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# Latina/o Identities: Social Diversity and U.S. Politics

Among its many aspects, racialization involves the attribution of singular group identities, cultures, and behaviors to members of racialized groups (Omi and Winant 1994; Torres, Mirón, and Inda 1999). Members of dominant, and especially hegemonic, groups have no difficulty perceiving great complexity and diversity amongst themselves, but racialization seems to render opaque the similar complexity and diversity within “minority” groups. This is as true in politics as it is in other realms of collective life. Some dominant-group candidates seek to appeal to presumed minority group “bloc” voters, while others appeal to fearful or angry dominant-group voters by using “wedge-issue” stereotypes. Media reports fall into similar patterns on a regular basis, and even political scientists have been known to employ such social constructions.

by

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In this brief article, we challenge the longstanding practices abetting the construction of a monolithic and singular identity for U.S. “Latina/os.” We take up this challenge in several steps.

First, we offer a theoretically-based account of how social group identities—including “racial,” ethnic, and gender identities—are implicated in politics. Second, we provide brief accounts of the primary historical “fault lines” underlying the diversity and complexity of U.S. Latina/o populations, and also consider social forces that tend to unify those populations. In our conclusion, we discuss how diverse Latina/o identities intersect with U.S. politics. Our aim is to foster a better understanding of the social forces that shape both shared and divergent identities within U.S. Latina/o communities, and the implications of these identity-construction processes for U.S. political life.

## Social Group Identities and Politics

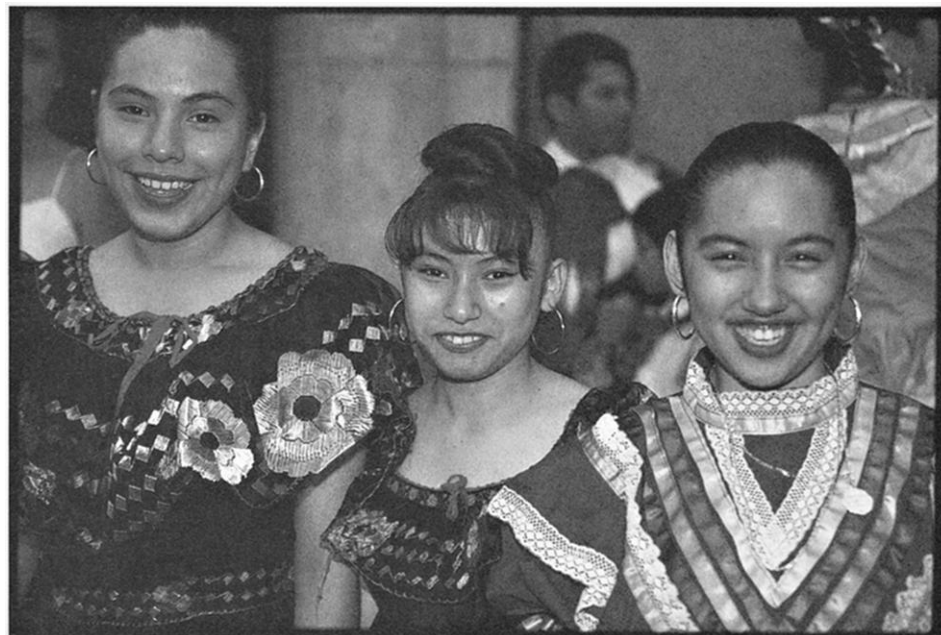
It has become a truism among social scientists that all social group identities—e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference—are socially constructed, meaning that these identities do not exist in nature but are created through processes of human discourse. As such, they are inherently contestable, subject to power relations that, in turn, embed them in political life. The key points that we emphasize here are that human beings in complex societies have multiple social group identities (e.g., “American,” “woman,” “Chicana,” “Latina,” “wife,” etc.), and that the significance of any one of these identities in the life of any given individual is contextual. The social context, that is, plays a powerful role in determining which of the above-listed examples of social identities is most important at any given moment in a person’s life.

Accordingly, understanding the political significance of Latina/o identities requires an awareness of the historical and social contexts that most influence the interests of group members in relation to their social group memberships. “Identity politics” revolves around the nexus between the politics of recognition, in which political contestation centers on allegations of social group “misrecognition” and/or “nonrecognition” (Taylor 1994, 25), and the relationships between group identity and the material interests of group members (see, e.g., Schmidt 2000, 47-56). The political significance of the identities of Latina/os is shaped by historical contexts that tend toward both division and unity among group members, in which the very boundaries of group memberships are as subject to contestation as are the meanings of such memberships (Giménez, Lopez, and Muñoz 1992; Oboler 1995). In the following paragraphs, we sketch out some of the most important historical experiences serving as fault lines creating distinctions and political tensions within the Latina/o community, as well as some of the most

important experiences that have led to greater unity.

## Historical Fault Lines Shaping Diverse U.S. Latina/o Identities

Some of the experiences most important in creating the identities of U.S. Latina/os occurred outside the boundaries of the United States. Latin American<sup>1</sup> population groups, for example, trace their very creation to the sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the vast majority of the Western Hemisphere. The experience of conquest, and the cultural transformations of the region resulting thereafter, established certain cultural patterns through-



Schmidt, Barvosa-Carter, and Torres note that fault lines exist within the Latina/o community created by national identities. Here, several girls gather during a New York City festival. Photo by Rommel Pecson/Impact Visuals.

out (e.g., Spanish or Portuguese language dominance, Roman Catholic religious dominance), and also generated important divisions within the regional populations that have been brought, so to speak, to the United States and incorporated into the U.S. population.

Of all the fault lines running through the contemporary U.S. Latina/o population, the most politically salient are the national divisions derived from the nineteenth-century independence movements that swept through the colonies of both Spain and Portugal, and which resulted in the creation of more than 20 independent nation-states by 1900. The resulting powerful national identities profoundly influence the ethnic identities of U.S. Latina/os. Indeed, the Latino National Political Survey (de la Garza et al. 1991) found that national origin was by far the most important marker for ethnic self-identification among its Latina/o respondents, greatly surpassing the importance of panethnic identifiers such as Latino or Hispanic.<sup>2</sup>

A second important fault line among contemporary U.S. Latina/os results from the diverse modes and

contexts of their incorporation into U.S. society. Sociologists have long recognized that the mode and character of initial contact between social groups profoundly influence the subsequent relationships between those groups. Among U.S. Latina/os, for example, it is highly significant that Mexican Americans first became part of the United States following the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, when the U.S. government forcibly “purchased” nearly half of Mexico’s territory. Puerto Ricans experienced a similarly violent incorporation following the Spanish-American War of 1898. These incorporation processes played very significant roles in the subsequent racialization of both ethnic groups (see, e.g., Acuña 1988; Barrera 1979; Jennings 1977), and the racialized patterns thereby established continue to influence their socialization as ethnic group members even today.

Most present-day Latina/o families, of course, trace their introduction into U.S. society through family narratives of migration from some part of Latin America. The historical and social contexts in which these migrations have occurred—both at the point of departure and at the point of settlement in the mainland U.S.—have deeply influenced the social and political identities of the persons involved in ways that further differentiate the highly diverse Latina/o population (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Generational differences in experience and political identity constitute one important facet of this differentiation among Latina/os. As is true of all social groups, different

Latina/o generational cohorts tend to see the political world through the prisms of their own formative experiences of political maturation, and the differing perspectives often give rise to political conflicts (see, e.g., M. Garcia 1989; Sánchez 1993).

Social scientists have also documented important regional differences in group experience and identity among Latina/os in the various parts of the country. In the U.S. Southwest, for example, Latina/o identity is rooted in a largely shared history of being “Americanized” in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War, but there are important differences in identity-structuring experiences among residents of Texas, California, and northern New Mexico, to name only the best-known regional distinctions (see, e.g., Estrada et al. 1981). In turn, the numerical dominance of *mejicanos* in the U.S. Southwest deeply shapes and conditions the ethnic identities of members of other Latina/o population groups (e.g., Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Central Americans). In somewhat similar fashion, the Latina/o experience in parts of the U.S. Northeast has been

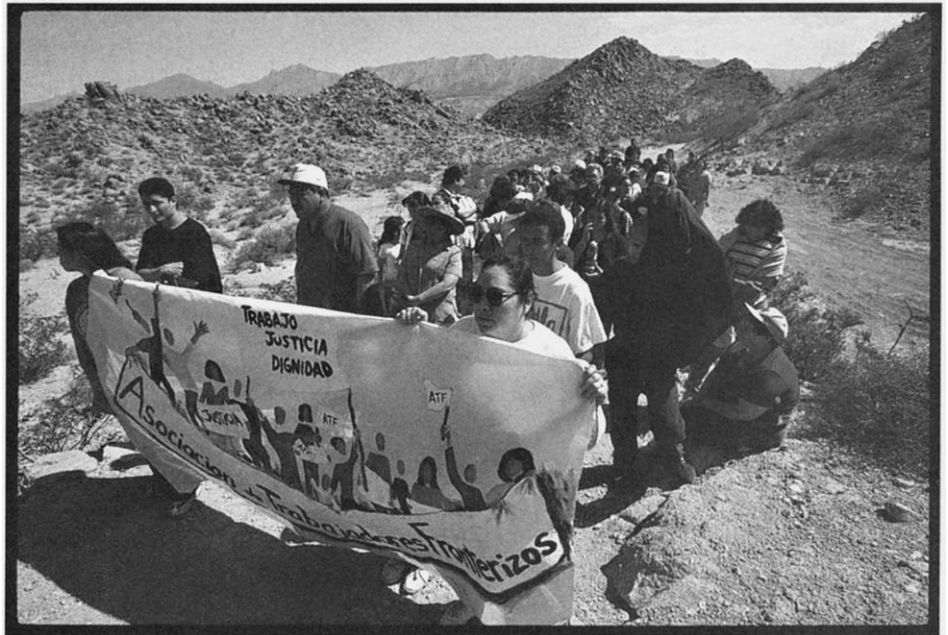
defined by the numerical dominance of Puerto Ricans (Jennings 1977, 1988), and that of Latina/os in South Florida by Cuban exiles (Moreno 1997; Torres 1988). The Midwest, in turn, is home to a more genuinely mixed Latina/o population composed of several national-origin groups (Padilla 1985).

Gender divisions are as significant. Latinas are traditionally expected to be passive, economically dependent, chaste, and monogamous, and to provide unlimited domestic service to the men culturally designated to protect them (e.g. fathers, brothers, and husbands). Departures from these gender mandates notwithstanding, restrictive gender norms have structured a long history of systematic subordination of Latinas to both Latino and non-Latino men (Ruiz 1998). Resistance to this gender subordination has created deep cleavages among those Latinas/os who favor and oppose the traditional gender order (A. García 1997). Latina/o gender norms are today increasingly in flux, transforming male and female gender roles in ways that both erode and sometimes reinscribe patterns of Latina subordination (Del Castillo 1996; Hardy-Fanta 1993; Martinez 1998; Zavella 1987). Even more controversial in certain respects, sexual diversity also provokes key differences among Latina/os. As is true within other ethnic communities today, conflict has erupted among Latina/os over struggles to overcome homophobic intolerance of gays and lesbians as distinctive members of the group (Anzaldúa 1987; Trujillo 1991).

Last, but by no means least, class differences also play a central role in shaping different Latina/o political identities. Overrepresented among the nation's poor, and statistically and visibly sequestered in low-paying, sometimes exploitative and unsafe, jobs, Latinas/os are often perceived homogeneously as members of the working poor. Despite this perception and its alarming reference point, however, class divisions are a significant factor in relations among Latina/os. For example, while some residual class differentiation has always existed among landowners and laborers in what is now the American Southwest (see, e.g., Acuña 1988, Gómez-Quíñonez 1994), upward mobility among Chicanos with greater access to educational and career opportunities during the last 30 years enlarged and increased the influence of the middle and professional classes. This trend has been offset, however, by large influxes of new immigrants whose economic opportunities are constrained by structural changes in the economy that occurred during these same decades. Today, class status among Chicanos and other Latinos ranges from affluence to destitution—with

many newly arrived and homeless immigrants gripped in a daily struggle against starvation (Chavez 1998). In this context, class dissension among Latina/os has often centered on the reluctance of middle and upper middle class Latina/os to direct resources and influence to aid the Latina/o poor, and their willingness to follow class interests that run counter to the needs of the impoverished (Gómez-Quíñonez 1990; Ortiz 1996).

Class divisions also exist between the different Latina/o national-origin groups. Cuban Americans, for example, are generally more affluent than members of other Latina/o groups. This affluence has translated into disproportionate political influence (especially regarding U.S.-Cuban relations) and, in general, a more



Members of the Mexican-American community participate in a religious procession in El Paso, TX. Photo by Jack Kurtz/Impact Visuals.

conservative political outlook among Cuban Americans than that of other Latina/o groups. Despite these variations, many regard the overlap between working class and Latino/a identification as among the most promising bases for political solidarity among Latinas/os (Giménez 1999; DeSipio 1996).

### Historical Forces Shaping Latina/o Unity in the United States

Racialization, a common (though not ubiquitous) phenomenon in the lives of most Latina/os for more than a century, has probably done more to create a panethnic identity among Latina/os than anything else. By racialization, we mean the attribution of “otherness” by members of the dominant Anglo ethnic majority in the United States, and the structural forces of domination, exclusion, and discrimination that have been deployed to develop and act on this widespread attribution. Racialization entails both symbolic nonrecognition and misrecognition by members of a dominant group, and material deprivations and disadvantages that

are structurally linked to the symbolic misrepresentations of group members. Racialization, then, experienced by multitudes of U.S. Latina/os across multiple generations in various parts of the country, has been a powerful catalyst for defensive reaction through the assertion of a valued, shared identity as Latina/os.

There are more positive, endogenous, factors influencing the development of a unified Latina/o identity as well. Recognition of cultural similarities (e.g., language, folklore, and artistic expressions) generates a sense of "we-ness" that leads many, although not all, Latina/os to feel an affinity across national-origin, generational, class, gender, and sexuality differences, particularly in the face of Anglo cultural hegemony (Flores and Benmayor 1997). Many activists and elected officials, moreover, have seen the political advantage of finding common ground across national-origin, regional, and other differences. The U.S. political system, and especially the distributive politics of congressional appropriations, rewards those groups with a palpable and geographically widely-dispersed presence and a well-articulated set of interests. Thus, to the extent that Latina/o elected officials and political activists can find common ground and common identity, panethnic unity may bring both symbolic and material rewards.

## Conclusion: Political Implications

The U.S. Latina/o population cannot be usefully conceived of as a political monolith. The differences sketched above create political cleavages that become more or less salient at given junctures depending on context. At the same time, there are some contextual factors that foster development of a common political outlook among Latina/os under certain circumstances. At least three important political implications can be drawn from these observations.

First, the diversity among Latina/os sketched above may be expected to produce cross-cutting political cleavages. These cleavages will take different configurations

in different political contexts. For example, the commitment of a large portion of the Cuban American community (which is by no means monolithic) to an anti-Castro political stance placed Cuban Americans politically at odds with the rest of the Latino population in the controversy over returning Elian Gonzalez to the custody of his father. This particular political cleavage, however, is extremely specific and is unlikely to have significant implications for consensus-building on issues such as health or education policy.

However, diversity among Latina/os will certainly continue to influence the potential for, and patterns of, coalition building by and among Latinos. Community-building efforts aimed at bringing different Latino subgroups together will be effective only if organizers are willing to acknowledge both similarities and differences among targeted communities. A well-known example of this comes from Felix Padilla's study of Puerto Rican and Mexican Americans' efforts to come together politically as Latina/os (Padilla 1985). Similarly, both Mary Pardo (1998), in reference to East Los Angeles, and Carol Hardy-Fanta (1993), in reference to Boston, described successful Latina efforts to build and mobilize effective coalitions across ethnic lines. In each case, the richness and diversity of Latina/o perspectives formed the basis for successfully uniting diverse groups to work toward common political goals.

Finally, greater Latina/o political unity may be expected in the wake of anti-Latino moves by political leaders and/or in public opinion more generally. That is, to the extent that Latina/os feel threatened simply because they are Latinos, they will embrace this panethnic identity. For example, when former California Governor Pete Wilson pushed for passage of Proposition 187 (which sought to deny public services to undocumented residents) and Proposition 209 (which eliminated affirmative action in state hiring and college admission decisions), it heightened anti-Wilson and even anti-Republican Party unity among Latina/o voters in that state.

## Notes

1. For our purposes, Latin America includes those Caribbean islands whose peoples are typically incorporated as Latinos after migrating to the mainland U.S. (e.g., Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic).

2. But see Jones-Correa and Leal (1996) for a discussion of LNPS data on panethnicity as an important secondary ethnic marker.

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