

The Complexities of the Term Hispanic

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What are the reasons for inventing the ethnic category called "Hispanics"?"

On the surface they appear to be political and cultural. The establishment, the academic community and some political Latin American groups have been doing so. Scientific papers that use the term to signify race, comparing it to other categories such as Black and White, are not only wrong but deceptive. "Hispanic" is not a race; there are white, black, yellow and more importantly, brown "Hispanics;" the latter are genetically closer to Native Americans. Repressed forces in the cultural and collective unconscious might explain this selective blindness. Is genocide of Native Americans one of the reasons? Since migration from Mexico and Central America in the last ten years has reached proportions not seen before, we have to examine the reality of Mexico and Latin American *vis a vis* the reality of the United States. It is important to understand what Latin America is, but more importantly what Latin America is not.

The fall of the twin towers and the declaration of war against world terrorism have confirmed two assumptions of American scholarship. America's relation with the rest of the world is not what appears to be, and the history of the United States can

be understood as a struggle over land, race, gender, and above all, economic domination. Events after September 11 are forcing us to examine what lies behind what we call democracy and freedom. Malcolm X once called democracy hypocrisy, and Chomsky talks of the fifth freedom, the freedom to cheat, to rob, to manipulate, and above all to use economic and military power. It can be said that academicians in the United States, in complicity with established political policies, have created a new ethnic category, "Hispanics," using ethnicity to camouflage certain prejudices to gain political advantages and ignoring what lies behind the scenes.

Ethnicity emphasizes religion, culture, and language more than race. The use of race is considered politically incorrect. Race is related to racism, and no one wants to be a racist. Chester Pierce, a Harvard professor, once began a lecture on racism by looking at the audience and stating that everyone in the audience was a racist; some knew it, others did not. Race is a term that emphasizes inherited physical characteristics, including skin color, shape of the skull and eyes, and texture and color of the hair. It is undeniable that it plays an important role in group and social interactions and relationships. Is there a Hispanic race? No, there are white Hispanics, black Hispanics, yellow Hispanics and, more importantly, brown Hispanics. Race shapes how people view themselves and how others view them. Downplaying

race as political incorrect will never solve the problem.

Studies of the mortality rates of Hispanics in the United States, the effect of drugs in Hispanics, or the use of antipsychotics in the treatment of schizophrenia, in which races are compared are also deceptive. Black Hispanics and Black Americans are Black, White Americans and White Hispanics are white, and Indians and mixed Indians are genetically closer to Native Americans. Why is this not obvious to everyone? Are there repressed unconscious reasons that need to be addressed?

A useful paradigm that can assist us in shedding some light on these questions is the differentiation of the unconscious. There is a personal and dynamic unconscious emphasized by Freud, and a cultural and a collective unconscious emphasized by Jung. The collective unconscious is the immense reservoir of human history and human experiences since the beginning of human kind. Blind spots or scotomas resulting in the inappropriate use of the term "Hispanic" may be caused by problems in the cultural and collective unconscious of the whole American continent, North, Central, and South.

Two problems come to mind: the genocide of Native Americans after the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the slavery of Africans.

The problem of slavery has been addressed and partially worked through, but not the problem of genocide of Native Americans.

Most research studies do not consider the fact that the majority of the so-called "Hispanics" are Indian or mixed Indian (Native American). A possible explanation for this blindness lies in the deep scars left by genocide. Genocide has painful and shameful roots. The problem of slavery was partially solved by dividing the American world into Black and White. In this schema the category Brown was omitted because it was considered impure or non-existent. If there was mixing of White and Black, the product was always Black. This division may explain, in part, why Native Americans became invisible or non-existent.

It is interesting to note that White Anglo-Saxon Americans opposed miscegenation, the overt mixing of the races, and preferred genocide to overt mixing. On the other hand, the White Spaniards and Portuguese embraced miscegenation with a passion.

The Anglo-Saxon killed; the Spaniard and Portuguese raped and killed. Thus, the Mexican expression "*hijo de la chingada*" (product of rape) is very appropriate and very true.

Who are the "Hispanics" who live in the United States? According to the 2000 census, 58.5 percent are Mexican, 3.5 percent Cuban, 9.6 percent Puerto Rican, 4.8 percent Central American, 3.8 percent South American, 2.2 percent Dominican, 0.3 percent Spaniard, and 17.3 percent all other Hispanic. The great

majority of Hispanics are Mexicans. Every year, thousands of poor Brown Mexicans and Central Americans illegally cross the southern borders of the United States looking for work. As a percentage of the labor force this group has reached its highest level in the year 2000. In New York City the increase has been 203 percent in the last ten years in the process, emptying entire villages. The Hispanic population of the United States constitutes the fastest growing population in the country. By 2050 it is predicted that the Hispanic population will constitute 25 percent of the United States. In the year 2000 43.5 percent of Hispanics lived in the West and 32.8 percent lived in the South; 76.8 percent of Hispanics lived in seven states (California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey). Hispanics in New Mexico comprised 42.1 percent of the total state population, the highest proportion for any state. One third of the population of California, one of the largest states, is Hispanic. The largest Mexican populations were in California, Texas, Illinois and Arizona, mostly southwestern states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). According to the Brookings Institution Center, the Hispanic population is spreading across the nation faster and farther than any wave of immigrants in the history of the United States.

To try to understand the history of the Native Americans, it is not necessary to repeat the stories of Pizarro or Cortez or to review

the history of the Aztecs, Mayas, Incas, or all the other tribes in the Americas. Instead Brazil, which is not "Hispanic," will be examined to give some objectivity and distance. Surface reality is deceiving. Hidden reality is more accurate but more difficult to grasp. Therefore, two extraordinary books will be examined to explain what Latin America is not. These two classics are *Los sertones* by Euclides da Cunha (1977), and *The War of the End of the World (La guerra del fin del mundo)* by one of the greatest contemporary writers, Mario Vargas Llosa (1981).

Something incredible and brutal occurred in the northeast of Brazil in the last decade of the 19th century in a place called Canudos, located in the remote Brazilian underdeveloped lands that are home to all the damned of the earth and the most wretched of the poor, another variety of Native Americans. Paradoxically an apocalyptic prophet (a sort of Osama bin Laden) sought to convert Canudos into a paradise through religion and the promise of a place without hunger, money, property, taxes or institutions like marriage. The description of the destruction of Canudos is narrated by da Cunha in *Los sertones*. This classic book is beyond typecasting. It is a combination of documented history and feature news reporting and the source for *The War of the End of the World*. North Americans and Latin Americans know very little about the incident described in these two books.

Brazil became independent in the final days of the nineteenth century when the Republic replaced the monarchy. On this occasion, an exception in the history of Latin America occurred; the intellectuals and the military, always on opposite sides, worked for the first time, side by side. Positivism was an important element and should not be forgotten when the history of Latin American nations is reviewed. In Brazil positivism became an official philosophy among the colonizers and had much more influence than in France. According to the positivists, the only way to become a modern country was to become a republic; republics were supposed to bring modernization and social justice.

Shortly after the establishment of the Republic of Brazil, in a very isolated place in Bahia, a rebellion began against the new Republic. The rebels consisted of the poorest and most miserable people of Brazil. At the beginning no one gave importance to the rebellion, probably because of the extreme remoteness of the region or because Native Americans are invisible or nonexistent.

The State of Bahia sent an expedition, which was defeated by the rebels. The same occurred with a second expedition. In Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo these events began to receive attention.

No one understood what was happening. The intellectual elite

could not offer a coherent explanation for the situation, a rebellion by the poor, fighting against something created to help them? How is it possible for Latin American experts to have been wrong, not only this time, but also so many other times? Why have intellectuals promoted religious intolerance in the past, and ideological and political intolerance in the present? Perhaps one reason is that ideology is not perfect. Ideology may be used as a mask to hide prejudices and selfish interests. Usually the people themselves, not intellectuals, have a better understanding of what is good for them.

When intellectuals cannot explain something, they invent a theory. They said that the rebellion was directed by the natural enemy of the Republic, namely the monarchy, which in turn was aided by Great Britain trying to favor commercial ties with the United States. (Sometimes, in psychiatry if the explanation for an event comes from the patient, it is called a delusion, but if it comes from the therapist it is called a theory or an interpretation.) The Republic sent another expedition, headed this time by Coronel Moreira Cesar, a famous Republican. His regiment was the best in the Brazilian army. Again the rebels overcame Moreira Cesar. In Rio there were protests, and monarchists living in the city were assassinated. It was rumored that the British navy was involved.

Euclides da Cunha accompanied the fourth expedition, but he only saw what his ideological worldview permitted him to see. The fourth expedition was the last. All the rebels died in one of the worst massacres in history. Only later was da Cunha able to comprehend that something horrible had occurred.

Los sertones is the explanation that he presents to himself, to his country, and to the rest of the world. It is a critique based on an understanding of what Latin America is not. It reveals, among other things, that the indiscriminate transplant of ideas, values, and trends to inadequately prepared soil, or to a different soil, can result in unexpected catastrophes.

Fanatical Catholic preachers had indoctrinated the peasants. The poor had found in religion a magical solution for their misery.

No other remedy was available, and they transformed religion into a fanatical cult. The leader of the rebellion was Antonio Conselheiro, an apocalyptic prophet, who was able to convince his followers that the Republic was the incarnation of the devil.

It is extraordinary that the peasants followed Conselheiro. They followed him because they could understand what he told them. He had a way of reaching their minds, their hearts, and their culture. On the other hand, Native Americans could not understand the positivistic ideas that were behind the foundation of the Republic; its abstract institutions, and its

representative bodies were meaningless to them. All such abstractions were totally remote from their daily personal experiences. It was easier for them to see these notions as something dangerous that had to be avoided and destroyed. They saw the army as invaders and foreigners; the peasants had never before seen people from Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo. They acutely felt that their lives and their culture were threatened forever. Their culture was primitive, but it gave them a feeling of security and belonging. They were connected with their world and had wisdom born out of communion with nature, which Western civilization tended to destroy. When the land was taken away from them, their souls were mortally wounded, and their spirits were amputated. The land was everything: the beginning, the end, and everything in between.

The same can now be said about the environment. In destroying the purity and dignity of nature we have become disconnected from the force that moves the universe. We become closed systems recycling negative feelings and negative thoughts. The Native Americans had nothing to share with the foreigners. In the 1850's when the United States' government wanted to buy tribal lands, Chief Seattle wrote a marvelous letter in reply. He asked, "How can you sell your own mother? We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth, and it is part of

us." All Latin American countries have passed through similar situations. *The War of the End of the World* presents this situation and more in a great literary work.

The Brazilian peasants were not prepared to understand the abstract ideas that were the foundation of the Republic. Prejudice and intolerance divided Brazil, a country with a history of genocide against Native Indians, but Brazilians could not see it or refused to see it. In the intellectual and emotional work demanded by the writing of his testimony, da Cunha found the truth he was seeking. Paradoxically, for da Cunha and Vargas Llosa, the liberating truth was not in history, nor fiction, but in both. The *serton* (*desert*) was compared to a desert covered with words. What you make with these words is what is called reality.

The entire history of the Republic was well documented by newspapermen and historians. What happened on the Native American side was not documented. The losers never write history. This lack of history gave Vargas Llosa the opportunity to invent Leon Natuba, a peasant, who knew how to read and write and therefore was able to report from the point of view of the peasants. Vargas Llosa interviewed the survivors of the tragedy, and it took him several years of painful research to write his book.

Readers of the novel (as Conselheiro's followers) perceive Conselheiro not as an ordinary human being but as a mythical figure. Both sides in the horrible conflict were two worlds apart. Conselheiro was blinded by religious beliefs, Moreria Cesar by his political beliefs. Belief in utopia blinded them both. Ideology, politics, and incurable corruption are responsible for Latin American catastrophes.

Latin America is a misnomer. No one speaks Latin except the priests. A better name would be Tin Can America or Tin Foil America; no Latin America country has reached the development of the United States, except perhaps Chile. Isabel Allende said that Spaniards who stayed in Peru were only interested in gold and silver; the Spaniards who crossed the deserts and wilderness going south were adventurers at heart. They mixed with a fiery brand of Native American that resisted conquest by the Incas. The result is Chile today.

It is useful to remember that history is recorded from the point of view of the dominant groups. The natural tendency is to favor beliefs and prejudices that favor power groups, ignoring the belief systems of the powerless. For example, in the history of the wars from 1600 to 1900 against the Native Americans in the United States, the triumphs of the White colonizers were

described as victories, and the triumphs of the Native Americans as massacres. In Latin America, there are multiple forms of intolerance, which cross and re-cross and generate tragic misunderstandings. The major evils are politics and ideology. Latin American political fanaticism is pernicious because it is a two-edged sword. It uses deceptive promises and delivers evil practices. However, the worst type of fanaticism is the one that responds to other forms of fanaticism.

Canudos demonstrated that the image that Brazil had of itself did not correspond to its reality. The country was different from what it thought it was. In fact, there were many countries within a country.

The history of Latin America is complicated by the fact that a written culture was imposed over an oral culture. The conflict between the oral culture of the people of Canudos and the written culture of the Republic reached its zenith when Native Americans had to pay taxes and not receive rent for their land that was taken away. The constitution and its written laws were beyond the peasants' grasp. As described in *Los sertones*, the Republican ideas were incomprehensible. The imposition of a different ideology was foreign to people who were accustomed to think intuitively and concretely.

When people have a different system of knowledge or different belief systems, they have different cognitive structures. In Canudos the peasants' point of view was limited, demonstrated by their inability to understand the intention of their enemies. Their thinking was egocentric, magical, and animistic. They thought that inanimate objects had feelings and intentions. Events that occurred together were thought to cause one another.

To use Piaget's terminology, their thinking was preoperational and concrete.

The development of the highest faculty of the living organism is his or her intellect; and the intellect is the most powerful tool to be able to adapt to a different culture. Adaptation cannot occur without the development of two complementary processes, assimilation and accommodation. In the United States when the Native Americans signed land contracts, they thought that the Whites were prepared to share the land with them. They did not know that the Whites wanted to take the land exclusively for themselves. They could not understand how a piece of paper, which they could not read, could have the power to dispossess them for ever of something that was theirs for thousands of years.

Unlike Europeans, Mexicans and Central Americans can come and go over mutual borders with the United States more readily than

other groups. Immigrants from other continents have to cross oceans. Mexicans walk across the border or wade a river. This proximity enables them to maintain close contacts with their homes and communities. Resistance to assimilation is stronger among Mexicans than among other groups. Mexicans tend to retain their Mexican identity more than others, as was evident in the struggle over Proposition 187 in California in 1994. In this country the "Hispanic" culture is protected by emphasis on multicultural diversity and bilingual education. However, there is no Hispanic culture. Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, and Central and South Americans are culturally different. Each of their cultures includes different ways of perceiving, speaking, eating, singing, dancing, evaluating, and seeing reality. Moreover, the U.S. Census Bureau pointedly cautions the use of statistics on "Hispanics," because the term includes many distinct groups, which differ in socioeconomic characteristics, culture, and ways of immigration.

Mexico, Central American and some South American countries have had distinctly non-Western traditions. Even in the twentieth century, as Octavio Paz, Nobel Prize winner (1991), said, "The core of Mexico is Indian. It is non-European." In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, Mexico went through a revolution, which established a new basis for national identity, and Mexico tried to define itself in opposition to the United

States. The fact of massive Mexican immigration, legal and illegal, is part of the Mexican argument for NAFTA; either you accept our goods or you accept our people.

In a special issue *Time* magazine (June 11, 2001) addresses this problem, calling it the vanishing borders, a process that is radically transforming both countries to the point that a new term has been coined for America, "Amexica." The present century will be a century not of America, but the century of "Brown Power" as Haya de la Torre, the Peruvian founder of an international political movement, once said. Peru has now its first Indian President in 500 years, but he considers himself mixed, thus giving a good example of the problem of the majority of mixed Indians. They prefer to identify with the Spaniards, a perfect example of identification with the aggressor. The Pope recently canonized Juan Diego, a Mexican Indian, but in his official portrait Juan Diego is transformed from Indian to Spaniard.

The large cities of the United States are in a state of growing fermentation. Crime, drugs, and violence occur in incredible proportions. Can the historical assimilation of disparate immigrant groups occur at a rate sufficient to avoid a social catastrophe? Can schools, health services, and prisons increase to meet the growing needs? It has been reported that in the

United States the mentally ill are the largest incarcerated population in the entire world. This oddity and others are social time bombs ready to explode.

Commentary

What can we do to avoid a human tragedy like Canudos? Economic and military power is not enough. Understanding or trying to understand the other is better.

Some times both historical and fictional truth are necessary to grasp the complexities of historical, social, and cultural problems, for this reason we used a historian and a novelist. *The War Of The End of the World* is not the only novel on Native Americans that Vargas Llosa wrote. *The Green House* and *The Story Teller* are about the tribes that live in the Amazon. These tribes resisted conquest first by the Incas and later by the Spaniards, but succumbed to the influence of missionaries and linguists who sent them to the cities to be civilized, only to become servants and prostitutes. Reality is difficult to grasp, but total reality is more difficult. It has several levels, and it is multidimensional. Even more difficult to understand is the interaction of these different levels. A given group of people may speak from one level, and a second or a third group may be responding from a different level.

When dealing with conflicts and disagreements, what is called truth should be placed by all parties involved in parenthesis; otherwise the disagreeing parties are bound to end up in mutual negation. Each party has its own truth. Truth without parenthesis means that one party is right and the other is wrong, or even worse, one of them is crazy. When both parties are willing to put truth in parenthesis, they realize that different views become legitimate even when the consequences are not equally desirable to all. Finally, when the truth is put in parenthesis the issue is no longer who is right and who is wrong, but whether they are willing to compromise and coexist for the good of everyone. This view has both therapeutic and ethical implications because it compels us to adopt an attitude of permanent vigilance against the temptation of *certainty*. It forces us to recognize that *certainty* is not a proof of the truth, and that we do not only live in *the* world but in a world.

Refusal to understand this will only bring perennial conflict and war. A conflict can only be solved if we are willing to move to a different domain where dialogue and compromise is possible; a domain where intimidation is replaced by tolerance and opposition by acceptance.

To understand tragedies such as Canudos, what is needed is not one light but many lights. The greatest challenge is to be able

to consider all levels of reality at once and none of them exclusively. Historical reality and fictional reality are part of what is mythical and what is mythical is part of what is social and communal.

The problem of race should be confronted with honesty and courage. The more one runs away from race, the more one runs into it. The more one sees and examines the cliches and the whole problem, the more one is able to understand the whole problem. The golden age of Jazz occurred in the United States at a time when improvisation and creativity were essential for the survival and adaptation of Black Americans to a hostile society.

Jazz is a great American experience transformed into art. Jazz made Europeans forget Europe and Africans forget Africa. Jazz was able to consolidate a divided nation. This example needs to be followed as well as the example of artists like Picasso, who appears to paint from every point of view possible, all at once.

However, it took Picasso more than sixty years to learn how to paint like a child.

From a different perspective, in his book, *The Clash of Civilizations, Remaking of a World Order* (1997), Huntington explains how "civilizations" (plural), not "civilization" (singular), are replacing nations and ideologies as the driving forces in global politics today. He offers a brilliant analysis

of the current climate and future possibilities of the world's volatile political culture. What is important is not an ideology, a political party, or a program to govern, but a special culture, a sum of values and principles that are universally accepted and that generate ideas that even, in contradiction, are helpful to the advancement of humanity. Different peoples can learn how to keep their cultural identity and live with others in harmony and peace.

The true voyage, the true bath in the fountain of youth, according to Proust, is to see the world through the eyes of another and even better yet through the eyes of many others. In this way many universes can become one.

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