

Latinos by Any Other Name Are Latinos

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By FRANK del OLMO

If you ever want to start a lively argument with a Latino, don't bother asking about illegal immigration, bilingual education or whether Fernando Valenzuela is actually 20 years old. Just ask what Latinos should call themselves.

That question has stirred up strong feelings ever since young Mexican-Americans first began referring to themselves publicly and proudly as Chicanos.

Now I have been hearing that word ever since I was a small boy growing up in a local barrio 25 years ago. The word was no big deal until the late 1960s when, like so many other words, it took on a highly political connotation. Younger, more militant community activists adopted the term as a symbol of pride and assertiveness. They argued that it was not some hyphenated term imposed on us by outside society, like Mexican-American, but a word that emerged from within the community itself.

The debate over the word Chicano mirrored the controversy in the black community over words such as Negro, Afro-American and black. Both debates have long since faded and, just as black has come to be accepted as common and proper usage, so Chicano is now virtually interchangeable with Mexican-American.

Which is not to say that there still aren't a few people who feel strongly about one term or the other. But these days I get a lot more letters about an entirely different word that has emerged to confuse and enrage everyone—Hispanic.

The Oxford English Dictionary documents the word Hispanic back to the 16th Century. But most scholars and demographers agree that it did not come into general usage in the United States until the mid-1970s, when the U.S. Census Bureau first admitted that its 1970 census had seriously undercounted persons of Latin American extraction in the United States.

Under pressure from Latino activists to avoid a repetition of that mistake in the 1980

head count, the bureau searched for an all-encompassing word to describe the diverse assortment of Latin Americans living in this country—Mexican-Americans and Mexican citizens, Puerto Ricans and Cuban-Americans and others. Hispanic was the Census Bureau's solution.

The word was soon adopted by many Latino activists and social-service organizations serving Latino communities, many of which rely on government funding. Hispanic also became popular in the national news media.

Because I consider Hispanic to be bureaucratic, I helped persuade *The Times'* editors who recently revised this newspaper's style guide to avoid the word. Writers at this newspaper are supposed to use Hispanic only when quoting a news source, whether a document or a person who simply doesn't know any better.

In all my years of living and working in Latino communities I have never heard a Latino refer to himself as a Hispanic. I have heard the word used in storefront anti-poverty programs, but never in local churches, barrio parks or neighborhood *cantinas*.

Perhaps another reason Hispanic has slipped into the language is that the terms that Latinos use to refer to themselves vary from place to place.

Take Mexican-Americans as an example. In California and Texas, Mexican-American and Chicano are most widely used. But as you travel farther south in both states, closer to the Mexican border and areas of heavy Latino population, the Spanish-language word *Mexicano* is more common.

In New Mexico, on the other hand, there are many Latinos who can trace their roots back to the original Spanish settlers. They refer to themselves as Spanish-Americans or Hispanos. The latter term is often heard in Colorado, where it is sometimes used interchangeably with Chicano. In Arizona, Mexican-American is most common.

I won't even try to list all the words that Puerto Ricans, Cubans and other immigrants from Central and South America use

for themselves. It is worth noting, however, that new terms seem to emerge constantly. Puerto Ricans, for example, have long referred to themselves as *Boricuas*. On recent trips to the East Coast, however, I noted wider usage of the term *Nuyorican*, which translates as a Puerto Rican born and bred in New York City.

Many readers may find all this confusing, but the variety is engaging. The only drawback is that this hodgepodge allows the bureaucrats, and some of their poverty-program allies, to label us with that ugly and imprecise word, Hispanic.

Latino is preferable as the all-inclusive term for our various communities. Its derivation is straightforward. In Spanish, Latin America is called *Latinoamerica*. Latin Americans consider everyone living from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego to be Americans, so that part of the word is easily dropped, leaving us with Latino. (This use of Spanish also excludes Latins, such as Italians, who do not come from Latin America.)

Two popular publications aimed at the Latino market also opt for Latino. The New York-based *Nuestro* magazine, which has a heavy Puerto Rican influence, bills itself as "the national Latino monthly." The Chicano staff of its West Coast competitor, *Q-Vo*, claims to publish a magazine "for today's Latino."

The young people putting out these slick magazines are more in touch with what is happening in the Latino community than is the federal government. But we have to face up to the fact that Hispanic will probably stick. As long as it is accepted in government, in the mass media and in the corporate board rooms of this country, we'll have to live with it.

But that doesn't mean that we have to like it.

In fact, if there is one positive thing about the emergence of Hispanic, it's that both Chicanos and Mexican-Americans finally agree on something. They don't like being called Hispanics.

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Conrad has a few days off.

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