

# LATINOS AND HISPANICS: A PRIMER ON TERMINOLOGY

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## The Latinization of the United States

Since the 1960's persons of Latin American descent have become an increasingly important part of the country's population. In the early 21st century, Latinos will become the largest so-called minority group. Even now, the country's largest cities have substantial populations of Latin American descent. Miami is a Latin American city within the boundaries of the US with its large Cuban and Caribbean population. It is a financial and tourist center for much of Latin America. Los Angeles has a Mexican population that is second in size only to Mexico City. Neuyorico (New York) has not only a large Puerto Rican population, but also a rapidly-growing Dominican immigrant group. One out of every five persons in Chicago is a Latino, mostly of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Central American origin. Over the past decade, Central Americans in the US have ncreased at a faster rate than any other Latino group. There are sections of many cities where one does not have to speak any English at all, a phenomenon that has stimulated not only bilingual education, but also English-first and English-only movements. Whether you welcome, resist, or are indifferent to the change, Latino individuals, groups, and concerns will contribute to the shaping of our common future within your lifetime and even more within that of your children.

## Creating New Identities and Sorting Them Out

The integration of Latinos into the national mainstream will require a number of major adjustments - some pleasant, some difficult. One of the most immediate is simply determining what to call the large heterogeneous population and its various sub-groups. One or two nation-wide terms are essential for easy reference on political, economic and other key issues. The new terms are not simply shallow labels. They represent new identities in the public and personal realm for the individuals and groups who either adopt the terms or have them applied to them.

Many Americans, however, are confused about what is politically or culturally correct in the new terminology? Should they call someone a Hispanic or a Latino? Are they dealing with a Chicano or a Mexican-American? What about Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Central Americans and people from South America or even Spain? Most readers have already faced the dilemma. Should I risk the embarrassment or even the ire of a friend or stranger by using a term that he or she may judge as ignorant or racist on my part? Where to go for help? There are no easy guides in the library and no one has thought of setting up a hot line. Even if you successfully adjusted to - or participated in - the changes in identity of another major group from Negro and Colored to Black and Afro-American and finally to African-American, that still does not help you with your Latino identity problem. Why is this writer using the term Latino rather than Hispanic? What you need is a basic primer on terminology that will clear away the confusion and give you confidence in dealing with persons of Latin American descent in your professional and social life.

## The Continuing Importance of National Origins and Multiple Identities

Before the ethnic revolution of the 1960s, there was little concept of people of Latin American descent forming a single group within the country. Individuals were identified as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and so on - that is, by their national origins whether they were born in the US or outside of it. In fact, a recent survey reveals that most individuals still use national origin as their primary identification with some finer distinctions arising, say between Mexican and Mexican-American. This is not to say they do not use Hispanic, Latino or Chicano, but it is obvious that these terms refer to larger or political identities. An individual may therefore have several overlapping or shifting identities that are used consciously and selectively depending on the formal or informal situation in which they find themselves. Usage depends on individual choice. While one Mexican-American may reject all other labels, another may also call himself a Chicano, Latino, and a Hispanic at various times or even simultaneously without feeling any conflict although each one of these terms has a political charge to it.

## Hispanics

Let us take a closer look at the broader terms of identification. Hispanic has traditionally been used in a neutral sense on the East Coast by Puerto Ricans and Cubans to refer to themselves. The term Hispanic, however, also has political and class implications. Seeking an appropriate term for the diverse population of Latin American descent, the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) adopted the term Hispanic in 1973 at the recommendation of the Task Force on Racial/Ethnic Categories. The Census Bureau and other government agencies, along with other large institutions and businesses, followed suit giving the term mainstream acceptance. Politically, the term has become identified with the Establishment. It is widely used by HUPPIES, Hispanic Upwardly-mobile Professionals, who want to integrate themselves into the mainstream and corporate cultures. Hispanic is a non-threatening term and it avoids any negative stereotyping that still might be attached to national-origin labels. Hispanics tends to be politically conservative. If they become unhappy with the status quo, they prefer to work within the system rather than rock the boat.

The functional use of the term "Hispanic" is reminiscent of the use of the term "Hispano" by Nuevo Mexicanos who wanted to distinguish themselves from both the Spanish and the new immigrants from Mexico after the U.S. conquest of the far Mexican Northwest and its conversion into the U.S. Southwest. The use of the term "Hispano" by Latinos from New Mexico retains a claim on their Iberic roots, but avoids the negative connotations of an inferior alien culture that was strongly associated with the term "Mexican" after the Southwest was acquired as part of the Manifest Destiny of the U.S. However, it is obvious that this self-identified term, "Hispano," used by persons from New Mexico, has a totally different connotation from the cognate "Hispanic" employed by the U.S. government beginning in 1973, which has as its political intent to homogenize all persons of a Spanish-speaking background. Outside of the Southwest, the term "Spanish" was frequently used as the functional equivalent of Hispano in New Mexico. Mexicans and other Latin Americans who did not want to be stereotyped as inferior peoples from banana republics preferred to identify themselves as "Spanish" and this term was often offered to them by Anglos who did not want to offend them.

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**Latinos**  
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Latino is a term adopted by groups primarily in the West and Midwest who reject Hispanic as a colonial imposition by the government. They also argue that the term is so broad that it includes everyone of Hispanic heritage, including those in Latin America and Spain. (Ironically, this is the reason why the Task Force on Racial/Ethnic Categories rejected the term Latino.) While Latin is an even broader term than Hispanic, the "o" at the end was applied to give it a narrower meaning that refers to people of Latin American descent living within the US, particularly those who are born here. It too has a political charge. Self-identified Latinos are more confrontational than Hispanics and feel that the struggle for equality and opportunity in America is far from over. Latinos know that rocking the boat is the other side of the American way. They focus - not on the individual achievements that Hispanics take pride in-but on the long road the Latino population of the country must still travel before achieving full social, economic and political equality. Academicians and social activists are the biggest promoters of the term Latino.

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**Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, and Mexicans**  
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It is no accident that the term Latino is most popular in the areas of the country with the greatest concentrations of Mexican-Americans and Mexicans. Its currency in the Southwest, West, and Midwest is related to the term Chicano which was adopted in California in the 1960s as a self-identification by young Mexican-Americans who were mad as hell and were not going to take it anymore. The term quickly became the label for a militant civil rights movement that was a rebellion not only against mainstream society, but also against an older generation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans for whom the word Chicano meant something like punk and delinquent. The term Chicano preceded the term Latino, and the latter is an attempt to broaden the ethnic base of the radical political perspective carried by the term Chicano. In the West and Southwest, most universities have Chicano Studies departments. Latino Studies departments are more common in the Midwest where Mexican-Americans have to share cultural space with other groups of Latin American descent. Hispanic Studies departments are rare and may be concentrated mostly in the East and South. If they exist at all, they are probably associated with the study of the Spanish language.

What Latino is to Hispanic, Chicano is to Mexican-American. A self-identified Mexican-American is less likely to have an argument to pick with the rest of society. Like the term Hispanic, the terms Mexican-American and Mexican tend to be used by persons who still have a strong identification with the nation of origin and who, in fact, may be immigrants. For Mexicans who are proud of being Mexican, a Chicano is someone distant from his roots whose culture is American and who might as well be another type of gringo - an unsavory one at that. That is why Chicanos rebelled against two parent cultures and - against the grain - have managed to gain a level of respect from both that would have been unpredictable in the 1960s. Chicanos recharged the term Chicano with a new meaning that is accepted by some and rejected by others.

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**Puerto Ricans, Neuyoricans, and Boricuas**  
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To a lesser degree, this sort of tension also exists between Puerto Ricans on the island and Neuyoricans on the mainland. Among both, those who reject the image

and heritage of being colonized by Europeans often use the term Boricua, derived from Borinquen, the indigenous name of the island, instead of Puerto Rico. This is why Wayne State University has a Center for Chicano-Boricua Studies.

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**The Gender Factor**  
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The Women's Movement among Latinos has also created additional permutations. Women activists have insisted on reading the term Latino in a very narrow sense as referring only to the male members of the species. They have thus forced a change in general usage and in the names of many programs to Latina/o, Latina/Latino and to Chicana/o or Chicana/Chicano. Males who resist the change on the basis that the original term is comprehensive and inclusive (the way that Mexicano refers to all Mexicans, including the females) are considered retrograde male chauvinists by the more feminist females.

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**The Race Factor**  
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It is important to remember the fact that Latino and Hispanic are NOT racial designations. They are cultural and political labels. Individuals who apply the terms to themselves or to others may be of any color or racial mixture. This is now acknowledged by the US government and institutions of higher learning which distinguish between Hispanics on the one hand and whites not-of-Hispanic-descent and African-Americans not-of-Hispanic-descent on the other. Hispanics are considered one group no matter what the skin color.

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**Applying the Terminology**  
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So what does a culturally and politically sensitive American who is not of Latin American descent do with all of this information. Apply it carefully. Analyze the environment. If you are talking to someone who - more often than not - looks European and is wearing corporate stripes, he or she is probably a Hispanic of Argentine, Spanish, or Chilean descent. They could also be of Mexican or Puerto Rican descent but of the middle class or upwardly mobile. If you are at a union rally, and most of the brothers and sisters are Brown, they probably identify as Latinos, Chicanos and Boricuas. If you have any doubts, wait to see what they call themselves. They may prefer an identity based on the nation of origin. The term Creole, for example, is used by Haitians. If you still cannot tell what someone wants to be called, then do not be afraid to ask. They will prefer this to being mislabeled.

Just remember - we are not all the same and we usually don't bite.

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