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LATIN@S: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Immanuel Wallerstein

“That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet,” Shakespeare has famously told us. Is this true? And, if you change the name, is it still a rose? Or is the name an important part of the existential reality? Anyone who has followed ethnonational politics in the world-system cannot miss how often names change, how many quarrels take place about the change of names, and how many people refuse to accept name changes, persisting in the use of earlier terminology.

Are those in the United States who are to some degree related to those who were slaves to be called Colored people, Negroes, Afro-Americans, Blacks, or African Americans? May one of these people call himself or herself a Nigger? And should we capitalize these names or use lower case? Is the language spoken today by most people in Montenegro Serbo-Croat, Serbian, or Montenegrin? And on and on. You will notice immediately that these are not recondite scholarly debates but matters of passion and anger.

As we know, the term Latin@s is a relatively recent invention, especially with the @ sign. It is not an innocent choice. The @ sign is obviously the deference to the quite recent determination to develop and use nonsexist language. But whence Latin@s? It refers first of all to two different but related groups: those who come from and identify themselves with the countries of what is today called Latin America; and those within the United States who are descended from the first group. Or more or less, since no doubt there are a

number of persons on the margin of both groups, about whom we could argue whether or not they should be included in the category, and such arguments have been rife.

Let us start with persons who come from the countries of Latin America. We immediately have a problem of which you are all aware. Which countries shall we include in Latin America? And what does Latin mean? It is usually said that this was an invention in 1865 of a French economist, Michel Chevalier, who was Minister of Finance in the government of Napoleon III. But Durán points out that it was already used in 1856 by two writers from Latin America: the Colombian José María Torres Caicedo and the Chilean Francisco Bilbao. Both were living then in Paris and, in Durán's view, were responding to an "impulse from the indigenist movement rooted in anti-Spanish sentiment" (1956, 61).

Chevalier obviously found this concept useful to his country. France was at that time occupying Mexico, and the concept "Latin" was intended to pull within a French sphere of influence all the countries in the Americas which shared the characteristics of a Romance language and were largely Catholic—that is, those countries that had been historically colonized by Spain, Portugal, and France. It was also intended to limit the political role of the United States in this region. For this reason and also because of its indigenist overtones, the term was resisted for a long time, both by scholars and officials in Spain and in the United States.¹

The French were into using the term Latin a lot those days. In that very same year of 1865, the very same French minister persuaded Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium (but not Portugal) to enter an arrangement called the Latin Monetary Union, meant as a counterpart to and constraint on the role of the pound sterling in world monetary transactions. Greece joined in 1868 and Romania in 1889. Other countries were persuaded to mint their coins according to the union's standards. The list is motley, but politically understandable: Austria, Bulgaria, Venezuela, Serbia, Montenegro, San Marino, and the Papal State. The union disbanded in 1929. When, however, the Catholic Church consecrated the term Latin America in 1899, it restricted it to Spanish-speaking countries plus Brazil.

In the twentieth century, the term came into widespread and common political usage, albeit with varying definitions of the boundaries. Latin America was in competition with a number of alternative possible names. A quick survey of encyclopedias published in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and German shows no consensus whatsoever. Sometimes, one has to look under America, sometimes under "the Americas." English-language encyclopedias usually distinguish between North America and Latin America, Italian and German encyclopedias between Anglo America (or Anglosaxon America) and Latin America. But a Brazilian encyclopedia did not even have the term. It contained only North, Central, and South America. There is also Iberoamerica, Hispanic America, Lusoamerica, and of course the Western Hemisphere. As

one can readily see, the terminology one prefers has implications both in the reading of history and in terms of contemporary politics.

The U.S. government has historically preferred that intergovernmental organizations be pan-American structures. Indeed, in 1945, Nelson Rockefeller, then U.S. assistant secretary of state for Latin America and a member of the U.S. delegation to the founding conference of the United Nations, was behind inserting a special clause in the UN Charter that legitimated the geopolitical role of regional organizations, thinking of the Pan-American Union about to transform itself into the Organization of American States (OAS).² When, however, several years later, the Mexican, Brazilian, and Argentine governments pressed the UN Economic and Social Council to create an Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), the United States fought the proposition, albeit unsuccessfully.³ We know what an enormous intellectual and therefore geopolitical role ECLA was to play in subsequent decades, and one can well appreciate why the United States was unenthusiastic about the structure.

Later, however, when ECLA became tamer, it also changed its name to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. This reflected the ambiguous status of the various Caribbean countries—mostly English-speaking—in relation to the concept Latin America. And then there has always been the question of whether Haiti should be included in the term (because it is French-speaking) as well as Puerto Rico (because it is juridically part of the United States).

Still, despite nitpicking and blurred lines, most people in Latin American countries understand what it is to be a Latin@. It has clear political meaning. It symbolizes a certain militancy vis-à-vis the United States (and to a lesser extent today western Europe). It is therefore a concept that has a left tonality. For this reason, some persons on the right in Latin America would prefer to think of themselves as westerners, or Catholics, or even Europeans (in the sense of a putative pan-European identity). On the other hand, there have been some persons on the left, especially in those countries with a large population of *indios* who are uncomfortable with the concept, preferring a certain *indigenismo*.

The concept Latin@s in the context of Latin America is both militant outward (Latin@s as opposed to *Yanquis*) and unifying inward. We are all Latin@s together—Creole, ladino, indio; or *branco, pardo, negro*. It is doubtful that the concept Latin@s explains very much about, say, Guatemalan politics today.

When we come to the United States, the term has a different history. For one thing, it is much more recent. Fifty years ago, there were no Latin@s in the United States. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans were about the only categories in use. After Castro came to power and there began a migration of Cubans to the United States, there were also Cubans. In the 1960s, with the advent of the concept of affirmative action, the U.S. government created the official category of Hispanics, giving it a somewhat fluid definition: “all persons of Mexican, Puerto

Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.”

Hispanics were one of four groups who were to benefit from affirmative action. De facto, one was a Hispanic if one had a traditionally Spanish surname. This led to two absurd consequences. In 1969, a certain Robert E. Lee went to a judge in Maryland and petitioned for a change of name from his English surname (and what a name in particular) to a Spanish surname. Once granted, he applied for advantages under the aegis of affirmative action. I am not sure how the government handled this request, which was probably difficult to reject legally. The other absurd consequence is that universities began to demonstrate that they had responded to demands of affirmative action because they had on their faculty middle-class white Argentinian refugees. Martha Giménez vigorously protested this clear evasion of the intent of affirmative action by her university in Colorado—to no avail, it should be noted.⁴

The 1960s were, however, a time of both militancy and demographic shifts. Young Mexican Americans renamed themselves Chicanos. There was beginning to be a serious Dominican migration to the United States, and later of course from many other Latin American countries. There were now second- and third-generation Puerto Rican migrants to the continental United States. The Puerto Ricans were no longer located just in the Northeast and the Mexican Americans no longer just in the Southwest. Both geographically and politically, there arose a demand for a unifying construct of these persons. This gave rise to the use of the concept, Latin@s.

This also gave rise to a debate as to whether Hispanics or Latin@s was the more useful concept. The debate was both academic and political. In academia, there was an illustrative argument among epidemiologists. In 1980, David E. Hayes-Bautista wrote an editorial for the *American Journal of Public Health* (1980) arguing that epidemiological studies that lumped together all Hispanics were deceptive because they failed to distinguish between the *Raza* of Indian origin and European Spaniards, and thereby removed the crucial variable of racial oppression.

In 1987, Hayes-Bautista and Jorge Chapa (1987) pursued the matter in the same journal in a more detailed way. In this article, however, it was no longer *Raza* and *indios* that were to be used to define Latin@s but persons “originating in a Latin American country” (p. 61), a category that, they argued, derived from the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. They said that the term Hispanics included Spanish, Portuguese, Cape Verdeans, and Filipinos, all of whom they wished to exclude, and did not include the English-speaking groups in Latin America, whom they wished to include. They insisted that Latin American was a geographical concept, not one based on ethnicity, language, or race.

In response, Fernando M. Treviño (1987), said he preferred the first article, based on *Raza* and *indios*, to the one based on the Monroe Doctrine. He pointed out that eliminating Filipinos was eliminating a group that was also “dis-

criminated against” (p. 50). He concluded however, quite strangely, that Hispanics was a better term, even though he claimed he had no objection himself to being called a Latino. And the editor of the journal, Alfred Yankauer, neither a Latino nor a Hispanic, chimed in (1987), saying that, while he himself preferred Latino, he could obtain no consensus on this question among the editorial board.

Martha Giménez responded (1989) to this debate among the epidemiologists by questioning the utility of *any* standardized terminology. She said that the label Hispanic “abolished, for all practical purposes, the qualitative historical differences between the experiences and life chances of U.S. minority groups of Mexican or Puerto Rican origin, and those of Latin American and Spanish peoples.” But then Giménez gave short shrift to Latino as well. Giménez pointed out that all these categories represented the “internationalization of minorities,” and, as a result, “the devaluation and the denial of the unique historical experiences, struggles, culture, and identity of U.S. racial and ethnic minorities who are reduced to an abstract statistical category capable of indefinite expansion through legal and illegal immigration” (1988, 44). She asserted that these categories were what Marx had called an “imaginary concrete,” and said they were “an empiricist grasp of a complex set of world-scale processes and relationships” (1988, 53).

The politics of this are quite clear, both within academia and within the larger U.S. political world. Latin@s are an identity group demanding rights they are denied and opportunities they do not have. Hispanics are the object of solicitation by the Republican Party. Centrist Democrats are not sure what this group is to be called. Anti-Castro Cubans certainly do not consider themselves Latin@s and probably hardly ever call themselves Hispanics. Haitians are not usually called Latin@s. And the few Brazilians that have migrated to the United States may not be either. As for those who have come from Spain, one group that purports to speak for them, the Spanish American Heritage Association, declared in 1980: “A Hispanic person is a Caucasian of Spanish ancestry. The Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans are not Caucasians of Spanish ancestry, and therefore not Hispanics” (cited by Hayes-Bautista and Chapa, 1987, 64).

University politics seem to have followed the larger political developments. There were never, to my knowledge, Hispanic programs, other than Spanish language and literature departments. But in the 1970s, many Chicano and Puerto Rican studies programs were created. Later, most of them renamed themselves Latin@ studies programs, or something similar. One could show the same historical development for the concept Asian, which today, within the United States, embraces Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos, Indians, and Bangladeshi, as well no doubt as many others. There is also the category Asian Pacific, which adds in the Guamanians and many other islanders. Individual Filipinos could, I guess, decide whether they preferred to be categorized as Latin@ or Asian Pacific in identity.

So, what's in a name? Obviously, quite a lot. Names define the boundaries of identity. Names define claimed historical legacies. Names define opposites

or opponents. Names define what one is not. If one is a Latin@, one is not a Hispanic, or at least that is true for most people. And names of course symbolize alliances. Names are assertions of permanence, or at least of long-lasting structural situations and qualities. But in fact names, seen through a long-distance telescope, are very transitory, even transient. Names do not last too long, on the whole. But while they last, names are incredibly binding and bounding. They are in some ways akin to quick dry putty. Coming at the right moment, they instantly affirm existential reality, and then last as long as they last—until I guess the putty dries out, that is to say, until the utility of the name exhausts itself.

Seen in the prism of April 2004, how important and effective is this name, Latin@? In the Western Hemisphere, Latin@ identity is at the heart of a crucial geopolitical battle. Faced with the rapid emergence of a triadic geoeconomic struggle between the United States, Western Europe, and East Asia, the United States is very anxious to enlarge and secure privileged access to markets and investment in the Western Hemisphere. The construction of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) is no doubt the linchpin of this aspiration, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was the first major step in arriving at this goal. In the United States, both Democratic and Republican politicians support this objective for the most part, and there has been only marginal difference here between the politics of the Clinton and the Bush administrations.

For a while, it seemed as if FTAA was virtually unstoppable. NAFTA had been adopted, a free trade agreement between Chile and the United States was signed, and others were being negotiated. Then suddenly FTAA got into trouble. Many things happened. Bush's Iraq adventures consumed U.S. governmental attention and gave space in Latin America for alternative views. The worldwide movement against neoliberalism showed its teeth first at Chiapas, then at Seattle in 1999, and subsequently morphed into the World Social Forum, commonly referred to as Porto Alegre. Lula and the PT won the elections in Brazil. The politics of the Lula government may have disappointed many on the left in terms of its position on the external debt and on internal land reform. But in terms of general foreign policy, Brazil has become a systematic organizer, first of all of resistance to the one-sided neoliberal objectives of the United States and Western Europe within the World Trade Organization (WTO), and secondly, and not least, to the FTAA, or at least to an FTAA on U.S. terms. By organizing the G21, Brazil brought about the failure of the Cancún meeting of the WTO in September 2003. And by promoting a potential merger of Mercosur and the Andean Community, Brazil brought to a stalemate the November, 2003 meeting of the FTAA in Miami, which had been intended to further its construction.

What we are seeing here is a geopolitical assertion of "Latin America" in the world-system. It involves pulling away from Western Hemisphere structures and moving toward Latin American structures, ones that are also allied with what we used to call Third World structures. The game is scarcely over, and

there is certainly no guarantee how it will come out. But Latin@ identity, that is Latin American identity, is at the center of the effort.

If we turn to the United States, again seen in the prism of April 2004, we read regularly in the newspapers that the largest growing electoral group in the United States, and indeed all over the country, is Latin@s. Well, actually, the newspapers seldom call them Latin@s. They are usually called Hispanics. Republicans are said to believe that, only if they can increase their now relatively low share of the Hispanic vote, can they reelect George W. Bush. And Democrats are working hard to consolidate their existing larger share of this group's votes, and expand it, first of all by more voter registration, and secondly perhaps by appealing to those younger Cubans who have been previously voting Republican but who now want a more flexible U.S. policy toward Cuba.

The question is, where is all this heading? In the case of Latin America, will Latin American identity be subordinate to a larger Third World identity (by whatever name that comes to be called)? Or will it be attracted by a link to "Latin" Europe, which after all is a connection that has many roots among Latin Americans—Catholicism for some conservatives; France as the locus of the Enlightenment for many left-of-center intellectuals; family links to Spain, Portugal, Italy, and even Germany for all sorts of people? And what is the content of *Latinidad* for a peasant militant in the Movimento sem Terra (MST) in Brazil, or for a Zapatista in Chiapas? Does the base militant even know the term? This is very far from being clear, as we look ahead into the next two decades.

A similar type of uncertainty surrounds the use of Latin@ within the United States. It is clear that there are many commonalities about the problems that Blacks and Latin@s face today. But it is also clear that there is a latent rivalry (well, not so latent), as each group pursues its own attempt to obtain rights it has been long denied. The future of a rainbow coalition (including of course also Asian Americans and Native Americans, and perhaps also Arab Americans) is as important and as tenuous as the future of common ties among Third World countries. Republican strategy is to hive off the upwardly mobile within these groups and particularly among the Hispanic/Latin@s. It has not been totally without success.

These are the games we play with names. But underneath these games lie the continuing polarizations within the capitalist world-economy, and the continuing different (even opposite) visions about the future, both of the capitalist world-economy as a system and, given its structural crisis, about the system that will replace it. And here we come to the final question. The deepest political struggle in the world-system today is that between what I call the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre. They represent two different visions and two different sets of objectives. But neither is as clearly defined about its middle-range objectives as it claims to be or even as it believes it is.

In this worldwide political struggle, the concept Latin@s can push us all, and particularly those who are encompassed within the concept, in two different,

even opposite, directions. On the one hand, it can be a legitimate demand by oppressed groups, using a name that is ultimately founded on concrete local political realities. Latin@s can therefore move forward with others in a family of oppressed groups, and their movements, to find common ground and some kind of unity in objectives and action with other groups founded on other concrete local political realities. This is obviously the hope of those who participate in the World Social Forum with its base concept of the “open forum.”

But of course it is equally possible—as we know from looking at comparable groups in the historical past and indeed in the historical present—that it can be the base of turning inward, of creating a fortress that protects the group more or less, and puts it in critical conflict with other similar groups. One should not underestimate the pressures that exist and will come to exist to move in this direction.

So, Latin@s as a concept and a discussion about “Latin@s in the world-system” is a double-edged sword that has to be handled carefully, intelligently, and with a sense of how much is at stake.

Notes

1. eynote address at “Latin@s in the World-System,” 28th Annual Conference of the Political Economy of the World-System Conference, University of California, Berkeley, April 22–24, 2004.

The first journal to be devoted to Latin American affairs in the United States was founded in 1918, and entitled the *Hispanic American Historical Review*.

2. At its founding in 1948, the OAS had 21 members, the 18 Spanish-speaking republics, Haiti, Brazil, and the United States. Today it has 35 members, the entire list of independent states in the Western Hemisphere. Essentially the OAS has added Canada and the English-speaking Caribbean states, plus Suriname, diluting its Hispanic character.

3. See Furtado (1985) for a detailed account of the contentious politics of creating ECLA by a leading figure in ECLA.

4. See Giménez 1988. In another article, Giménez recounts the “travesty of the concept” of affirmative action with this anecdote: “An interesting example of the effects of including well-educated South American professionals in the ‘Hispanic minority group’ is the recent award of a minority fellowship, by Boulder’s local newspaper, to a high school senior ‘minority’ student, the talented and multilingual (speaking English, Spanish, French, and German) Argentine-born son of two Argentine university professors” (1989, 567n).

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