



Photo by Asterio Tecson.

Hispanic Day Parade, Fifth Avenue, New York, 2010.

## RESEARCH

# Hispanic Panethnicity

by G. Cristina Mora

**A**lthough terms like the Hispanic/Latino community, the Latino vote and Hispanic culture are common today, panethnicity has not always been a major form of group representation. Indeed, if we were to examine America in the late 1960s, we would find that this community was, for the most part, geographically, culturally and politically disparate. During that period, all the major Mexican-American civic organizations were based in the Southwest, where Spanish-language media outlets imported programming from Mexico, and student activists developed a “Chicano” youth movement. Puerto Rican civic organizations, by contrast, were clustered in the Northeast. Television and radio stations from New York through Philadelphia aired Spanish-language soap operas, variety shows and news programming imported from San Juan. And activists there focused on two main issues: Puerto Rican sovereignty and urban poverty in “Boricua”

neighborhoods. Lastly, Cubans and their organizations in the 1960s were primarily based in Florida. There, exiles built close-knit ethnic enclaves that remained intensely focused on the developments of Fidel Castro’s Cuban revolution, and Cuban households tuned in to media stations that broadcasted news of Havana.

The disparate nature of the period, however, was not simply happenstance. Early attempts to build organized political or cultural bridges between these communities were infrequent and unsuccessful because these groups resisted the notion of panethnicity. Thus, in 1971, Puerto Rican and Mexican-American civil rights activists held a “unity” summit in Washington that disintegrated amid “floor fights” and “shouting matches.” In addition, media executives who tried to bridge cultural divides by, for example, providing Mexican programming to Cuban-American audiences — and vice versa — regularly received complaints and

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even threats. “Cubans didn’t want to have anything to do with Mexican programming... and the Mexicans would raise hell if we substituted their [Mexican] soap operas with anything else,” recalls one former media executive. Indeed, America in the late 1960s had virtually no Hispanic panethnic civic organizations, no panethnic commercial media efforts and, quite simply, no official category in which to conceive of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans as a single community.

By 1990, however, the situation had changed dramatically. By then, prominent social movement groups, such as the National Council of La Raza, had evolved from Mexican American to panethnic organizations and served as political advocates for the “Hispanic community.” By 1990, Spanish-language media networks, like Univision Communications Inc., had evolved into national ventures that created “Hispanic” programming and catered to a national, panethnic audience. Equally important, by that time the U.S. Census Bureau had created an official “Hispanic” census category that consolidated Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Cubans into one statistical meta-group.

How did this shift occur? A simple hypothesis might be that organizations adapted to self-identification trends. Indeed, public commentators and journalists have posited that Hispanic panethnicity emerged in the United States as Latin American migration diversified and ethnic groups began living together and developing a common cultural outlook. Social movement organizations, commercial media networks and state agencies, the argument suggests, simply changed their practices to reflect a grassroots shift in identity that started on the ground, in communities.

Yet, immigration scholars have long argued that socioeconomic and citizenship boundaries slice through the purported Hispanic community in significant ways. For example, scholars have found that Cubans’ higher socioeconomic status and their political refugee experience give them an outlook on American politics, civic involvement and assimilation that is distinct from the outlook of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. Additionally, cross-sectional data have shown that only a small fraction of individuals in these ethnic communities believe that Hispanics share a common political agenda or a sense of linked fate. More important, several studies

[Puerto Rican Day Parade, Fifth Avenue, New York, 1971.](#)



Photo from Associated Press.

have shown that individuals overwhelmingly prefer to identify nationally, for example as Puerto Rican or Peruvian, rather than panethnically. One study even mentions the popular, “Don’t Call Me Hispanic, I’m Cuban!” bumper sticker that circulated in Miami during the early 1990s to assert that panethnicity has been an unwelcome form of identification for some. To be sure, there has been a significant increase in Hispanic panethnic self-identification since the 1980s, but this increase emerged well after the organized panethnic turn in the civic, state and market sectors.

My research uncovers the perfect storm that led to the institutionalization of Hispanic panethnicity in the United States. Broadly, I argue that the organized shift toward panethnicity comprised a three-step process. First, Mexican-American and Puerto Rican social movement organizations made claims on the federal government, demanding that the U.S. Census Bureau classify their subgroups as distinct from Anglo Americans. At the time, Mexican-American and Puerto Rican data was mainly classified as “white,” which made it difficult for social movement organizations to prove to government organizations and grant-making agencies that these communities were disadvantaged. In a nutshell, activists needed accurately labeled census figures in order to prove that Mexican-American and Puerto Rican communities had high rates of poverty and unemployment and were thus different from Italian and Irish Americans. Media entrepreneurs in the Southwest supported activists’ claims, arguing that Spanish-language audiences were culturally distinct from European immigrant groups.

Second, these activists, along with select Cuban American political leaders, negotiated a new “Hispanic” data category with census statisticians. At the time, the Mexican-American, Puerto Rican and Cuban-American communities were being courted by the Nixon administration for their votes, which placed pressure on the Bureau to listen to activists’ demands. At the negotiation table, census officials and activists agreed that a larger, panethnic category would be ideal, in part because it could yield a meta-group that would capture mixed-Latinos, such as Cuban Puerto Ricans, as well as Latinos who did not identify with Latin American countries, such as the Hispanos in New Mexico and the Tejanos in Texas. Moreover, for census officials, the notion of Hispanic panethnicity would translate into a sizeable category that could be compared to black and white classifications, simultaneously appeasing critics and yielding more reliable demographic information. For



Photo courtesy of the United States Census Bureau.

A woman holds up a 1980 census form, the first to include a “Hispanic” category.

activists, the new category would provide data that could help secure grants for the “Hispanic” community.

Lastly, census officials, media executives and activists worked together to promote the notion of a Hispanic collective identity. Spanish-language media executives had long been interested in the census debates because more accurately defined racial/ethnic categories could help them prove to advertisers that their potential audience was large. They thus joined with activists and began promoting the new Hispanic census category in specially designed commercials and public information programming. One Univision ad even portrayed a woman holding up the 1980 census form and pointing to the new Hispanic question. Once the 1980 census had been conducted and the first Hispanic numbers had been reported, media executives quickly used this information to develop Hispanic marketing manuals and to generate the notion of a Hispanic consumer market.

In effect, the Hispanic category became institutionalized throughout the 1970s and 1980s as activists, census officials and media executives clashed, negotiated and collaborated to promote the notion of a Hispanic identity. Further links emerged throughout the 1980s as activists and media executives assisted one another. Indeed, activists promoting “Hispanic”

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**4. COLOR OR RACE**

Fill one circle.

If "Indian (American)," also give tribe.

If "Other," also give race.

<input type="radio"/> White	<input type="radio"/> Japanese	<input type="radio"/> Hawaiian
<input type="radio"/> Negro or Black	<input type="radio"/> Chinese	<input type="radio"/> Korean
<input type="radio"/> Indian (Amer.)	<input type="radio"/> Filipino	<input type="radio"/> Other— <i>Print race</i>

Print tribe →

→ NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 5 about Hispanic origin and Question 6 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

**5. Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?**

- No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
- Yes, Puerto Rican
- Yes, Cuban
- Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.* ↴

Census questions on race and ethnicity, 1970 and 2010.

was one factor, but ambiguity was also important. Indeed, at no time did either civic, media or census actors ever fully define what made "Hispanics" Hispanic. While they did consider characteristics such as language, surname and a felt connection to Latin America, these factors were eventually replaced by vague arguments noting that Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and others were united because they shared common family values, worked hard and all had some connection to Spain. It was this ability to mutually invest in a vague concept that allowed organizations that would otherwise not work together to overcome differences and form ties.

With time, these connected organizations also began producing claims that historicized the Hispanic concept. For example, activists claimed that Hispanics had been represented in the American Civil War, even though the term "Hispanic" as such had not been invented at that time. By historicizing Hispanic panethnicity, organizational actors could invoke a sort of collective amnesia and make the notion of a Hispanic culture seem timeless.

In sum, it was not simply the state or civic groups or the media that created the idea of panethnicity. Rather, Hispanic panethnicity emerged out of the complex web of relationships and interdependencies among organizations in these sectors. In the process, organizations developed common vocabularies and ways of representing Hispanic panethnicity. Indeed, the fact that so many actors and interests played pivotal roles in the construction of panethnicity ultimately makes it difficult for the public to pin the construction of the term "Hispanic"

political agendas were regular guests on Spanish-language talk shows, and during a moment of economic downturn, media executives helped to connect activist organizations with corporate donors and firms that were advertising on Spanish-language television. Moreover, by the late 1980s, activist organizations were regularly sending members to Census Bureau workshops to learn how to better analyze Hispanic demographic data.

By 1990, a variety of organizations from across these fields had come together to promote the notion of

panethnicity. For social movement leaders and media executives alike, the notion of Hispanic panethnicity provided them with new opportunities to mobilize resources. For census statisticians and government bureaucrats, the idea of Hispanic panethnicity produced new, reliable forms of data. And together, these organizations came to promote the idea of a Hispanic minority, a Hispanic consumer market and, most importantly, a Hispanic culture.

But what allowed these organizations to keep collaborating? Their ability to share resources

on a single event or organization. This in turn creates the illusion that Hispanics have always existed in some way or another.

As with all social constructs, there have been the occasional public commentators who question the validity of panethnicity and argue that it is simply a product of state, political or media interests. And to be sure, the notion of panethnicity is not accepted by all. Yet, these critiques have been overshadowed by the Hispanic policies, data reports, media shows and cultural symbols that claim the validity of panethnicity. Moreover, as major events loom, such as elections or census counts, the networked chorus of state, market and civic organizations amp up their actions and loudly insist on the real existence of the Hispanic vote, the Hispanic market and the Hispanic community.

As new generations of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans and others are born, they too

Hispanics became a sought-after demographic in the 2008 presidential campaign.

come to believe that Hispanic panethnicity represents a national cultural bond. Not knowing of a time when the census, the media and the political landscape looked differently, these new Americans join Hispanic civic groups, tune into Hispanic media, read books on Hispanic history and fill out surveys that provide Hispanic categories. Although the definition of Hispanic culture remains ambiguous to them, they nonetheless identify themselves as part of a panethnic community that is deep-rooted and that has existed across history.

*G. Cristina Mora is an assistant professor in the Sociology Department at UC Berkeley. She is currently writing a book on the development of Hispanic panethnicity in the United States. She spoke for CLAS on September 19, 2011.*



Photo courtesy of Barack Obama.