3-21-1996

Editor's Note

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This issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* is devoted to further consideration of the public policy implications of specific topics that are of concern to the Latino community and in need of urgent redress. This must be a priority if the United States is not to find itself hopelessly mired in the ramifications, blithely ignored at the end of the twentieth century, of the complexities the changing ethnic composition of the country will create in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

Latinos presently account for approximately 22 million, or 8 percent, of the U.S. population. The increasing migration from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America, and the high birthrate among immigrants in particular and Latinos in general, make the Latino population the fastest-growing minority group in the United States. Most estimates project that by the year 2050, one in every five people in the country will be Hispanic. Add to the population crucible the projected increases in the number of Afro-Americans and the exponentially increasing inflow of Asians and other nonwhite nationalities, and the result will be a true potpourri of skin tones in which color blindness will have become a malady of the truly blind.

Part I of Latinos in a Changing Society, which appeared in our Spring/Summer 1995 edition, addressed questions relating to immigration, employment, and income and participation in the political process. In his Foreword, Dr. Edwin Meléndez, director of the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston, observed:

> For many . . . ethnic conflict is part of an assimilation or integration process that in time will reach a more promising stage of tolerance and understanding. . . . For others, understanding how Latinos contribute to the landscape of America has not yet worked its way into their consciousness, partly because of their so-called invisibility between blacks and whites. The presence of Latinos is propitious in that their legacy will mark economic, political, and social changes into the next century. As Carlos Fuentes expressed it, America will find itself shifting toward the "Latinoization" of its own borders.

Thus, he concludes, "[Latinos] may well be on their way to becoming the agents of change in fostering America's future."

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This audacious prediction is a suitably appropriate starting point for Part II of *Latinos in a Changing Society*. It addresses questions of identity and ethnicity and how the subtleties and psychological nuances embedded in these concepts and the ways they play themselves out in practice. Matters relating to education and health, for example, are symptomatic of cultural differences that are ignored by policymakers, exacerbating rather than ameliorating the problems Latinos face.

Indeed, if self-awareness is the key to self-understanding, societal awareness of the cultural imperatives that are germane to the Latino sense of identity is the key to societal understanding of the dynamics of Latino behavior and its social appurtenances. Linked, of course, to the Latino sense of self-identity is the changing status of ethnicity and the role it plays in American society.

Once used almost exclusively to define the causes of ethnic conflict and inter- or intraregional strife in far-off places, ethnicity was viewed as something of an anachronism, a throwback to tribalism, something quite out of place in a modern society. It was perceived in terms of its being like a bad habit, one which could be broken by application of sufficient will. It was something people could grow out of as their propensity to modernize became more ingrained and the influence of mass culture — the "filthy tide," as W. B. Yeats once referred to it —subsumed indigenous differences and stamped us all with the same brand name.

We were all members of the global family, inexorably destined to become clones of one another in terms of our participation in the global marketplace, where seemingly archaic concepts such as the social implications of different cultural values and the folk memories of heritage and history are consigned to the trash bins of history. In our rush to become modern, we lost sight of our own uniqueness, dismissing as premodern (or should I "up" the intellectual notch and say postmodern?) the very things that are the birthright of our humanness.

Whereas in the first part of the twentieth century the industrial credo emphasized mass production and standardization in the marketplace of goods and services, in the latter part of the century we are bringing the same rigid dispositions to compartmentalize human relationships, the social interactions that define personal behavior and our "place" in society.

We are "measured" in terms of generalized social norms that have their origins in the predominant Anglo/Western value systems that often have little more to commend them besides the fact of their being accoutrements of the dominant — read "ruling" — classes. Hence they come with the imprimatur of what amounts to secular theology's own sense of infallibility.

Thus, the appeal of Buchananism, the political ideology articulated by Republican presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan, who rails against immigrants ("Americans for American jobs"); uses xenophobia as a vehicle to denigrate values that do not conform to his own tunnel-visioned idea of the American dream; champions white nationalism ("Who speaks for the Euro-Americans?") to reach the "anxious" classes, the millions of white Americans who feel threatened by the impact inexorable social change is having on their lives, job insecurity, and the fear that hordes of foreigners are massing on the country's borders ready to claim the meager fruits of their economic orchards at a fraction of the wages American employees currently enjoy. For these millions, "values" are a code word for the exclusion of people of color or others who by virtue of race and nationality are seen as a clear and present danger. Fortress America, a concept as futile as it is simplistic, is becoming the preferred solution.

In "Understanding Latino Ethnic Identity Development," Dr. Azara Rivera-Santiago notes that "the steady growth in the [Latino] population has necessitated extended

research that is more reflective of cultural perspectives which are different from the typical Western view of the world or the majority culture. This is particularly true of the literature on identity development." In addition, Dr. C. H. Hoare, writing in the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, observes that "the values of American society of autonomy and independence foster an identity that is individualistic. In particular, American individualism and self-centrality help us to understand the American idea of the person. They do not, however, propel us toward understanding the way in which identity may be differentially constituted in other cultures."

Most important, the connection between culture (customs, language, values, beliefs, etc.) and ethnic identity is not sufficiently appreciated. Or, to put it somewhat differently, the values of American society with their almost pathological emphasis on the individual don't help us to understand how other cultures, which do not put a premium on the individual as the fulcrum that balances the universe, work.

On the other hand, one must be careful to distinguish between ethnic identity and cultural affinity. The latter is a necessary but insufficient ingredient of the former. The complexities inherent to the understanding of each add to the need for caution in interpretation. When we tread the mine-filled fields of ethnicity, with all the loaded connotations associated with the term and the equal proclivity with which policymakers and practitioners use and abuse its implicit racial content for whatever pretext serves the convenience of the moment, we need to guard against the off-the-cuff generalizations that impede rather than advance understanding of its relevance to defining the framework for public policy in the next century.

In her examination of models of ethnic identity development, Rivera-Santiago identifies the features that are common to all. At the early stages of the developmental process, "all share the common belief that an individual shows preference for the values of the dominant culture and society"; in the "search" stage, however, "[all] suggest that individuals undergo a search for a better understanding of their culture and themselves." One other conclusion of research in this field, which is still in its embryonic stage, is that in environments where there is less tolerance for cultural differences, "preference for identifying with [one's] ethnic group becomes more meaningful." Intolerance, it seems, creates a longing for the safety of the tribal womb.

Central to the idea of a more elastic definition of ethnicity is the need to ascertain how ethnic groups, such as Latinos, especially in a bicultural society, view themselves rather than how they are viewed by others, to fashion public policy according to their assessment of their needs rather than our assessment of what they must do or achieve in order to become part of the so-called mainstream, to recognize difference rather than to minimize it.

The importance of socioeconomic and political factors on the development of ethnic identity is a recurring theme in the recent literature on the subject, particularly with regard to the way in which inequities in areas such as education and employment can play a significant role in identity development.

Only recently have we acknowledged the obvious: that ethnicity reflects different cultural values; that these differences, rather than being compressed into the false dichotomies of some ill-conceived, poorly designed, and disastrously executed processes of what have invariably turned out to be models of nonintegrative assimilation, the failure of which manages simultaneously to be one of the most transparent yet concealed secrets of our times, *must* become the foundation stone for an edifice of multiculturalism, its many stories connected by stairwells of self-esteem, each step on the stairwells a tentative venture into the promised land of self-empowerment. ✤

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