

Luis Fernando Restrepo
Professor of Spanish and Latin American & Latino Studies
Associate Vice Provost for Diversity
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
lrestr@uark.edu

HISPANIC STUDIES AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF U.S. LATINO EDUCATION. REFLECTIONS FROM THE NEW SOUTH

Presentation Summary

Today when the Latin American diaspora in the US has surpassed fifty million there is an increasing tension regarding its political, economic and cultural integration, as it is reflected in the courting of the Hispanic vote in the current presidential campaign, but also the rejection in the recent anti immigrant legislation in Arizona and Alabama and the deportation of nearly one million immigrants during the Obama administration.

Spanish language instruction reflects well those contradictions. It is restricted in several states official English only legislations, depriving immigrant children of their native language. Yet Spanish is the most taught language in affluent and predominantly white schools and at the university level. It is a language desired by many middle class Anglos seeking to position themselves in a growing bilingual job market.

It is no longer the interest in Golden Age literature and the aura of the liberal arts education based on the humanities, nor the interest in the Latin American societies that drove area studies during the Cold War. Hispanic studies today are confronted with a historic change that it must address as Latino education acquires national relevance given the growing number of Latinos entering the educational system ¿What is then the role of Hispanic studies today in the US? ¿Which are its goals and its guiding research

and pedagogical principles? And how its historical transatlantic and hemispheric scope and interests will be affected by this new historical shift of the discipline?

I do not have set answers for these fundamental questions, and the goal of this presentation is more an invitation to reflect on these matters to work collectively in the new agenda for Hispanic studies in the XXI century. From my own experience as a college Spanish and Latin American professor in the US for more than two decades, I have seen that the essential questions and directions in the field have changed. This is most evident when the students from working class immigrant families, with a ruptured collective memory, hesitantly speaking an undervalued and neglected language, having experienced discrimination, come to the university. It is in the university that they start to reflect on their place in history and to examine the role of specialized knowledge and the university as an institution in relation to society.

The history of Hispanic studies can be divided in three main periods, classical hispanism (19th to mid 20th century), Latinamericanism (post WWII), and Latino/Chicano studies (1960s and Civil Rights movement). The Latin American diaspora en North America and Spain is undergoing historical transformations and changing their hosts countries as well. In this context we need to envision a new Hispanism that reconnects the greater Hispanic world. To reconnect the different Hispanic traditions, there are two key areas of research and pedagogical concerns. The first one is related to the language politics in these regions, going beyond the celebration of Castilian to address the language rights of multilingual societies. The second is the plights of immigrant communities denied basic rights and protection of the nation states.

The potential for Hispanic studies is real and substantial if we consider the growth of the Latino population and the transformation of the US society and culture that this growth brings. According to a Pew Hispanic Center report, there are 12 million Latino students in the public schools k-12 (of 52 million). According to the US 2010 Census, in a couple of decades, Latinos will represent one third of the public schools student population.

College enrollment is nearing three million (2,825,433 of 21,544,004 in the US DOE National center for Educational Statistics NCES October State of Education 2012 report). In my own campus, Latino enrollment increased 22.8 percent but remained flat for African Americans. Latinos are now the largest minority group in at the U of Arkansas and in US campuses. The number of Latinos with advanced degrees, college professor, administrators is nonetheless significantly low. According to the American Council of Education 2010 *Status of Minorities Report*, as of 2007, minorities represented 17 percent of full-time faculty and 18 percent of full-time administrators. Minorities held 13 percent of presidential posts in 2006.

In this context of a growing student population and the slow access to educational positions, Hispanic studies should acquire relevance in the educational politics at a national level, although there is also a growing push back. Not too long ago, the education department of the state of Arizona dismantled the Mexican American studies programs in the high schools and removed several books from the school libraries, including message to Aztlan from Rodolfo Corky Gonzales, Chicano, the History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement, Critical Race Theory, Rethinking Columbus, Paolo Freire Pedagogy of the Oppressed, *500 Years of Chicano*

History, and Occupied America A history of Chicanos by Rodolfo Acuña. There is a clear resistance to what is perceived as the Latinization of the US. One outspoken critic is the neoconservative Harvard political science professor Samuel Huntington. For Huntington. In *The Hispanic Challenge*, Huntington expressed:

The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril. (The Hispanic Challenge 2004).

The demographic growth of the Latino population in the US certainly represents challenges, that is true, denial of the inevitable transformation of American culture is another matter. There is a conspicuous element in public discourse about Latinos and latino immigration that needs critical attention. There are often references to a rapid growth, demographic explosion, boom, natural disaster like proportions. The language of containment, of how are Latinos going to be managed politically, economically culturally. We Latinos cannot be passive in this process and enter the conversation of where we want as a nation to go. A key place to develop the key arguments for this conversation is no other than the field of Hispanic studies.