

“Hispanic”

Origins, Use and Meaning Of the Term

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In common English language usage, both verbal and written, most notably in the United States and especially in official publications and communications of governmental bodies, the word “Hispanic” has been in favor, at least since the 1960s, to designate people, groups, organizations, entities, places, cultures and things pertaining to or having origins in the Iberian Peninsula of Europe or anywhere in Latin America. This definition would include and encompass, but not be limited to, people or ethnic groups living in the United States who are immigrants or descended from immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Chile, Argentina and other Spanish speaking nations of the Western Hemisphere. It would also include the descendants of indigenous Spanish-speaking peoples who populated what are now the states of California and New Mexico and other Southwestern states, that had lived in those regions long before the United States acquired them in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at the end of its war with Mexico in 1847-1848. It should be noted that many people in the



“Chisme Killz”, Vincent Valdez, 2001.

United States who speak English as their first or even only language nonetheless consider themselves “Hispanic” because of their ancestry and cultural origins.

It is interesting that “Hispanic” appears to be used in English-speaking countries and societies exclusively. Similarly, people in English-speaking nations do not use “Anglo” as an adjective or descriptive qualifier, except when a contrast and comparison to the Spanish-speaking or cultural world is necessary in the context of a communication or conversation. The only exception to this rule comes when, as shall be seen, persons in Latin American nations, communicating in English for the benefit of an Anglophone audience, refer to artistic artifacts or other matter predating Columbus as “pre-Hispanic.”

Today, “Hispanic” also appears, at least on the surface, to be largely synonymous with the terms “Latino” or “Latina” (masculine and feminine derivations, respectively), which seem to include and encompass the same people, groups, cultures, places and things. However, it must also be observed that it would appear somewhat awkward, for example, to refer to a work of architecture as “Latino,” especially in view of the fact that English uses no gender and that therefore such a term would appear dangerously sexist to American and other Anglophone feminist ears. Therefore, “Hispanic,” being neutral in such sensitive issues as gender equality, would seem to be the most effective term for these purposes.¹

However, it has recently been suggested by some that the term “Hispan-

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ic,” while acceptable on the surface, may, intentionally or unintentionally, have some subtle, hidden or deep meanings, nuances or connotations that are in fact or tend to be negative or derogatory. This idea needs to be considered and, if true, suggestions for corrective measures examined.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition² contains two definitions of “Hispanic.” The first, derived from “Hispania,” in the context of an adjective, reads “Pertaining to Spain or its people, especially pertaining to ancient Spain.” Oxford lists several derivations, such as one in 1584 by an R. Scot “Confession compulsorie as by Hispanicall inquisition” and in 1632 one Lithgow mentioned “this Hispanicall proverbe.” This definition of “Hispanic” leads to a few derivations, notably “Hispanicize,” meaning “to render Spanish.” The second, more modern, definition states a “Hispanic” to be “a Spanish-speaking person, especially one of Latin-American descent, living in the U.S.”³ Derivations for this definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* commence in 1972, where the *New York Times Magazine*⁴ stated:

The fictional melting pot has become a *pousse-café* in which every layer is jealous of, or hostile to, every other layer; in a fever of ethnicism, Italians, Jews, Orientals, Hispanics and others have withdrawn into themselves.⁵

This second definition on the part of Oxford appears only in the second (1989) edition of its dictionary, not in the original first edition⁶ and not in the 1976 *Supplement to the First Edition*, though the supplement does add “Hispano-American.”⁷ In the first edition, only the original definition as “per-

taining to Spain” was observed, the second edition’s second definition as to a “Spanish-speaking person living in the United States” being an apparent afterthought on the part of Oxford.⁸

To draw an analogy, people residing in the United States, Canada and other English-speaking nations outside the United Kingdom (and no doubt in the modern largely English-speaking Republic of Ireland!) would not at all enjoy having their societies and cultures referred to as “British,” certainly not in the United States on Independence Day, the Fourth of July!

Patriotic Americans recalling the struggles and sacrifices of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, Patrick Henry (“Give me liberty or give me death!”) and the other founding fathers in the long, hard war of the American Revolution against British imperial colonialism cannot help but be sympathetic to Latin American heroes like Father Hidalgo in Mexico and Simón Bolívar in South America in their similar battles to free their lands from centuries of oppression by Spain. Yet both the original and deep meanings of the term “Hispanic” treat people in the Western Hemisphere as though the Spanish rule had never been thrown off, as though their noble and valiant—and successful— fights for freedom did not really matter. In its deepest connotation then, the term “Hispanic” implies a slur and affront to the patriotism and national pride, dignity and sovereignty of nations like Mexico and many of its regional neighbors.

Moreover, the term “Hispanic” seems to exclude the very essences, cores, fibers, beings and souls of Mexico and other Spanish-speaking nations. For example, an English-language internet

website for the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) refers to a section of art works in a Mexican museum under the heading of “Prehispanic Art.” Similarly, an English language travel website for the Dominican Republic encourages U.S., Canadian and other Anglophone visitors to tour a “Prehispanic Museum.” Such peoples as the Aztec, Maya, Inca and their modern descendants, therefore, are absolutely conspicuous in their absence as not being considered truly “Hispanic.” Thus the term “Hispanic” serves to cut off the culture and heritage of much, if not the majority of the people of Mexico and other Western Hemisphere nations, who are largely descended from indigenous ethnic groups who existed in the New World prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus. With the term “Hispanic,” much of a Mexican or other Latin American is missing, as though someone, as in Shakespeare’s play, tried to cut out his or her heart but not the blood.⁹ To extend this analogy, many Americans would no doubt feel most deeply offended were the dominant culture, in referring to itself as “British,” to subtly ignore by implication the huge contributions to America by persons of, for just a few examples, German, Irish, Creole, Cajun, Jewish, Italian, Scottish, Portuguese, Russian and other Eastern European or Scandinavian descent.

Finally, it is interesting to note that “Hispanic” tends to be used, as noted above, to designate an American of Latin descent, leading to the suspicion that some may subconsciously—or quite consciously—utilize the term to assimilate people of Latin heritage into Anglo America, deprive them of or at least water down their culture and begin to make them “gringos,” though

there is no real direct evidence for such a supposition. However, utmost vigilance is called for, since much racial discrimination—and condescension—is kept silent, unspoken and not documented: “Everyone knows it and no one has to say a thing,” is a common attitude among some of the less progressive segments of U.S. society.

Moreover, as a brief aside, the use of “Hispanic” as a qualifying adjective, as in, for example, “she is a Hispanic American,” is highly suspect. It is self-evident that such descriptives (like “Italian American” and “Jewish American”) simply function as diminutives.

“Hispanic” is a term of deep, intense and distinct pride
in the independence, equality, self-respect, sovereignty
and dignity of all Spanish-speaking nations.

Very seldom does one hear Americans of the dominant culture refers to themselves as “Anglo-Americans,” “European Americans” or even “white Americans” except perhaps in conversations with or concerning people of other groups. Whatever the ultimate status of the term “Hispanic”, its use as a descriptive is to be generally rejected as condescending and patronizing and to be avoided as much as possible.

In addition, as a second passing aside, there appears to a casual observer an air of unwanted governmental bureaucracy in much of United States usage of the term “Hispanic,” as though its major purpose were classification by politicians and agencies of various constituencies and groups on paper. It is very tempting, then, to simply call for the rejection and suppression of the term “Hispanic” altogether.

However, it is very clear that people of Latin American descent in the

United States and people in Latin America itself think of themselves as “Hispanic” and do not feel offended or insulted by the term. For example, the United States abounds with names like the “National Hispanic University” in San Jose, California and “The Hispanic Yellow Pages” virtually nationwide. A recent Yahoo! search of the internet yielded 619 websites using the term, in their own words, “Hispanic art”; the majority were in the United States referring to enterprises operated by persons of Latin American descent, but some were in Mexico. A similar search for the term “prehispanic” yielded 978

websites in both the U.S. and Latin America. As in the case with UNAM cited above, people of Latin extraction in both the U.S. and in the Spanish-speaking nations are not troubled by being referred to and referring to and thinking of themselves as “Hispanic.” Why, then, should a proclamation be made now to so trouble them?

Furthermore, the difficulties of the substituted use of terms like “Latino” have already been mentioned, while “Latin American” might diminish the cultural heritage of the Spanish speaking Western Hemisphere even further, as with, for example, the notorious statement and gaffe of former U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle who, having returned from a tour of Latin America, stated his profound regret he could not converse with the people of that geographical region of the world because he had not learned to speak Latin in school.¹⁰ Least preferable of

all would be the option of returning to calling people in Spanish-speaking cultures of the Western Hemisphere “Spanish,” thus driving home the unwanted air of Spanish cultural colonialism that has already been mentioned.

Finally, there has been considerable rebellion, rightly or wrongly, in much of U.S. society against the perceived phenomenon of “political correctness” wherein people feel compelled to adopt word and term constructions felt to be awkward, constricting and unnatural while being forbidden to use other, seemingly quite comfortable terms, in order to avoid running the risk of possibly offending some constituency or other. There is no reason to foster, contribute or further fan the unwanted flames of such resentment.

Languages, and the attendant meanings of words and terms within them, are in a constant state of flux and change, as any linguist will readily attest. Anyone in the English-speaking world, by way of analogy and example, who has even the slightest familiarity with the works of Shakespeare can cite a myriad of words and terms whose meanings have utterly changed since the time of Elizabeth I, some becoming more negative, some much more positive in connotation and others neither negative nor positive but simply very different.

What must happen, therefore, is a guided and directed evolution and change in the meaning of the word and term “Hispanic,” an act and work of “linguistic (or semantic) engineering” as it were.

It is strongly recommended that institutions like the UNAM and the great universities of Latin America, as well as scholars in the United States and elsewhere, collaborate intensely to find a new, enhanced but not utterly alien

meaning for the word and term “Hispanic,” and then communicate this amplified, clarified meaning to authorities like the *Oxford English Dictionary* for ongoing revised supplements and future full editions.

The change will not occur all at once, but as a new meaning for the word and term “Hispanic” is officially stated and promulgated throughout the world, especially the United States, and the new meaning is slowly superimposed over the old one without entirely subverting or undermining it, a new consciousness and positive attitude on the part of the English-speaking world toward Spanish-speaking nations, cultures and societies will gradually arise and emerge, for the benefit of all. Such a revised and modified meaning, then, for “Hispanic”¹¹ might include, but certainly by no means be limited to the following:

“Hispanic” means and refers to persons, peoples, places, things, cultures, heritages and societies that are or have been in history touched upon or affected by the Spanish language, but which in turn have strongly influenced the course and evolution of that language and matters related to it. “Hispanic”

refers equally and without any preference or superiority to both Spain and to Spanish-speaking nations, regions and communities of the Western Hemisphere, as well as to the descendants of indigenous pre-Columbian peoples of North, South and Central America and the Caribbean who came to live in contact with and sometimes to blend with Spanish-speaking people, though this definition is in no way intended to diminish or subtract from the indigenous cultures of these ethnic groups. “Hispanic” also includes people in the United States of America and other predominantly English-speaking nations who are immigrants or descended from or choose to identify with, in whole or in part, originally Spanish-speaking nations, peoples or cultures, regardless of whether these people themselves are Spanish- or English-speaking, bilingual or other. “Hispanic” also includes immigrants or their descendants from many regions of the world, notably but not exclusively Europe, Africa or Asia, who now live in predominantly Spanish-speaking nations or regions (for example, people of German or Italian ancestry in Argentina or descendants of

Japanese immigrants in Peru) who are part and parcel of and contribute to these societies. No implication of cultural domination or superiority, residual colonialism or paternalism on the part of Spain or any other nation or region nor the direct descendants of the same is intended within any portion of this definition.

“Hispanic” is a term of deep, intense and distinct pride in the independence, equality, self-respect, sovereignty and dignity all Spanish-speaking nations, regions, societies and cultures, including their descendants, whatever their present language and wherever these nations, regions, cultures or societies may be presently located.

“Hispanic,” finally, is a term of greatness, largeness of soul and of soaring achievements, notably but not exclusively in the arts, culture, music, architecture, literature, exploration, technology, scholarship, education, science, faith, philosophy and political progress that are all, in many ways, among the gems of the entire world.

The meaning of “Hispanic” is, to conclude, dynamic, ever expanding, ever growing in height, depth, complexity, subtlety and beauty. **MM**

NOTES

¹ The term “Chicano” (feminine “Chicana”), once in vogue in the 1960s and 1970s, has similar problems of gender sensitivity and, in any event, has fallen out of favor and usage, probably because it has limited reference to residents of the United States of Mexican origin or descent, tending therefore subtly and tacitly to slight people of other Latino heritages or backgrounds.

² *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 255-256.

³ As noted above, a great many English speaking, or bilingual Americans consider themselves “Hispanic” and would take exception with any definition that limits the term to Spanish-speaking people exclusively.

⁴ *New York Times Magazine* 24 September 1968, cited in *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵ With a remark of this nature as Oxford’s first cited example of this new definition of the term “Hispanic,” it does indeed appear somewhat

suspect as a term with negative connotations. However, other cited derivation examples used by Oxford, such as a 1976 discussion on U.S. population statistics, appear more neutral in tone.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1933, reprinted 1961).

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary, Supplement to the First Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 105.

⁸ English speaking Americans of Latin descent—two notable examples are the master science fiction fantasy writer Philip Jose Farmer (who writes in English) and Victor Rodríguez, commentator at the Public Broadcasting System—however, might well be troubled by the implication that the secondary definition of “Hispanic” is limited to a “Spanish (not English)-speaking person living in the United States,” thus excluding a great many English-speaking Americans of Spanish or Latin American descent.

⁹ See *The Merchant of Venice*. The writer most sincerely and humbly apologizes to readers for the unfortunate anti-Semitic tone of this comedy, but notes that the world of literary scholarship still reluctantly accepts it as a classic and deems it an appropriate work for continued performances worldwide, and therefore feels it may safely be cited here to raise a parable regarding universal principles. With the greatest respect to those of any and all backgrounds, absolutely no insensitivity whatever toward anyone is intended or implied.

¹⁰ <http://www.funnymail.com>, 21 May 1998.

¹¹ Yet with such a broad, open definition, the question must arise whether the United States of America itself, though predominantly an English-speaking nation, ought to be, in light of all its history, cultural ties and connections with the Spanish speaking world, designated a “Hispanic” country. Perhaps only time will tell.