

While Latin immigrants and the Hispanic population in general remain concentrated in the South and West, where three fourths of them still live, they have started to move out of their traditional areas of settlement to increase their presence in other areas. In 1990, eleven states had less than 1 percent Hispanic population; by 2000, the figure had dropped to just three. A state like Georgia, for example, went from 1.7 percent Hispanic in 1990 to 5.3 percent in 2000, a 312 percent increase due to an inflow of over 300,000 persons.

Although just two states, Texas and California, continue to concentrate half of the Hispanic population, it is clear that new clusters are being created continuously by two forces: the gradual expansion of Mexican labor migration eastward and the settlement of immigrants from Central and South America in new areas of the country. Driven, in part, by the rigors of tighter border enforcement that has made more difficult the traditional cyclical migrant flow, Mexican laborers have become more settled and have trekked east attracted by new and better employment. New York, Florida, and the Carolinas have been principal targets of this eastward flow, which has turned Mexican labor migration into a national phenomenon (Massey et al. 2002; Smith 1992, 1998).

At the same time, Central and South Americans which comprise just 8.6 percent of the Hispanic population, but are its fastest growing components, have spread around the country, targeting both traditional and new areas of settlement. There are, for example, large concentrations of Dominicans in Providence, Rhode Island and in Boston; of Colombians in New Jersey and Los Angeles; of Salvadorans in Washington, DC and in Los Angeles; and of Brazilians in Massachusetts (Guarnizo et al. 1999; Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Landolt 2000; Levitt 1997). Such movements have also contributed to turn Hispanics into a truly national presence.

Hispanic Immigrants as Manual Labor

The most potent factor accounting for the surge in Latin American immigration, aside from the consolidation of social networks across national borders, has been the labor needs of the American economy. This huge economy, surpassing 10 trillion dollars of GDP in 2000, generates a vast demand for foreign labor at both the high-end of professional and technical occupations and the low-end of low-paid manual jobs (Bean and Stevens 2003; US Bureau of the Census 2000: 451). While Mexican, Argentine, and Colombian engineers are found in Silicon Valley and other areas of high-tech industrial concentration, the bulk of Latin and especially Mexican migrant labor comes to fill labor needs at the bottom of the American labor market. At just 31 percent of high school graduates and 5 percent of college graduates, the Mexican immigrant population of the United

States ranks dead last in human capital among major foreign nationalities and is separated by a vast gap from the average education of the native-born population, 84 percent of whom have a high school diploma and 24 percent a college degree. Central Americans, especially Salvadorans and Guatemalans, are not in a much better position (US Bureau of the Census 1999).

The overwhelming weight of Mexican immigration, its human capital characteristics and its continuation over time, reinforced now by large Central American contingents, have given the Hispanic population its dominant economic and occupational profile. A clear bifurcation is currently taking place between the two main components of US-bound immigration: with a high proportion of well-educated professionals and entrepreneurs, immigrants from Asia are poised to occupy positions of increasing advantage in the American economy and society. Driven by a sustained low-wage manual labor flow, Hispanics will have to climb their way up over several generations. Even those groups with higher levels of human capital and entrepreneurial prowess cannot escape the dominant characterization of Hispanics, defined by continuing low-wage immigration.

Enforcement Policies

Although couched in general language, all legislative and police efforts at controlling unauthorized immigration have been directed mainly at one region, Latin America, and at one country, Mexico, for it is there where over 90 percent of the “problem” originates. Take Mexico and Latin America off the map and all the threats allegedly posed by illegal immigration to American society would instantly go away. Efforts to achieve the goal of stopping the flow, implemented after endless select commissions, study groups, and congressional hearings have come to naught and have, in many instances, backfired, leading to the consolidation and growth of the unauthorized population (Massey et al. 2002).

The principal reason why border control policies have failed so resoundingly, turning unauthorized immigration into a national rather than a regional phenomenon, is that they clash directly with the structural demands of the economy, described previously. The same unauthorized worker caught and turned back at the border is the one for whom a number of American employers – ranchers, farmers, landscapers, construction crew bosses, restaurant owners – are clamoring.

The second reason why the flow is unstoppable is the consolidation of social networks between places of origin and destination. These networks include not only the migrants themselves and their kin left behind, but also their US employers, and the vast number of subcontractors that have emerged to side-step restrictive provisions of the immigration law.

For the existing Hispanic population of the United States, the continuation of the unauthorized inflow has three major consequences. First, the relentless expansion of its numbers, easily outstripping in relative and even absolute terms

that of any other segment of the American population. Second, the consolidation of its objective position and public perception at the bottom of the American labor market and the national hierarchies of education and social status. The third consequence is the growth of a second generation growing up in conditions of severe disadvantage. Because workers without papers find it more and more difficult to maintain their traditional commuting pattern across the border, they opt to bring their families and settle them permanently in the US side. This leads, in turn, to the rapid growth of an infant population which, under normal conditions, would have grown up in Mexico or Central America. Instead, they grow up in America – a second generation subject to the challenges of poverty, feeble communities, and generalized prejudice.

The Rise of Transnational Communities

There was a time when Mexican immigrants who left their country to settle in the United States were regarded as little more than defectors. If they became American citizens, they lost all rights to their Mexican nationality, and their children were derisively referred to as *pochos* (Barrera 1980; Grebler and Moore 1970). How times have changed. Today, Mexico's president refers to his nationals abroad as VIPs (very important *paisanos*). For no less than two decades now, the Mexican federal and state governments have devised a series of measures to court their emigrant population and retain its loyalty. Such measures have culminated in laws allowing Mexicans abroad to vote in national and state elections and permitting them to become US citizens while retaining dual nationality (Goldring 2002; Smith 1998).

In every case, the consolidation of communities straddling national borders has resulted from the combination of two sets of forces. First, migrants themselves have sought to preserve these ties through remittances to family and kin, periodic visits home, and the creation of philanthropic and civic committees to help improve public services and opportunities in their places of origin (Levitt 2001; Vertovec 1999).

Second, new communications and transportation technologies have greatly facilitated these movements, transforming what originally were scattered individual initiatives into a social phenomenon of massive, regular, and predictable dimensions. Today, remittances sent by Latin American expatriates far exceed the foreign aid received by the region and rival in size the sum total of foreign direct investments (*Latin American Weekly Report* 2003). In countries like El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and even Mexico, expatriate remittances figure among the top three sources of foreign exchange, often exceeding the combined total of the country's traditional exports (Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Landolt 2001).

There is a great deal of diversity by national origin and generation in the population classified as "Hispanic." Contemporary immigrants from Latin America

who replenish and add to this population are themselves different in terms of human capital, modes of incorporation, patterns of settlement, levels of transnationalism, and political orientation. Table 2.1 presents data on the five largest Hispanic immigrant nationalities in 2000 and the respective legal immigrant flows in 2001.¹ Three things are immediately apparent from these figures. First, the enormous disparity in size, with Mexicans eclipsing all other groups. Mexicans are almost twenty times more numerous than Cubans, the next largest nationality, and they outnumber all other legal immigrants from Latin America by a factor of ten to one.

Second, the very different spatial settlement patterns of these five nationalities. Cubans are, by far, the most concentrated, with two-thirds settling in Miami and its environs. They are followed by Dominicans, who cluster heavily in New York City and its surroundings. The Mexican and Salvadoran flows resemble, being more dispersed and featuring their largest concentrations in Los Angeles. The principal secondary cluster of Mexican immigrants is, however, Chicago, while that of Salvadorans is Washington, DC. Finally, Colombians are also dispersed, featuring smaller concentrations in Miami and New York City and environs.

Third, the table also makes apparent the significant differences in the human capital composition of each immigrant nationality. Professionals and administrators represented 62 per thousand of all Colombian immigrants in 2001 (38 percent among those declaring an occupation). The figure drops to less than 50 per thousand among Cubans and Dominicans and then to less than 10 per thousand among Mexicans and Salvadorans (approximately 10 percent of those declaring an occupation). The size of these last two groups combined dominates the averages, reinforcing the characterization of the Latin immigrant population as, overwhelmingly, a low-skill flow.

Despite numerous differences among Latin groups, there are also signs of convergence. The emergence of a unified Hispanic population out of these very diverse origins and patterns of settlement is promoted by four mutually reinforcing forces. First, there is a common culture, grounded on language and religion. Unlike groups classified as "Asian" who cannot understand each other, all Latin American immigrants share the same language – Spanish (or in the case of Brazilians, the closely related Portuguese). While a rising number of these immigrants have converted to Protestantism, they all share a common religious background as Catholics. Despite the inroads made by Protestant sects, the Catholic Church is still paramount in the daily lives of most Latin immigrants in the United States (Hirschman 2003; Levitt 2003).

Second, the power of the state is heavily aligned in the side of turning Hispanics into a "real" ethnic minority. Nagel (1986) demonstrated long ago that the state can manufacture ethnicities and even races by the simple expedient of cataloguing and treating people "as if" they belonged to the same group. The enormous power of the media has also been put behind the process of manufactured ethnicity, as press articles, television programs, and films regularly dismiss national differences

Table 2.1 The Hispanic population of the United States – its five largest immigrant components¹

Characteristics	Nationality				
	Mexicans	Cubans	Dominicans	Salvadorans	Colombians
Size, 2000	20,600,000	1,200,000	765,000	655,000	471,000
Percent of Hispanic population	58.5	2.5	2.1	1.9	1.3
Legal immigrants, 2001	206,426	27,703	21,313	31,272	16,730
Percent of total immigration, 2001	19.4	2.6	2.0	2.9	1.6
<i>Principal cities of destination²:</i>					
Bergen-Passaic, NJ	–	–	1,248 (5.8)	–	–
Chicago, IL	11,165 (5.3)	–	–	–	–
Houston, TX	9,447 (4.4)	–	–	2,302 (7.4)	–
Los Angeles, CA	33,427 (16.0)	–	–	8,623 (27.6)	–
Miami, FL	–	18,425 (66.5)	–	–	2,642 (15.8)
New York, NY	–	–	9,787 (45.9)	1,478 (4.3)	2,066 (12.3)
San Diego, CA	10,558 (4.8)	–	–	–	–
Washington, DC	–	–	–	5,045 (16.8)	–
<i>Professional/executive occupations per thousand immigrants, 2001³</i>					
	7.4	47.2	41.6	9.2	62.0

¹ Puerto Ricans excluded.

² Figures in parentheses are the percent of total legal immigrants in 2001 going to each metropolitan area. Numbers representing less than 4 percent of each immigrant nationality are omitted.

³ Absolute number of immigrants declaring a professional or executive occupation per thousand legally admitted immigrants.

Sources: US Bureau of the Census (2001); Office of Immigration Statistics (2002).

within the Spanish-speaking population, referring to its members by the same uniform term. There are increasingly frequent references to "Hispanic" music, films, literature, and sports, even if they originate in different countries and distinct national cultures.

A third reason for convergence is the absolute numerical dominance of Mexican immigrants and their descendants in the Hispanic population. Without Mexicans, all other Latin-origin groups would have no more than local significance. It is Mexican immigration and its aftermath that have turned Hispanics into a truly national presence. Thus, all other groups are driven by the Mexican population as cars by a locomotive. The homogenizing pressures of the state and the media are not applied to a set of numerically comparable nationalities, but to a population dominated by a single core group, with others as mostly local satellites.

The fourth reason for convergence is closely related to the last and has to do with self-interest and with strength in numbers. Despite all the differences, politicians, entrepreneurs, and professionals have a growing interest in a unified Hispanic population. For politicians, of Mexican and non-Mexican origin alike, it means more votes and greater clout. For entrepreneurs, it means a larger, richer market. For professionals, it means access to government and corporate jobs as representatives of a large minority population and access to a larger clientele, if in private practice. The growth of the Hispanic population and its public image as a unified entity thus offers opportunities and paths of mobility that would not exist if its component groups were dealt with as separate immigrant minorities.

The New Second Generation

Until recently, the study of contemporary immigration to the United States focused on the immigrants themselves, their reasons for coming, and their patterns of adaptation. It has only been in the last few years that this focus has shifted on the realization of the lasting importance of the second generation. First generation immigrants have always been a restless bunch, here today and gone tomorrow, *in* the country, but not yet *of* it. By contrast, their US-born and reared children are, for the most part, here to stay. As citizens, fully imbued with American culture and aspirations, this second generation and its patterns of adaptation will play the decisive role in the long-term fate of the ethnic groups created by contemporary immigration (Portes and Rumbaut 1996: ch. 7; Zhou 1997).

Today, one in five Americans under age 18 is an immigrant or a child of an immigrant. This proportion is growing fast, fueled by continuing immigration and the higher than average fertility of many immigrant groups. Although still young, a rising number of children of post-1960 immigrants is reaching adulthood; a majority of this emerging population is of Latin origin (Jensen 2001; Rumbaut 1994). At first glance, and based on the experience of descendants of earlier

European immigrants, we may assume that the adaptation process of the new second generation would be relatively straightforward: children would gradually leave foreign languages and identities behind, embrace American culture, and claim and receive their rightful place in the economic and social mainstream (Alba and Nee 1997; Gordon 1964).

While there is some truth in this “straight line” assimilation story, there are important ways in which it does not fit reality well. There are groups among today’s second generation, slated for a smooth transition into the American middle and upper classes, riding on their parents’ human capital and material resources. Their ethnicity will become optional, displayed on occasion and when convenient. There are others who will claw their way upwards, despite poverty, based on family solidarity and the support of solidary co-ethnic communities. For them, ethnicity and the social networks linked to it will become a key resource and a strong basis for self-identity and pride. There are still others who are at risk of joining the underworld of gangs, drugs, prison, adolescent pregnancies, and early death that comprise the nightmare of American inner cities. For these youths, their ethnicity will be neither an option nor a badge of pride, but a sign of permanent subordination (Bourgois 1995; Vigil 2002).

Conclusion

The rapid growth of the Latin-origin population represents a phenomenon of momentous significance both for the United States and for the groups directly involved in the process. While the growing Hispanic presence is viewed with increasing alarm by some nativist organizations, there is no intrinsic reason why this population cannot integrate successfully into the American mainstream. Latin immigrants share the same Western and Christian traditions as the receiving population; and their work ethic, family values, and dreams for the future are the same. Spanish is a Western language with many affinities to English.

The barriers to successful integration are not cultural, but structural along the lines described in the preceding pages. The rapid growth of the Latin-origin population is fueled by the continuous arrival of immigrants of generally low human capital who come to fill a vast demand for menial labor in the American labor market. Their arrival not only drives down the averages in terms of education, occupational status, and income of the Hispanic population, but recreates anew the problems and the difficulties created by earlier arrivals.

Note

- 1 Puerto Ricans are excluded since they are not considered immigrants.

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