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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

Occasionally the *New England Journal of Public Policy* devotes an entire volume to consideration of a public policy issue of major importance. Thus the special issues on the AIDS epidemic, Women and Economic Development, Homelessness, and Education.

We have always prided ourselves on the belief that over the years we have made complex issues understandable to a broader public than is the norm for an academic journal, that we make issues accessible to policy practitioners, thus opening the way to an enhanced debate on the questions we raise. The purpose of a good publication is to inform, arouse curiosity, challenge conventional thought, all of which presupposes that what we publish is comprehensible, intelligible to the informed reader, relatively easy to grasp, not wrapped in the garbled verbosity that is too often the hallmark of many academic journals. We believe we have met these goals in this volume and the one to follow.

These two issues of the *Journal* focus exclusively on the Latino community in the United States, which is the fastest-growing minority in the country. It is a development that poses profound questions regarding the course this country will take into the twenty-first century and the way in which it will define itself. It will sever the almost metaphysical distinctions between the melting pot and multiculturalism, opposites on a philosophical curve that are as much self-created as self-evident.

Dr. Edwin Meléndez, the guest co-editor for this issue, observes in his Foreword that Latinos “may well be on their way to becoming the agents of change in fostering America’s future.” Perhaps he does not go far enough. Latinos may well change the American sense of its identity, not just challenge but abnegate some of the core beliefs America has about itself. Change may be incremental, but the sum of the increments always overwhelms the parts. They become in their aggregate the critical mass that presages not change but revolution, the shining pathfinders that illuminate the new course of history.

What makes Latinos so special is that there is not one Latino community but several, each with distinct characteristics, distinct lifestyles, and unique identity. Yet they share a common language and a common cultural base. And what makes this issue of the *Journal* so special is the fact that the articles are provocative, challenging many current orthodoxies, dispelling old myths, replacing conjecture and generalizations with the iron rod of meticulous research.

Three areas of Latino experience are examined in this volume — the impact of immigration policies, employment and income opportunities, and the degree of political participation. The common denominator in all three is that the Latino experience is excep-

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tional in comparison with the historical experience of other immigrant — or racial — groups, indeed, that in many ways it is antithetical to the experience of other groups and has many disturbing implications for the direction of public policy in these highly-sensitive policy arenas, especially in times of severe economic difficulties.

In California, Proposition 187, passed in November 1994, will deny undocumented immigrants access to public schools and other public services. It passed with a 62 percent majority, despite the fact that the balance of evidence suggests that undocumented immigrants probably contribute more to the public treasury than they receive in public services.

The proposition reinforces the scapegoating that is the root of racism, that is, the deeply held belief that “foreigners,” especially those who speak funny languages and look funny, are “stealing” jobs from Americans — Dare one use the itinerant migrants working the lettuce fields of Southern California for menial pittance as an example of the expropriation of jobs eagerly sought after by hordes of unemployed American workers? Sadly, the discrimination against Latinos is not confined to Anglos; African-Americans and Asians, long subject to the travails of discrimination, weigh in with their own prejudices: only about half of these voters opposed Proposition 187.

Further causing disturbance is the fact that, increasingly, research reveals growing cleavages between indigenous minority groups and “imported” immigrants, that the disadvantaged care little for the still less advantaged when any uplift in the status of the latter appears to threaten the position of the former. As Meléndez observes in his Foreword, “Ethnic polarization is wider than just whites versus ethnic and racial minorities.” This is an admission few academics are prepared to make; it exudes political incorrectness. However, the *New England Journal of Public Policy* pays deference not to the politically correct but to the politically honest: Why talk about rainbow coalitions when everyone knows that there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?

Suffice it to say that in an era of shrinking economic opportunities, when “downsizing” has become the yardstick of success, when government spends most of its energy trying to dismantle itself, each ethnic/racial group clings to what it has, even with the certain knowledge that it is to the conspicuous detriment of others. Altruism is a luxury only the well-off can afford, easier to contemplate when it can be written off.

What a distressing number of articles in this volume point out is that the experiences of Latinos simply highlight the way racial and ethnic conflict could extend to the whole nation in the near future, a prospect that should command Newt Gingrich’s egregious attention.

But then again, perhaps not. There is, Meléndez asserts, “a close relationship between the growing nativist and anti-civil rights sentiments, the dissolution of the liberal coalition around the Democratic Party, and the anger of the white electorate toward government. The primary factor underlying these issues is a stagnant U.S. standard of living. Targeting immigrants, minorities, and single mothers receiving financial assistance is easier than understanding how global competition, corporate restructuring, and new technologies have affected economic growth and income distribution during the past two decades.”

In this context, an angry and confused white America will continue to lash out at minorities. In the absence of political leadership that comprehends the psychological dimensions of the problems at hand, and the social consequences of our continuing failure to address them, white America will ensure that Latinos continue to be the victims of our larger greeds, destined to bear the brunt of social inadequacies and the parasitic hostility of the middle classes who think they have been betrayed by the people they elected to protect their interests.

V. S. Naipaul put it exquisitely: "When jargon turns living issues into abstractions, and where jargon ends competing with jargon, people don't have causes. They only have enemies; only the enemies are real."

I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Edwin Meléndez, director of the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Without his direction, guidance, and commitment to the project, I can confidently say that this issue would not have seen the light of day.

Part II of *Latinos in a Changing Society* will address the question of identity and ethnicity and the issues of education and health as they relate to the Latino community. 🐼