

THE NATURE OF ETHNICITY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HISPANIC/LATINO IDENTITY

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The notion of ethnicity or ethnic identity is essential for social policy in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic democratic societies like that of the United States. In these societies, policies have to be framed and decisions have to be made concerning the equitable and just distribution of resources. Moreover, the rights that accord to different ethnic groups within them must be clearly established. Before governments and other social institutions can formulate social policy toward, and apply it effectively to, ethnic groups, they must have a clear conception of ethnicity in general and of the particular ethnicity of the groups in question in particular. Unfortunately, neither of these is frequent. Indeed, in the United States today there is widespread confusion when it comes to the nature of ethnicity and the ethnic identities of ethnic groups within the country.¹

But this is not all, for conceptions of ethnicity and ethnic identities have serious implications for the way in which members of ethnic groups are viewed and treated. Certain conceptions of ethnicity can create and worsen prejudice, resulting in discrimination and social injustice. Consider, for example, the case of affirmative action for Hispanics/Latinos in the United States. The United States government, and indeed not just the government, but a large proportion of Americans as well, are committed to a policy of affirmative action for Hispanics/Latinos. And, although the meaningful implementation of this policy would appear to require a clear notion of Hispanic/Latino identity, yet, it is not at all certain that the government, the American people, or even Hispanics/Latinos ourselves know who we are. Indeed, some question that we have an identity at all, and those who do not, are nonetheless at a loss determining what it is.² Obviously, if we are going to avoid abuses concerning

particular ethnic groups, we need to have a clearer understanding than we presently have of what constitutes ethnic identity.

In this article I propose to explore the nature of ethnicity and present a new conception of it that I claim can help us do away with many of the problems that plague current understandings of ethnic identity. In order to put this issue in a concrete context, I shall use the example of Hispanics/Latinos throughout, but what I say should apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other ethnic groups. I begin with the examination of some misconceptions concerning ethnic identity. Then I turn to the view I propose.

I. MISCONCEPTIONS CONCERNING ETHNIC IDENTITY

There are several important current misconceptions concerning ethnic identity in this country. The first and most general has to do with what one might call the context of ethnicity. The others are more specific and have to do with the way ethnicity itself is conceived. I shall discuss the first under one heading, and the others together under a second heading.

A. *Contextual misunderstandings of ethnicity*

A common view of ethnicity among social scientists in the United States is that it refers to certain traits associated with social groups within a country, which are of alien origin. Thus, for example, we can speak of ethnic Poles in Germany, ethnic Russians in Estonia, and ethnic Hispanics/Latinos in the United States because they form identifiable social groups which have social features derived from countries and societies foreign to the countries where they live. The conditions of ethnicity implied by this view, then, include at least the following:

1. There must be a social group (individual persons by themselves are not ethnic unless they belong to an ethnic group);
2. The group must have distinct and identifiable cultural or social traits;
3. The cultural and social traits that distinguish the group must come from outside the country where the group resides; and
4. Those traits must be considered alien to those accepted as mainstream in the country of residence.

Poles living in Germany are ethnic because they constitute a group with identifiable cultural and social traits distinct from those of mainstream German society and traceable to Poland. Likewise, Hispanics/Latinos are ethnic in the United States because they form a group with

identifiable cultural and social traits that are alien to mainstream Anglo-American society and which arise from their ancestral homelands.

At least two of the four conditions of ethnicity mentioned, namely 2 and 4, can be easily challenged in the case of many ethnic groups. Consider, for example, the case of Hispanics/Latinos in the United States. For many Hispanics/Latinos their ancestral homeland is the territory where they actually reside, namely the American Southwest, and it is questionable whether all Hispanics/Latinos share common cultural or social traits. I will have more to say about the last point later. For the moment I only want to indicate that the connection to a foreign ancestral homeland is very problematic. It is problematic not just for the reason given, but also because in a country like the United States, largely composed of immigrants, mainstream cultural traits also come from outside the country. Anglo-Saxon cultural traits are not native to the territory which constitutes the United States today.

These problems indicate that ethnicity must be understood differently. There is no reason one could not speak of an ethnicity that transcends political lines. Why should Poles in Germany be considered to form an ethnic unity and Poles in Poland not? Why can't Poles in Germany and Poles in Poland be part of the same ethnic group? There is no reason to think of ethnicity solely within the context of a particular political unit. Indeed, there are problems of demarcation that arise and affect such a restrictive view of ethnicity. What happens, for example when an ethnic group becomes larger than the dominant group? Could not a situation like this turn the tables in such a way that the dominant group becomes ethnic and the large group non-ethnic? Or does ethnicity have to do with dominance and political and social power? There is also the question of what makes an ethnic group ethnic. If it is culture, which is the view of most of those who accept the conception of ethnicity under discussion, then how can one distinguish an ethnic group within a country from an ethnic group outside the country?

There are other difficulties that can be raised, but let me dispense with them and propose instead to distinguish between ethnic groups in national, regional, or global terms. Nationally we may speak of Poles in Germany as ethnic, but regionally (say in Europe) and globally (in the world) we may speak of Poles as forming also an ethnic unity. Likewise, we may speak of Hispanics/Latinos as forming an ethnic unity in the United States and also as forming an ethnic unity in the world, or in the Americas. There is no particular reason why one must restrict the notion of ethnicity to the context of a nation, a region, or the world. In all cases, it is important to be clear about the context, but for present purposes, I shall use the more globally encompassing context.

B. Misunderstandings in the conception of ethnic identity

There are at least five different conceptions that are explicit or implicit in discussions of ethnic identity: political, linguistic, cultural, racial, and genetic. My claim is that none of these provides a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for ethnicity and for this reason they must be abandoned. I shall illustrate the deficiencies of these conceptions with reference to Hispanics/Latinos, although they could also be easily illustrated with reference to other ethnic groups.

Consider, first, a political or national understanding of ethnicity. According to this position, it is a political unit, a country, or a nation that justifies the ethnic label. Poles are ethnic because of Poland, Italians because of Italy, and Turks because of Turkey. But there are difficulties. Consider the label "Hispanic/Latino." Here we have several possibilities, all equally unacceptable because there is no national or political unity that can be used to justify the ethnic label. Of course, some have argued that Hispanic in particular has to do with the political unit we know as Spain. In this sense, Hispanic refers to people who are part of the country, Spain. But there are at least two objections to this understanding of the term. First, the term seems to duplicate another term already in use: "Spanish." Why do we need "Hispanic" when we already have "Spanish" to refer to persons who are part of the Spanish state? Second, the political unit we know as Spain has not always had the same boundaries and therefore it has not always included the same groups of people. Indeed, this political unit came into being only after the deaths of Isabella and her successors, Joan the Mad and Philip the Handsome, left Ferdinand of Aragon as sole ruler of Castile and Aragon. Prior to this time, there was no Spain. The unification of Spain is supposed to have become complete when Ferdinand annexed the Iberian part of the Kingdom of Navarre in 1512. However, this political unit did not always have the same boundaries. During the reign of Philip II in the sixteenth century, for example, Portugal became part of it, although only for a relatively short period of time. Gibraltar was part of Spain for a couple of centuries before it became British over two hundred years ago. And something similar can be said about Perpignan.

Another possibility would be to think in terms of all the political units of the Iberian peninsula taken together: Spain, Portugal, Catalonia, Navarre, and so on. But this is not very helpful, for why should these units be included and others excluded? Why leave out the French Basque region? Why not include Perpignan? What about the Azores and the Canary Islands? And, of course, this leaves out all of Latin America. On what basis can we draw such distinctions to justify the use of "Hispanic"?

A second way to understand ethnic labels singles out language as the defining factor. An ethnic group is such because its members speak a language. But this again is far from acceptable, for many members of ethnic groups who live outside their ancestral homelands do not speak the languages native to those homelands. Consider again the case of Hispanics/Latinos. For this view to work we would have to claim that being Spanish-speaking is the determining factor in being Hispanic/Latino. And indeed, many think just this. But, strictly speaking, Spanish is not a language, the language that goes by that name is in fact Castilian. Castilians have appropriated the name "Spanish" by a process similar to that by which the United States has appropriated the term "America." It is a matter of prominence and power. Moreover, this language is spoken by many people who are not native speakers of it. Some of these live in the Iberian peninsula, like the Catalonians, the Galicians, and the Basques. Some of them live in Latin America, like the Maya and the Tarahumara. But some of them live in the United States, in Australia, and in Germany. Are all these peoples Hispanics? No one would think so, which means the linguistic criterion is not effective insofar as it is not a sufficient condition of the ethnic identity of Hispanics/Latinos.

Besides, there are people considered Hispanics/Latinos who do not have Castilian as their native tongue. Consider the case of some Bolivians whose native tongue is Aymara. According to this criterion they could not be considered Hispanic/Latino, and yet those who favor the use of "Hispanic/Latino" would want to do so. Moreover, if the Bolivians were to be brought to the United States, they would be classified as Hispanics/Latinos. There is also the case of people who do not speak Castilian at all but are nonetheless regarded as Hispanics/Latinos. Consider the case of children of Puerto Ricans and Cubans in this country who have never learned Castilian and yet not only are thought of as Hispanic/Latino by many, but also often think of themselves in this way. Clearly, "Hispanic/Latino" and "Castilian-speaking" are not synonymous. Besides, there is also the matter of proficiency. How proficient in the language does one need to be in order to qualify as Hispanic/Latino? If a level of proficiency is set too high, it would disqualify children and some mentally retarded persons. And if it is set too low, then it would qualify many students of the language whom no one regards as Hispanic/Latino.

Assume for a moment that none of what has been said against making language the criterion of Hispanic/Latino has merit. Even under these conditions, the linguistic criterion could be questioned insofar as it involves too little for identity. The argument would be that Castilian, or Spanish if you will, is very little more than the elements of a grammar

and this would not explain identity. Indeed, how much do some African Cubans, some native Bolivians, and some Asturians have in common linguistically? The accent would be very different, and so would be the vocabulary and even much of the syntax. Would they understand each other? To some extent yes, but one cannot assume so. Under these conditions, then, can language really be taken as the source of Hispanic/Latino identity?

To expand the understanding of "Hispanic/Latino" to include other Iberian languages and perhaps even Amerindian languages would not help, for the criterion would be both too narrow and too broad.³ It would be too narrow in that it would not solve the problem of French Basques, for example, or again, of people from other cultures who learn these languages. And it would be too broad in that it would lack even more cohesiveness than Castilian. The linguistic criterion, then, is of no use.

A third way of understanding ethnicity is more promising. It holds that ethnicity involves cultural differences in general and not any particular cultural difference such as language or religion. And, indeed, this view appears to make a lot of sense in the case of some ethnic groups who seem to stand out because of their peculiar cultures. But upon careful scrutiny this view also fails. Consider again the case of Hispanics/Latinos. At first it looks as if culture could function as an effective demarcating criterion of what is Hispanic/Latino and what is not.⁴ After all, certain cultural practices and traits appear to separate Hispanics from other cultures. Hispanics/Latinos seem to share all sorts of cultural characteristics which are idiosyncratic to them and are not shared by other cultures. These could include language or families of languages, values, religion, social customs, and so on. Culture could explain the problems that territorial and political demarcations have. But even culture fails for several reasons.

Consider the case in which we speak of Hispanics/Latinos as referring to persons who share the Spanish culture. This certainly poses problems, for what is Spanish culture? The culture of the political unit we know as Spain? Does it include Catalanian and Basque cultures? Why do we separate it from Portuguese culture and not from these? But perhaps it is separable from all these, in which case we may be speaking of, say, Castilian culture. But Castilian culture then reduces to the culture of those people who speak Castilian. But should we say Castilian as a native tongue or Castilian as an acquired one? Or does it have to do with political boundaries? And why exclude Latin America? The problem with including Latin America is that we have here a variety of cultures which are well integrated in some cases, and in some cases not, but which cannot under any circumstances be regarded as Spanish. A

brief walk through Mexico City's Zócalo and Madrid's Plaza del Sol is sufficient to get the point. Which boundaries should we use and who, then, should we call Hispanic/Latino? Clearly the cultural criterion is too vague to be of help, and when we try to pin it down, we end up by reducing it to the other criteria which were already found to be inadequate.

A fourth possibility is to choose race as the demarcating criterion of ethnicity. Race certainly sounds more scientific. Race does not seem to depend on culture, and those who belong to a race are supposed to share certain, clearly identifiable, physical characteristics. There would seem to be nothing difficult in separating people according to race. Yet, this criterion also runs into trouble. Its problems are twofold: First, race is hardly a clear criterion of separation insofar as it appears after all to include cultural and sociological elements.⁵ We see frequently that people who look different are classified as members of the same race, and people who look similar are classified as members of different races. In some cases, racial classification has to do with recent lineage rather than with anything else. Certainly, the experience of South Africa and the United States is quite ambiguous when it comes to race. In South Africa race classification has often been changed through legal procedures, and it is generally accepted that in the United States a good proportion of people of color become white every year.⁶

But this is not all, for even if race were an incontestable criterion of distinction among people, there does not seem to be any race that can properly be called Hispanic/Latino. In fact, many of the people who are called Hispanics/Latinos belong to different races. A Hispanic/Latino race? What would its characteristics be? Even in the Iberian peninsula itself, or even within what we know today as Spain, there is no uniformity of looks or physical makeup. There are even physiological differences between some Iberian groups. For example, the blood profile of Basques is different from that of other Iberians in some important respects.

The inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula are perhaps one of the most mixed people in Europe. Apart from the Celts, Iberians, Basques, Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Berbers, Romans, Vandals, Suebi, and Visigoths, the peninsula had a large infusion of Moors beginning in the eighth century and of Jews at various points in its history, and descendants of Amerindians have often moved to it and lived and mixed with other members of the population. Indeed, there are even Africans, Indians (from India), and Asians who have settled (voluntarily or by force) in Iberia at various times, and who have mixed with the population in Spain and Portugal. It would be completely impossible to speak of a Spanish race, or an Iberian race, if one were trying to refer to the people of the Iberian peninsula. And the situation becomes even more complicated

when we include Latin America in the picture, for the African and Amerindian elements in Latin America are substantial and they are themselves variegated and intermixed. Moreover, there is the more recent immigration from non-Iberian Europe and Asia. The current president of Peru is of Japanese ancestry, and there is a significant number of Asians in Paraguay, Italians and Welsh in Argentina, Germans in Chile, French in Cuba, and so on. What is the Hispanic/Latino race, then?

At the beginning of this century, when philosophers were greatly impressed with biology and the evolutionary theory of Darwin, José Vasconcelos, a Mexican philosopher, proposed the idea that in Latin America there were the makings of a fifth race which, instead of being exclusionary, like the other four, would be a true mixture of all the others. It is a race, he speculated, guided by love rather than interest.⁷

Vasconcelos's theory was inspiring, but it was flawed from the beginning, for it relied on the unclear notion of race. There is one point in it, however, that is important and of which we should take note, namely, that there is no present distinguishing race in Latin America and that what we have is a veritable collage of races. And this point can be extended to cover Iberians and Hispanic Americans. If there is to be a Hispanic/Latino race, which I very much doubt, it is still in the making and must be by force an extraordinary mixture.

In the face of these difficulties, some propose a fifth view. They argue that it is not race, but genetic lineage that serves to give unity to ethnic groups. We belong to an ethnic group because we are genetically connected to it. The criterion of ethnicity is genetic lineage. In short, genetic lineage is both a necessary and sufficient condition of the proper use of an ethnic label and of the identity of those to whom it is applied.⁸ *Prima facie* this seems to make considerable sense. It certainly solves many of the problems raised earlier with respect to political boundaries, language, culture, and race. Members of an ethnic group can move about, join different states, speak different languages, have different cultures, and belong to different races and racial mixtures.

Still, there are at least three serious problems with this view.⁹ The first is that it involves either circularity or a reduction to some other factor, for genetic lineage always must have an origin. Membership in a genetic line presupposes the genetic line. The problem arises in that the identity of the genetic line has to be assumed (thus the circularity) or analyzed in terms of non-genetic factors, such as territory, political unit, language, culture, and so on (thus the reduction). If I am Hispanic/Latino because I can trace my lineage to my grandparents, what makes them Hispanics/Latinos?

The second problem is also very serious: Genetic lineage is both too narrow and too broad as a criterion of identity. Consider the case of Hispanics/Latinos. It is too narrow because there are Hispanics/Latinos who have no genetic link to other Hispanics/Latinos. For instance, some children of Welsh immigrants to Argentina are as Hispanic/Latino as any other Hispanic/Latino—indeed, when they visit Wales they feel they do not belong there. And genetic lineage is too broad because it would have to include 10th-generation descendants of some Hispanic/Latino couple who have not lived in a Hispanic/Latino country, have not associated with other Hispanics/Latinos, and do not share with them any cultural traits.

This brings me to the third difficulty: Genetic lineage is too imprecise a criterion insofar as it is not clear what it involves. In short, what constitutes genetic lineage? A completely unmixed genealogy or a partially mixed genealogy? If the first, I doubt many Hispanics/Latinos would qualify as Hispanics/Latinos; if the second, then having had a single Hispanic/Latino ancestor, ten generations removed, would be sufficient to make one qualify. But this does not make much sense.

II. A HISTORICO-FAMILIAL CONCEPTION OF ETHNICITY

Ethnicity and ethnic identity involve a certain unity in the ethnic group. We speak of the ethnic group as one; we are able to identify it; and we speak of it as different from other social groups, distinguishing it from them. But ethnic groups are often quite variegated and contain within themselves subgroups which are themselves distinguishable. Consider the example of Hispanics/Latinos. We think of Hispanics/Latinos as having some kind of unity, as having an identity which is recognizable and identifiable, and which distinguishes them from other social groups, whether ethnic or not. We distinguish Hispanics/Latinos from Italians and Anglo-Saxons, for example. At the same time, Hispanics/Latinos are by no means homogeneous. The overall group is composed of many different subgroups which are themselves identifiable and distinguishable in various ways. There are Dominicans, Iberians, Latin Americans, Mexicans, and so on.

A satisfactory conception of ethnicity, then, needs to explain two things: First, the unity of ethnic groups and their difference from other groups; second, the diversity found within ethnic groups themselves. In the case cited, it must be able to explain how it is that Hispanics/Latinos are somehow one group rather than an arbitrary collection of individual persons and also how this group differs from other groups. At the same time, a satisfactory explanation must also explain the diversity within

the overall Hispanic/Latino group. In short, it must explain how it is possible for the group to have any unity and at the same contain much diversity. The problem with the conceptions of ethnicity we discussed earlier is that they fail to accomplish this; they fail to explain diversity within unity. My claim is that the conception of ethnicity and ethnic identity I shall now propose does accomplish it.

An ethnic group of people must be understood as forming a unit which goes beyond political, linguistic, cultural, racial, or genetic frontiers. It is not even necessary that they name themselves in any particular way or that they have a consciousness of their identity. Some of them may in fact consider themselves members of the ethnic group and even have a consciousness of their identity as a group, but it is not necessary that all of them do. Knowledge does not determine being. What ties the members of an ethnic group together, and separates them from others, is history and the particular events of that history; a unique web of changing historical relations supplies their unity.

Obviously, historical relations tend to generate common properties, but such properties might not go beyond certain periods, regions, or sub-groups of people. There can be unity without community. *A* may follow *B*, and *B* may follow *C*, and *C* may follow *D*, implying a connection between *A* and *D* even when *A* has nothing in common with *D*. Let us explain this further. Consider the case of *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*. *A* has a relation (*aRb*) with *B*; *B* has a relation (*bRc*) with *C*; and *C* has a relation (*cRd*) with *D*. But there are no direct relations between *A* and *C* or *D*, or between *B* and *D*. (In order to simplify matters I assume that the relation between *A* and *B* is the same as the relation between *B* and *A*, and so on with the others.) Now, the mentioned relations allow us to group *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D* even though there is no property common to all of them, not even a relation that unites them directly. There is, however, a relation between *A* and *B*, another between *B* and *C*, and another between *C* and *D*. At the same time, these relations allow us to separate the group *ABCD* from other groups, say *MNOP*, because none of the members of *ABCD* has relations with the members of *MNOP*, or because the relations between *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D* are different from the relations between *M*, *N*, *O*, and *P*. To group implies to unite and separate, and to unite and separate are made easy when it is done in terms of properties common to all the members of a group, but it is not necessary that it be done on the basis of such properties. It can be done on the basis of properties or relations that are not common to all the members of the group as long as there are relations or properties that tie each member of the group with at least one other member of the group.

This is the kind of unity that I submit justifies the notion of ethnic identity. Let me illustrate my point with reference to Hispanics/Latinos. We are speaking here of a group of people who have no common elements considered as a whole. Their unity is not a unity of commonality; it is a historical unity founded on relations. King John II of Portugal has nothing in common with me, but both of us are tied by a series of events that relate us and separate us from Queen Elizabeth II and Martin Luther King. There is no need, then, to find properties common to all Hispanics/Latinos in order to classify them as Hispanics/Latinos. What ties us is the same kind of thing that ties the members of a family, as Wittgenstein would say.¹⁰ There may not be any common properties to all of us, but nonetheless we belong to the same group because we are historically related, as a father is to a daughter, an aunt to a nephew, and grandparents to grandchildren. Wittgenstein's metaphor of family resemblance is particularly appropriate in this case, for the history of Hispanics/Latinos is a history of a group of people, a community united by historical events. This means also that the requirements of coherence and purity do not apply. Families are not coherent wholes composed of pure elements. We are related clusters of persons with different, and sometimes incompatible, characteristics, and purity of any kind is not one of our necessary conditions. This is why families are in a constant process of change and adaptation. My claim is that this is how we should understand ourselves as Hispanics/Latinos.

The concept of an ethnic identity allows us to see aspects of reality that would otherwise be missed. They would be missed to a great extent because the conceptual frameworks used would be either too large or too small to allow us to see them. Concepts are windows to reality. The concept of an ethnic identity is indeed a window to the history of a chapter in universal human history. It introduces in the vast panorama of humankind a frame that directs the attention of the observer toward something that, under different conditions, would be given little attention or missed altogether because of the vastness of the view. Thanks to it, we see more of less. Ethnic terms, like "Hispanic/Latino," open windows which yield knowledge we would otherwise not have. At the same time, such terms and concepts allow us to notice things which we would miss if we used narrower concepts. These are also windows, but like any window, they reveal something by excluding something else. By using these narrower categories, we would be losing a larger view. The use of an ethnic label, then, reveals something unique by narrowing and widening our views at the same time.

This does not mean that the use of ethnic terms and concepts should necessarily be exclusionary. To speak and think about an ethnic group

should not prevent us from speaking and thinking in other ways as well, that is, from using other principles of organization, and therefore from including the consideration of other unities. For these other organizations and unities will surely explain, emphasize and reveal other facts which, under different arrangements, would go unnoticed. My point is that the perspective based on the notion I have proposed explains, emphasizes, and reveals aspects of social reality which would otherwise be neglected. I do not mean to exclude such arrangements. Indeed, there are many other enlightening ways of thinking about the reality comprised under terms such as "Hispanic/Latino." We could think in regional terms, such as Latin American, Iberian, Central American, and South American; in linguistic terms, such as Quechua, Castilian, and Basque; in political terms, such as Brazilian or Mexican; and so on. And all these would, if the notions are historically warranted, reveal to us aspects of the Hispanic reality which under different conceptions would be overlooked.

III. TWO OBJECTIONS

There are at least two serious objections to the view I have proposed that I must take up, however. The first attacks my view by arguing that it does not do justice to the fact that ethnic groups are, indeed, different from other groups and that difference cannot be explained merely in terms of historical connections. Hispanics/Latinos, for example, are different from the Chinese, the French, and certainly Anglo-Saxon Americans, so the argument goes. We can tell who is and who is not Hispanic and we are quite aware of the differences that separate us from other groups. A good explanation of these differences must refer to deep ways of thinking and acting. It will not do to argue, as I have done, that there is actually nothing Hispanics/Latinos and other ethnic groups have in common, for if this were the case, then it would not be possible, as it in fact is, to tell these groups apart from others. Of course, uncovering such common properties might be difficult, or even factually impossible at times, but that does not entail that such properties do not exist. That those which have been suggested thus far do not work does not entail that the task is logically impossible.

The answer to this objection is that I do not claim that there are no common properties to ethnic groups and, therefore, that there is no explanation of how we in fact tell ethnic groups apart from other groups. Rather, I have argued that there are no properties common to an ethnic group at all times and in all places that are discernible. This view does not prevent one from holding that there are properties common to an ethnic group, at all times and in some places, or at some times and in all

places; or properties common to each ethnic group at all times and in some places, or at some times and in all places. Nor can my position be construed as holding even that there are no common properties to an ethnic group at all times and places. My point is only that there are no properties which can be shown to be common to any ethnic group at all times and in all places. Indeed, I believe there are properties common to ethnic groups at some times and in some places and it is precisely such properties that serve to identify them at those times and in those places. At every time and in every period, some Hispanics/Latinos have properties that tie them then among themselves and distinguish them from other groups, but these properties do not necessarily extend beyond those times and places and, indeed, they do not need to extend beyond them to account for our identity and distinction from other groups.

This clarification of my position serves also to answer the second objection to which I said earlier I needed to refer. This objection argues that the criterion for ethnic identity I have proposed is too weak because it could describe a situation in which only a single property is shared by any two individuals and that would not be enough to set the group apart from other groups. Consider two groups of, say, six individuals each which we wish to distinguish from each other: Group 1 is composed of members *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F*. And group 2 is composed of members *G*, *H*, *I*, *J*, *K*, and *L*. Now, according to the view I have proposed, there would be nothing wrong with a situation in which each of the members of each group had only two properties. For the first group the properties would be as follows (in parentheses): *A*(*a*, *b*), *B*(*b*, *c*), *C*(*c*, *d*), *D*(*d*, *e*), *E*(*e*, *f*), and *F*(*f*, *g*). For the second group the properties would be as follows: *G*(*g*, *h*), *H*(*h*, *i*), *I*(*i*, *j*), *J*(*j*, *k*), *K*(*k*, *l*), and *L*(*l*, *m*). Now, the point to note is that the last member of the first group has one property in common with the first member of the second group. The significance of this fact is that this makes the break between the two groups arbitrary. That is, there is no more reason to end the first group with *F* and to begin the second group with *G* than to end the first group with *B* and begin the second group with *C*. True, the set of properties of the first group (*a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*, *f*, and *g*) is different from the set of properties (*g*, *h*, *i*, *j*, *k*, and *l*) of the second. But the fact that there is at least one common property (*g*) between the first and the second group makes the break into the two groups arbitrary, for we could as well say that the first group, rather than being composed of *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F*, is composed of *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, and *E*; and the second group, rather than being composed of *G*, *H*, *I*, *J*, *K*, and *L*, is composed of *F*, *G*, *H*, *I*, *J*, *K*, and *L*. And, of course, other combinations and breakdowns would also be possible.

Moreover, the situation is even more serious when one considers that in reality the members of any group, and certainly the members of a group such as Hispanics/Latinos, share not one, but more than one property with members of other groups that presumably we want to distinguish, as groups, from the group of Hispanics/Latinos. In short, the view I have presented, so the objection goes, is too weak.

One way to answer this second objection is to modify the view I have proposed as follows: Instead of speaking of members of a group, each of which shares at least one property with at least one other member of the group, propose a set of properties several of which are shared by each member of the group. Say that we identify a group with six members: *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F*. And let us propose a set of six properties also: *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*, and *f*. According to this view each member of the group would have several of these properties as, for instance: *A* (*a*, *b*), *B*(*a*, *b*, *e*, *f*), *C*(*c*, *d*, *f*), *D*(*b*, *c*, *d*, *e*, *f*), *E*(*a*, *e*), and *F*(*b*, *e*, *f*). The advantages of this answer should be obvious. Here we have a stronger position and one that can solve the weaknesses pointed out earlier. Clearly, now we have a tighter bond between the members of the group we want to distinguish, and we can also easily set the group apart from other groups by simply showing how individuals which are not members of the group do not have any or a sufficient number of the set of properties which are used to define the group.

Now let us apply this to the case of Hispanics/Latinos by way of illustration and say that there is a set of twelve properties several of which all Hispanics/Latinos have (the selection is purely arbitrary and should be given no significance): speaker of Iberian language, Iberian descent, born in Iberia, born in Latin America, Amerindian descent, African descent, citizen of Iberian country, citizen of Latin-American country, resident in Iberian country, resident in Latin-American country, Iberian surname, lover of Latin-American music. Using this criterion, Juan de los Palostes qualifies as Hispanic/Latino because he is of Iberian descent, was born in Latin America, and speaks Spanish. His daughters also qualify because they speak Spanish, are of Iberian descent, have Spanish surnames, and love Latin music, although they were not born or reside in an Iberian or a Latin-American country. And some children from Anglo-American fathers and Latin-American mothers who do not speak Spanish and were born in the United States can also be considered Hispanic/Latino because of their partial African descent and their love of Latin-American music. At the same time we can distinguish this group from those which might have one of these properties, say that they speak an Iberian language or were born in Latin America, but do not have any other. Moreover, it would exclude, for example, children

of Anglo-Saxon missionaries in Latin America and African Americans who have learned Portuguese in school.

Clearly this way of answering the objection we are considering is promising. And there is in fact no reason why it cannot be integrated into my view, except that, upon further reflection, there are problems with it. I see three difficulties in particular that make me hesitate. First, there is the problem of determining the particular set of properties we should identify as pertinent. How and on what bases do we decide on the set of properties in which Hispanics/Latinos share? Indeed, even in the rather innocuous list I provided as an illustration, there are some properties that are bound to create difficulties. For example, why should the child of Anglo-Saxon American missionaries, who was born in Colombia and holds Colombian citizenship by the fact that he was born in that country, and moreover speaks some Spanish, not be considered Hispanic/Latino? And we might keep in mind the problems raised earlier concerning political, territorial, cultural, racial, and other such properties.

A second problem with this way of answering the objection that should also be obvious from the example is that, even if we were able to settle on a satisfactory list of properties some of which all Hispanics/Latinos share, we have no easy way of determining the number of these properties required for someone to qualify as Hispanic/Latino. Two? Three? Four? Twenty? And does it make a difference which properties are involved? In the earlier example, does it make a difference whether we include love of Latin-American music and Amerindian descent or not? Indeed, are two of some kinds sufficient (e.g., lover of Latin-American music and Amerindian descent), whereas of other kinds three or four are needed? Obviously, this complicates matters tremendously, and it is not clear on what basis a decision can be reached.

The third problem is still more vexing. It has to do with the fact that, even if we were able to settle on a set of properties and on the number that need to be shared, this could turn out to be of use only for the past and the present and not the future. We do not know what properties will be pertinent for Hispanic identity in the future. The set of properties in which Hispanics/Latinos share could change, and so could the proportion of properties necessary for qualification. After all, we are speaking of a historical reality, and historical realities are in a constant process of change. Our identity is flexible and subject to evolution and transformation.¹¹ We can easily illustrate this point with a reference to language. Suffice it to say that the English spoken in the Middle Ages would be unintelligible to an American today, and yet we still consider it to be English. So, whatever we think pertinent for Hispanic/Latino identity in the past and present could in time change. If tigers can be bred to lose

their stripes, there is no reason why Hispanics/Latinos could not become quite different than what we are today or were in the past.

In short, the view we have been discussing as an answer to the second objection raised is simply too historical and inflexible. There cannot be a set list of properties in which ethnic groups share. There can be, of course, a list at any time, but the list must always remain open-ended. This is why it is still better to think in terms of history and family resemblance rather than in terms of a list of properties. Ethnic groups are part of a historical reality and, therefore, the criteria to identify them must take cognizance of that fact. Notice that I began by allowing the possibility that in principle there could be such a list of properties even if we cannot identify it. Now, however, it should be clear that I am not willing to allow the possibility of such a list even in principle.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, there is a wrong way and a right way of conceiving ethnicity. The wrong way is to think of it in closed terms, that is, as involving certain fixed properties shared by members of an ethnic group. The right way is to think of it in open, historical and familial terms. Ethnic groups are historical families, open and in a constant process of change. This allows us to account for both continuity and development in ethnic groups and should prevent the exclusionary closure which is so dangerous in social contexts. This view of ethnicity has important implications for social policy, but the exploration of these will have to be left for another time.

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NOTES

1. For example, a few years back, one of my oldest daughter's high-school classmates, who came from a well-do-to family, was allowed to apply to, and was subsequently accepted into, an elite college on the basis of being Hispanic/Latina. In fact, her only connection to anything Hispanic/Latino was a great-grandmother from the Southwest, whose Hispanic/Latino culture and values had been long forgotten by her descendants. Moreover, there is some evidence that, in many places, persons with very thin Hispanic/Latino credentials—as thin as being one-eighth Hispanic/Latino or merely having taken Spanish in high school—have been allowed to qualify as Hispanics/Latinos for purposes of affirmative action. (See Luo Michel, "Group Claims Some Police Officers Posed as Hispanics in Order to Gain Employment,"