

HOW THE UNITED STATES RACIALIZES LATINOS

WHITE HEGEMONY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Racializing Latinos

Historical Background and Current Forms

José A. Cobas, Jorge Duany, and Joe R. Feagin

Despite its scientific disrepute, the concept of “race” remains a powerful social determinant in the United States. The racialization of Latinos refers to their definition as a “racial” group and the denigration of their alleged physical and cultural characteristics, such as phenotype, language, or number of children. Their racialization also entails their incorporation into a white-created and white-imposed racial hierarchy and continuum, now centuries old, with white Americans at the very top and black Americans at the very bottom. Thus, one can speak about the intense racialization of daily life, including health, housing, education, work, friendship, and marriage patterns. In this introductory chapter, we trace the modern concept of race in Europe from its origin in the fifteenth century and the racialization of Latinos and Latin Americans in the United States since the nineteenth century. We also provide a brief overview of the main contributions of the individual chapters of this volume.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF RACE IN EUROPE

In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese became the first Europeans to travel to Africa and establish trading posts on its western coast. They initially exchanged such goods as metal pots and wine for Africans’ gold and spices. As the demand

for enslaved Africans increased and made their transport more profitable than trade in nonhuman goods, enslaved Africans became the cargo of many Portuguese ships.

The Spanish nation-state was the first to colonize on a large scale indigenous societies in the Americas for their resources, but its growing wealth and military apparatus were soon countered by the imperial expansion of competing English, Dutch, and French nation-states. Early on, Spanish and English conquerors and enslavers in the Americas rationalized the oppression of indigenous and African peoples in both Christian religious terms (uncivilized, un-Christian) and physical-biological terms (ugly, apelike). The massive enslavement of Africans awakened the interest of European and North American scholars. Some of the latter had even invested in the slave trade, and many others began to accent European superiority and African inferiority. By the last few decades of the 1600s, British and other European thinkers were laying the groundwork for a hierarchy of biologically distinctive “races,” which developed more fully over the eighteenth century. England’s Sir William Petty, a leading anatomist, portrayed enslaved “blacks” as physically and culturally inferior to “whites.” Drawing on European travelers’ accounts of the Americas and Africa, Petty advocated a ladder-like ranking of unchangeable human “species” or “races” characterized by physical and social differences. He insisted that natives of the southern tip of Africa were the “most beastlike of all the souls of men with whom our travelers are well acquainted” (quoted in Shore, 2000:87; see also Feagin, forthcoming).

In Germany, the West’s leading philosopher, Immanuel Kant, taught philosophy and what would later become social science. His treatise, “On the Distinctiveness of the Races in General” ([1775] 1950), laid out one of the first hierarchical models of human “races.” Kant’s work, which he claimed was based on science, conceived “races” as “differences in the human genus” shaped by different environments. Races varied in physical traits such as skin color, physiognomy, and body type, as well as in psychological temperament. Kant paid special attention to “Negro” traits. A physiological process ending with the evaporation of the acids of phosphorous, Kant asserted, “makes Negroes stink.” Although in his racist view blacks were well prepared for physical labor, they were also “lazy, soft and dawdling” ([1775] 1950:22). This early white racial framing of people of African descent influenced most subsequent models of the racial hierarchy in Western societies.

Shaped by English thinkers such as Petty in the late 1600s and early 1700s, the first conceptualizations of “race” in North America developed over the next century on the basis of a belief in the supremacy of the “Anglo-Saxon” race, supposedly linked to superior Germanic groups (Horsman, 1981). Variations on this Anglo-Saxon myth were widely popular in North America. Thomas Jefferson, the most famous of the U.S. founders and a patrician slaveholder himself, was the first American intellectual to write extensively on racial matters. Jefferson led in creating self-satisfying rationalizations for the enslavement of African Americans. In a passage reminiscent of David Hume’s stereotyping of Africans (Morton, 2002) and of Kant’s overtly racist thinking ([1764] 1965), Jefferson argued that enslaved African Americans did not have any achievements that would demon-

strate their human equality: “But never yet could I find a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture” (quoted in Gossett, 1997:43). A man with great influence over the next century, Jefferson read and was influenced by the earlier work of scientists such as Petty, including their negative views of black Americans. In Jefferson’s only intellectual book, the influential *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he articulated what Joe Feagin (2006:25, 28) has called the “white racial frame”: “An organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate. . . . Critical to the white racial frame is an interrelated set of cognitive notions, understandings, and metaphors that whites have used to rationalize and legitimate systemic racism.”

By the eighteenth century, an increasingly elaborate racialized discourse targeting African Americans, and to a lesser but significant degree Native Americans, was found in all major U.S. institutions—the economy, law, politics, education, and religion. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the concept of race and the racial hierarchy in the United States were aggressively linked to the ascendant school of “Social Darwinism.” The English philosopher Herbert Spencer, creator of that term and most important thinker in its tradition, saw human evolution as the outcome of individual competition for survival (Spencer [1873], 1972). The “fittest” American groups would supposedly prevail over “inferior” ones, and in this manner humanity would cleanse itself of unfit “races.” Spencer argued that human competition occurred in varying environments and that human beings developed specific skills needed for survival. For him, this competition explained the purportedly higher development of the intellect among “white” Europeans, who had to rely on their wits to survive vis-à-vis groups such as African “Bushmen,” who were alleged to depend on their brawn, not on their intelligence. Spencer put it as follows: “That superiority of sight which enables a Bushman to see further with the naked eye than a European with a telescope, is fully paralleled by the European’s more perfect intellectual vision” ([1873] 1972:7). Spencer’s writings won wide use and acclaim among white leaders and intellectuals in the United States, and some of his books became bestsellers. His thought drew on and reciprocally fostered the dominant racist ideology that had already emerged in the United States.

By the late nineteenth century, the dominant racist frame had coalesced in the momentous U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which provided the basis for the “separate but equal” doctrine of Jim Crow segregation. Homer Plessy contended in his lawsuit that being forced by a Louisiana law to ride in a separate train car violated his constitutional rights. In an astonishing display of racial arrogance and highly specious thinking, the all-white Supreme Court justices justified their decision to uphold Louisiana’s law, claiming that the plaintiff’s complaint was based only on his erroneous perception and not on reality: “We consider the underlying fallacy of the [black] plaintiff’s argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction on it” (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896:551).

THE RACIALIZATION OF LATIN AMERICANS AND LATINOS

The first major cases of North American racialization involved Indians and, as previously noted, enslaved Africans. The latter's vilification seemed to increase as slave labor became ever more important in U.S. agriculture, especially with advances in cotton farming in the South by the late 1700s. Beyond African Americans and Native Americans, whites created systems of oppression for other "Americans of color," including people of Latin American origin. White American leaders and the rank-and-file have belittled the physical appearance, Spanish language, Catholic traditions, and family values of Latin Americans at least since the 1830s.

The Spanish colonies in North America suffered from sequential imperialistic domination and racialization by Spain and then by the emerging United States. Spain's whites had mixed with the Indian and African-descended populations of Mexico and other Spanish American colonies, which resulted in a racially heterogeneous (mestizo) population. In the aftermath of the 1840s Mexican-American War, moreover, the ever-expanding United States seized much of northern Mexico, thereby incorporating about 110,000 Mexicans into U.S. territory.

The U.S. racialization process has had a cross-border dimension within the Americas. By the mid-1800s, the U.S. racial hierarchy and its rationalizing frame had become extended as white entrepreneurs and political leaders brought in more non-European labor and territories. The white Americans' racial frame soon classified all Mexicans as a racially inferior people who could not govern themselves. In Texas and California, among other areas, whites often spoke of Mexicans as "niggers" or "dirty mongrels"; the notorious adventurer Stephen Austin, in particular, referred to them as a "mongrel Spanish-Indian and Negro race" (quoted in DeConde, 1992:29). Over the coming decades, Mexicans were further described by whites as a mixed-race people who needed to be taught the Eurocentric way to advance their inferior civilization (Horsman, 1981).

The vituperation against Mexicans could also be heard in the nation's capital. In 1848, Senator John C. Calhoun, a vociferous opponent of the proposed annexation of Mexico, injected the language of the white racist frame into his jeremiad against Mexicans:

We have never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race—the free white race. . . . I protest against such a union [the U.S. annexation of Mexico] . . . Ours, sir, is the Government of a white race. The greatest misfortunes of Spanish America are to be traced to the fatal error of placing these colored races on an equality with the white race. . . . And yet it is professed and talked about to erect these Mexicans into a Territorial Government, and place them on an equality with the people of the United States. . . . Are we to associate with ourselves as equals, companions, and fellow-citizens, the Indians and mixed race of Mexico? Sir, I should consider such a thing as fatal to our institutions. (2007 [1848])

Clearly, the influential Senator Calhoun, a former U.S. vice president and secretary of state, put Mexicans "in their place" by insisting that they were not white but down the racial hierarchy among the "colored races."

As the oldest and largest group of Latin American origin in the United States, Mexicans have undergone the longest and most sustained history of racial oppression among Latinos. White American stereotypes of Mexicans emerged out of their earliest contacts in the U.S. Southwest during the first half of the nineteenth century. As Joan Moore and Harry Pachon (1985:4) have noted, "these first encounters with Mexicans tended to fix some basic outlines and to become the prototypes of later Anglo-Saxon images of all Hispanics." For instance, many white settlers, interlopers in the northern provinces of Mexico, scorned their native inhabitants as backward, lazy, cowardly, fatalistic, superstitious, violent, dangerous, and cruel. In this stereotyped imagery, whites drew on the racist framing used for centuries against African Americans and Native Americans. Such negative characteristics were supposed to have been passed on, as a result of the racial mixture between Spanish and Indian. Derogatory terms such as "spic" and "greaser" were coined to describe Mexicans in Texas, California, and elsewhere. The myth of racial inferiority helped to justify the U.S. conquest of a large part of Mexico's territory, as well as the low status of Mexican Americans in the racial hierarchy of the emerging Southwest. Although Mexican Americans gained U.S. citizenship after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, they were denied full access to their legal rights.

European Americans who annexed huge areas of northern Mexico by force already shared a strong racist framing of other peoples, mainly African Americans and Native Americans, as we saw in the previous discussion of founders like Jefferson, who died a few years before the Mexican-American War. That long-standing white frame, which by the 1840s focused on white supremacy and black (and Indian) inferiority, has long been adaptive, and its central racist doctrines have regularly been imposed on other "people of color." The "Anglo-Saxon race" and its "Manifest Destiny" (a term created during this era) to rule the Americas were hailed enthusiastically as the Mexican "race" and the country of Mexico were increasingly berated.

The white-generated racial frame was applied not only to Mexico but to other Latin American countries as well. In the 1850s, President James Polk, who feared that the British might acquire Cuba, attempted to buy it from Spain. Ultimately Spain refused Polk's offer, but in the interim several influential individuals expressed their concern. Noted journalist James Shepherd Pike wrote that the United States did not want a territory filled "with black, mixed, degraded, and ignorant, or inferior races" (quoted in Horsman, 1981:282). Various U.S. presidents—from Polk to Ulysses S. Grant in the 1870s—also considered acquiring all or parts of the Dominican Republic. But here, too, one of the main impediments to annexation was the Americans' common belief that most Dominicans were of African origin or mixed race. For instance, in 1873, the pro-annexation American journalist Samuel Hazard wrote that "the great majority [of Dominicans] . . . are neither pure black nor pure white; they are mixed in every conceivable degree" (quoted in Candelario, 2007:55). In the end, the U.S. government annexed neither the Dominican Republic nor Cuba, but Puerto Rico, which was perceived at the time to have a whiter population.

White feelings of superiority over Mexicans and other Latin Americans (as well as Native Americans) were well developed by the 1830s, when the current region of the southwestern United States was portrayed as “empty land” to be taken by white “settlers.” Disparaging images of Latin American peoples, which had consolidated during the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848, intensified during the Spanish-Cuban-American War, commonly referred to as the “War of 1898.” Mexicans and Native Americans, as well as Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Filipinos, were largely imagined by whites to be outside the “American” community. Highly negative, racialized portraits of all these conquered groups were popularized through paintings, caricatures, photographs, postcards, and films between the last third of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth. After the War of 1898, the inhabitants of the newly acquired territories of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines were often pictured as dark-skinned, childlike, effeminate, poor, and primitive peoples (see Duany, 2002; Thompson, 2007)—once again, standard themes from the old white racist frame. A recurrent theme of these portrayals was that of “Uncle Sam’s burden”: the white man’s mission to “save” the black children—sometimes dubbed “picanninies”—of the former Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

At least since the Spanish-Cuban-American War, the racial composition of Puerto Rico’s population has puzzled American travelers and public officials. Initially, many U.S. government reports (including those issued by the War Department and, later, the Census Bureau) insisted that the Puerto Rican population was predominantly of European rather than African origin. In 1898, an American travel writer, Trumbull White, called Puerto Rico “the whitest of the Antilles.” A year later, the census found that 61.8 percent of the island’s population was white. Other American observers remarked on the “surprising preponderance of the white race” in Puerto Rico, as the *National Geographic* magazine noted in 1900. In a widely distributed book, the geologist Robert T. Hill (1903:165) reiterated that “Porto Rico [sic], at least, has not become Africanized, as have all the other West Indies excepting Cuba.” Such reports helped to allay the common racist fear that the U.S. government had annexed a predominantly black population after the War of 1898. Such a view still surfaces in contemporary debates about the island’s political status, albeit indirectly. To many Americans, Puerto Ricans are not “pure whites” but racially mixed people.

U.S. racial discourses on Cuba long acknowledged that much of the island’s population was of European ancestry. Since the end of the nineteenth century, American travel writers and photographers have depicted a white Cuban elite that could eventually govern the country according to U.S. democratic standards. Nevertheless, high-ranking military officials such as General Samuel B. M. Young and Major George M. Barbour, who participated in the Spanish-Cuban-American War, described most Cubans as a degenerate, savage, irresponsible, ignorant, and stupid people. Governor General Leonard Wood, who oversaw the U.S. military occupation of Cuba from 1899 to 1902, wrote: “[W]e are dealing with a race that has steadily been going down for a hundred years and into which we have to infuse new life, new principles and new methods of doing things” (quoted in Pérez, 2006:139). In 1902, the U.S. government grudgingly recognized the

formal independence of the Cuban Republic, but only after imposing the Platt Amendment on the Cuban Constitution, allowing the United States to intervene freely in the island’s internal political affairs until 1934.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, large numbers of Latin Americans began to move to the United States, in addition to those who already lived in the territories annexed after the Mexican-American War. In the Southwest, Mexicans were quickly dispossessed from their lands through legal and illegal means. New Mexico was a site for numerous conflicts between whites and Hispanics whose ancestors had lived there for generations. After 1880, thousands of Mexicans moved to the railroad, mining, and agricultural centers of Texas, Arizona, and California. In the Southeast, black Cubans worked in the cigar industries of Tampa, Key West, and other Florida cities, where they were routinely segregated from whites under the Jim Crow laws. In the Northeast, especially in New York City, Cubans joined Puerto Ricans and Spaniards in what was to become one of the leading U.S. Hispanic communities. They settled primarily in working-class enclaves such as Spanish Harlem and the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Although few in number, these pioneers set the pace for the massive migration from Latin America to the United States during the twentieth century. As their totals grew, U.S. Latinos—often called “Spanish,” “Hispanic,” or “Spanish American”—became increasingly racialized as a separate minority group.

Throughout the twentieth century, Latinos were consistently portrayed in the white-controlled U.S. media as unwanted and disreputable aliens. As Otto Santa Ana (2002) has argued, the image of a “brown tide rising” has characterized much of the media’s discourse on migration from Latin America, particularly from Mexico. Moreover, Leo Chavez (2001) has shown that Mexican immigrants are typically considered an external threat and an internal enemy of the United States. In general, popular representations of U.S. Latinos continue to emphasize their lower-class origins, dark skin color, and foreign language and culture. Even today, Hispanics—especially undocumented immigrants—are often portrayed in terms of a thinly disguised white racist framing based on nineteenth-century Social Darwinism. For instance, the common notion of “illegal aliens” (or “wetbacks”) serves to justify their treatment as animals without any human rights. The racial connotations of current public policies designed to “stem the tide” of undocumented immigrants, primarily from Mexico, China, and other Latin American and Asian countries—but not from Canada or Ireland—may be covert but are nonetheless very powerful. Similarly, the post-9/11 security efforts to “close the borders” of the United States have targeted Middle Eastern-looking and other dark-skinned persons, including Latinos.

Immigrant and “foreign” status has again become central to the racialized identification of Latin Americans. From its beginnings in the 1600s, the white racial frame has insisted that “Americans of color” (initially Indians, then Africans) are not only inferior biologically and intellectually but also uncivilized, dangerous, and foreign to the “American way of life.” This anti-foreign view has been extended to Latin American immigrants in more recent decades. “Illegal,” an epithet meaning “foreign and dangerous,” has become a regular part of the United States’ vernacular, but only in reference to Latin American immigrants.

Unauthorized entrants from countries such as Russia or Israel, and there are many, are not designated as “illegal.” Citizens of other Western countries who violate U.S. immigration laws and regulations are excluded from the “illegal” category and are not routinely abused and targeted by the U.S. government.

In Phoenix and other southwestern cities, Latinos and Latin American drivers who display what law enforcement authorities perceive as “illegal” clues, such as an old car with “Mexican trappings” or the playing of certain kinds of music, are routinely stopped under the pretext of a traffic violation, yet with the main purpose of checking their immigration status. Indeed, the salience of this “illegal” imagery in the anti-Latino version of the contemporary racial frame has resulted in many bodily injuries and even in the deaths of immigrants, especially those targeted by white supremacists and xenophobes. Today, racialized framing and violence are facts of life for Latinos coming into and living in the United States. During the nineteenth century, Latinos and Latin Americans were often considered inferior “mongrels” who had to be saved by the Anglo-Saxon race. Today, Latinos are frequently treated as “problems,” such as welfare chiselers or irresponsible propagators of children. They are often considered a serious menace to U.S. culture.

As Clara Rodríguez (1997) and Arlene Dávila (2001) have thoroughly documented, U.S. Latinos are stereotyped as having a particular physical appearance characterized by olive or brown skin and dark, straight hair. Their body type is ambiguously located by whites as somewhere between the dominant images of whiteness and blackness (see Mendible, 2007). Similarly, the U.S. government, mass media, police, and other major institutions increasingly refer to “Hispanics” as distinct from both non-Hispanic whites and blacks. Although all Latinos have been racialized, each group has followed its own path toward racialization, depending on its historical background, socioeconomic characteristics, and mode of incorporation into the host society. The following chapters focus on several groups of Latin American immigrants in the United States—including Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Colombians, Peruvians, and Chileans. Overall, their experiences suggest that Latino (including the closely linked term “Hispanic”) has become a color-coded category. This process has many nuanced consequences and dimensions, as the savvy contributors to this volume consistently show.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In this book, we analyze how Latinos, both in the United States and in their countries of origin, have been racialized in various ways. Here, noted Latin American, Latino, and U.S. social scientists address the extent and costs of U.S. racial hegemony at home and abroad. In particular, our collaborators examine the multiple histories, causes, forms, and consequences of the racialization of Latinos and Latin Americans. Immigration restrictions, instauration of U.S.-style racism, violence, suppression of the Spanish language, and intergroup conflict are some of the racially based developments discussed in this volume.

Historically, Mexicans were the first sizable group of Latin American origin to be incorporated into the United States as a racialized and subordinated group. Yet, as Laura Gómez points out, many U.S. scholars have insisted that Mexican Americans are not a “race” but, rather, just another “ethnic group.” She asserts that the failure to recognize the racialized status of Mexican Americans has contributed to the misperception that the history of U.S. race relations chronicles white-on-black oppression only. This limited view has interfered, for example, with the recognition of the important role played by Mexican Americans in the “who is white” question.

Racialization often entails minimizing historical, cultural, and linguistic differences among peoples from the same region—including, for example, those in various Latin American countries. Such labels as “Hispanic” typically collapse diverse peoples into a single overarching group according to criteria devised by the dominant white majority. In two separate chapters, Rubén Rumbaut and Clara Rodríguez discuss the byzantine histories of the broad panethnic labels applied to groups referred to today as “Hispanics” or “Latinos.” From their beginnings, these categories subsumed culturally and geographically heterogeneous groups with separate identities and histories. The great inadequacy of these labels has been demonstrated in censuses since 1980, as many members of the so-called Hispanic or Latino population refuse to identify themselves with any of the racial labels they are offered on census forms and instead place themselves in the “other” category. As Rumbaut argues, the creation of a catchall term for people of various Latin American and Spanish origins has contributed to their racialization in the United States. In her analysis, Rodríguez adds that Latinos often resist their classification according to U.S. racial categories that tend to pigeonhole them as “not white.”

The dilemmas of racial, ethnic, and panethnic definitions are prominent among Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and other Central Americans, who often become an “invisible minority” in the United States. Nestor Rodríguez and Cecilia Menjívar discuss racialized groups from Central America (especially Indians and blacks) who have been victims of massive killings in their homelands, perpetrated by national armies under the pretext of “anti-Communist” campaigns, often with the support of the United States. Like many other Latin Americans, these oppressed people have migrated, with and without documents, in search of a better and more peaceful life. Upon entering the United States, many blend with a local Latino community and experience the “anti-illegal” xenophobia and indifference or hostility of local governments. Rodríguez and Menjívar speculate that Central American immigrants are faced with two options: either become part of the pool of Latino “cheap” labor or join other Latin Americans and Latinos in a common cause to bring about change.

The adoption of a Hispanic or Latino identity, beyond the immigrants’ specific national and ethnic identities, is still an emergent and contested process. Many Latinos are increasingly embracing a panethnic label in an effort to resist widespread stereotypes and advance their plight as a racialized minority. Whether identification as Latino or Hispanic will eventually replace specific national markers such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Dominican remains unclear.