

Orbis/Urbis Latino: “Hispanics” in U.S. Cities¹

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ABSTRACT

This text explores the effects of U.S. cities on Latinos and of Latinos on the cities. We argue that the mediation of varied urban spaces is important to shifting patterns of Latino development in which distinct Latino and Latin American populations come to achieve some differential unity as “Latinos” and begin to impact other groups and the overall societies in which they live.

The essay focuses on *Latinization* as the impact of Latinos on the values of other people and on cities and urban processes; our goal is to establish the bases for understanding Latinization as the story of the struggles of a heterogeneous community subject to worldwide forces.

In the future, Latinos will face constant efforts to maintain original cultural identifications while they adapt to new local and global processes. Without radical changes, a growing mass of unskilled, poorly educated and semi-literate workers will be immersed in a technologically advanced and capital-intensive society. Latinized cities are the spaces wherein reside possible positive dynamics that may change the scenario.

Keywords: Latinos, Latinization, globalization, gentrification, transnational processes, culture and technology, cities and hibridacion, urbanization and Latino identity, development/underdevelopment.

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RESUMEN

Este texto explora los efectos de las ciudades de Estados Unidos sobre los latinos y de los latinos sobre las ciudades. Nuestro argumento es que la mediación de variados espacios urbanos es importante para comprender los patrones cambiantes de desarrollo latino en los cuales distintas poblaciones latinas y latinoamericanas alcanzan alguna unidad diferencial como “Latinos” y empiezan a impactar a otros grupos y a las sociedades en donde viven.

El ensayo subraya “la latinización” como el impacto de los Latinos sobre los valores de otra gente y sobre los procesos urbanos que caracterizan las ciudades; nuestra meta es establecer las bases para entender la latinización como la historia de las luchas de una comunidad heterogénea sujeta a fuerzas mundiales.

En el futuro, los latinos van a enfrentarse a esfuerzos constantes por mantener sus identificaciones culturales mientras que se adaptan a nuevos procesos locales y globales. Sin cambios radicales, una población creciente de trabajadores de preparación inadecuada estará inmersa en una sociedad tecnológicamente avanzada. Las ciudades latinizadas son los espacios en donde residen las posibles dinámicas positivas que pueden alterar el escenario.

Palabras clave: Latinos, latinización, globalización, gentrificación, procesos transnacionales, cultura y tecnología, ciudades y hibridación, urbanización y latinidad, desarrollo y subdesarrollo.

1. CITIES AND LATINOS

Cities seem to have gained considerable importance in Latino discourse, if only because with globalization, the urban perspective turns out to be to major mode of thinking the world. This perspective also includes the so-called “rural spaces” where the new technologies transform all representations with modalities of the urban as the cognitive basis for accessing contemporary processes. And in this context, the discussion of how to think the relation *Latinidad-city* has woven itself in the debates about postmodernity, globalization and transnationalism with respect to the U.S.

This text explores the effects of U.S. cities on Latinos and of Latinos on the cities. In fact, we argue, Latino questions must be seen in relation to the spaces where Latinos live, act and interact. The mediation of varied urban spaces is important if we are to understand shifting patterns of Latino development in which distinct Latino and

Latin American populations of distinct origins and traits come to interact and achieve some differential unity as “Latinos” and begin to relate to and impact other groups and the societies in which they live.

Here the term *Latinization* means the impact of Latinos on the values and views of other people and on cities and urban processes; our intent is to present recent perspectives on their manifestations in key points of U.S. urban space. So our goal is to establish the bases for understanding the history of *Latinization*. Of course, *Latinization* is neither gratuitous nor spontaneous. The hybrid, transcultural conflict is in the constant struggle with hegemonic structures, so that *Latinization* is the history of the struggles of a heterogeneous community subject to worldwide developments.

Latinization is nourished by the local digestion of ideas, values, customs and cultural expressions. Latinos materialize cultural tendencies that form part of diverse processes that also affect Latin Americans and “non-Latinos”—those who begin to take on traits and attitudes of other groups and to develop a certain degree of identification with them. What’s more, *Latinization* affects the system where it develops, and this leads us to ask how Latino and urban come together: how do we characterize identity in function of *Latinidad/Latinization*? What forms and meanings intermesh in the lives of those subjects who ascribed to this identity?

The beginning of the present century signals the encounter of the enormous population growth of immigrants and refugees. Cities have gone through multiple transformations in recent years, and the role of Latino immigration in all this is evident. These questions multiply with the bitter struggles over recently arriving undocumented immigrants.

It is in urban spaces where we can analyze the dialectic of reconfigurations in the culture of new immigrants and the transformations of cities under the impact of globalization and the transnationalism. In this context, what are the representations and responses of recently arrived immigrants, many of whom have lived in small agrarian communities? What is the response to the urban system that privileges impersonal relations and unties family structures that constitute the social base for many Latin American populations? How are the spaces of immigrant subjects represented and what degree of integration do barrios achieve within the metropolitan order? What strategies of incorporation, assimilation or resistance do the immigrants put in play, and what are the reactions of the “natives”? What is the future of Latino immigrants in the face of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino campaigns? If the spatial structures of the city constitute relations of power, the different spaces present themselves like places of interaction that require different roles and abilities; and the question remains one of the possibilities for Latino immigrants in the urban environment.

2. GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

If globalization is a denationalized and deterritorialized system, at the same time its effects are reflected in the identities of the producers and consumers of the system; new practices and new attitudes emerge in relation to the new technologies of communication and transportation; new forms of community emerge at a time when certain social modalities are deprived of sense. Community and political participation, National and transnational identities of class, ethnicity and gender acquire new meanings that are in flux—one of the premises of globalization theory is just this—non-permanence. And the migrations present very clear changes, because the movement of goods is connected with the movement of labor.

The changes stemming from transnational immigration may be the origin of many identity crises that lead to still graver problems. All immigrants live between cultures; but in the globalizing era, cultural frames have ceased being stable, and are in constant conflict and mobility, so that the “coming-going” process goes on in spaces and beings in change and redefinition, with certain advances and successes but also case of lumpenization, addiction, criminalization, violence and psychosis. While economic and educational possibilities sometimes operate against the most negative effects of immigration, the alliances among different social groups create the possibility of diverse cultural resistances, while raising the question of how to generate their political articulation.

3. LATINO IDENTITY/ URBAN IDENTITY: WHERE ARE LATINOS?

One key aspect of Latino identity has been the retention of characteristics from their cultural past that have been defined as “pre-capitalist,” “pre-industrial,” “Catholic,” “agrarian,” or “dependent.” Such definitions present Latinos as “dysfunctional,” “less privileged” and “under-developed” on the basis of the parameters of the U.S. “rational” system; but Latinos can sustain and nourish a coherent community able to confront the most corrosive effects of technological advance. In fact the hope for a more human future may well depend, in part, on the conservation such residual traits among Latinos and the “Latinization” of non-Latinos. For Latinos, cultural identity is not related to Anglo-Saxon individualism, but with more communitarian concepts such as family and ethnic group. In this sense, the problematic confronting Latinos is when they try to conserve certain aspects of their culture in the context of the Anglo-American values. From this come the tensions among Latinos, the ruptures in family structure, the pressures that come with high grades of individualism and competitiveness, female independence, the emergence of new religious sects—all that which, for good or ill,

implies the destabilization or destruction of cultural bases, and which can lead to disorientation and violence.

We could trace the roads Latinos have taken to maintain their identities and values, and we could also underline the attraction that certain key Latino values have for others, with the hope that their richest dimensions survive and grow beyond the mechanical logic of efficiency and practicality. There are many who, without being Latinos, want to take on Latino identities and subjectivities. But there are many Latinos who think that the efforts to preserve their culture only contribute to condemning them to marginalization and poverty. Others seek the best of both worlds, combining elements into a working synthesis; and there are also those who argue that Latinos who lose key aspects of their identity risk a cultural uprooting which will diminish their chances in the postmodern world (Zimmerman 2000a).

Urban space in this century seems to extend beyond all definitions. Millions migrate from different spaces, and join in the life of the great cities. Every day, the physiognomy of the cities goes on changing, and with each turn, limits go beyond the official maps and the work of the urban planners. Satellite cities, peripheral barrios, and semi-rural communities go on adding onto an urban expansion that continues almost non-stop.

The growth has accelerated in the present era of high-tech communications; and one of its effects continues to be the utilization of the immigrants whose urban accommodation has scarcely been consolidated, because the majority of them see the city as marked by alienation. Over the years, the possible identification with local space grows, especially if the new city offers conditions for the integration of the effects of the here and there/the coming and going of large numbers. Urban transnationalization is a process central to the configuration of Latinos, and affects how we see the new identities which emerge (Báez Hernández, Bencomo and Zimmerman 2007)

Demographic changes among the immigrants is a challenge for traditional models of leadership and organization of groups and institutions that defend certain spaces, niches and interests: so the distinction of Latino communities that associated the regions and cities with particular Latino groups has to be revised and reconfigured considering the great population changes of recent decades. The transformations that impel the recent mass migrations affect not only places with deep colonial Latino traditions, so that Latinos begin to transform the spaces and Latinization continues consolidating, although always with conflicts with established Latino sectors and of course with other minorities and ethnic groups—and always with unforeseen mutations and combinations, rancors and alliances.

At the same time, the great U.S. cities are characterized by their high “intercultural porosity,” by the constant meeting of the local and global, the public and private, the traditional, modern and postmodern, real and virtual, the coexistence of these multiple crossing and undifferentiated levels constitute contemporary urban culture. The new means of communication make intermediate spaces disappear and tie cities that could not previously consider themselves connected. Technology has transformed space and distance into mere informative data that no longer divide the here from the there; and the nexus of the “real-here”/“virtual-there” is where Latinos are.

4. LATINO CULTURAL CHANGES AND LATINIZATION AS A RESPONSE

Careful political manipulation, exacerbated by the mass media and national security measures along with post 9/11 citizen panic, have succeeded in massifying the feeling of menace which reinforces even more the ideology of separation, isolation and racialization of the immigrants. But Latinization emerges as a unifying response to the attacks.

Latinization is the experience of frustrations and disillusionments stemming from the difficulties of being admitted on the train of progress. It is the recognition of the *difference* between the myth of upward mobility and the reality of living in the U.S. It is the distance between hegemonic one-dimensionality and the hybrid nature of Latinos.

Latinization is a process of inclusion and exclusion in which the urban immigrant looks for a roof that protects one and all. This roof is *Latinidad*, to the degree that it constitutes a defense in the face of discrimination and exploitation. Nationalist and regionalist identifications are not dropped and may even intensify, even while Latinization advances. Regional organizations formed to maintain transnational ties with home sites in the face of homogenizing forces can actually provide nodes for unification key to Latino unity in urban communities and this local/global, national/pan-Latino dialectic can lead to socio-political and cultural projects that result in vindications with respect to human rights and empowerment. The immigrants who begin to join with more established Latino groups find in Latinization a cultural response to *Anglo-Americanization*.

Many Latin American immigrants bring with them a historical baggage of exploitation and colonialism that gives them a basis for resistance; they also bring prejudices stemming from the social positions they occupied in their own countries. The mutations and hibridizations that emerge in newer Latin American immigrant communities are expressions of a crisis of representation impelled by new circumstances.

So we perceive the emergence and consolidation of new cultural forms (performance art, reguetón, graffiti, tattooing, body piercing, etc.) among various social groups (indigenous, afro-Latino, feminist, homo and transsexual)—all of them symptomatic of postmodern combinations that challenge traditional models and can also constitute bases of anti-hegemonic resistance in which Latinos take on protagonist roles.

Latino identities, representations and practices confront hegemonic norms to create a new system of contradictory values which express postmodern indetermination, but also a series of meanings that includes new cultural maps with endless borders and crossing points that can accelerate Latinization and lead to hybrid forms in unexplored directions. The search is not for some *axis mundi* identity essence or mythical Aztlán, but rather for distinct frames of the possibility of being Latino in an ever-expanding multicultural world.

A transformative vision of the U.S. multicultural context brings us to a connection with others without falling into a submission to past or present hegemonies. Multiculturalism is not equivalent to a relativistic fiction of cultural pluralism; it is a vision of identity affirmation that points to an ample and consolidated Latino identity forged on the bases of subject positions that divergent Latino groups have experienced. Cultural richness is not a matter of past myths but of new, at times chaotic forces give life to cultural resistance.

5. SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS ON THE CITIES AND LATINOS

We can't anticipate all the possible scenarios for this century, but in spite of the recent anti-immigrant policies, we know that the immigration waves will continue because their causes will continue, and so will the problems that confront Latinos like the great diversification of mixed cultural identities due to inter-ethnic marriages but also to overall urban Latinization. The multiplication of identities creates uncertainty and instability that can contribute to anomie and violence. There is a clear situation of racism and cultural hostility that includes prejudice and discrimination, conflicts with other minority groups and also with the majority. This is crucial because Latinos will constitute a significant portion of U.S. workers, and what happens to Latinos will be crucial to the national and global futures. But the Latino population does not automatically form a bloc with common objectives and interests; to build effective unity on social and political planes is no easy task.

In the years to come, Latinos will pass through a painful conflict of transformation defined by constant and contradictory efforts to maintain original cultural identifications and to incorporate and adapt themselves to the new destiny

society and rapid social changes on the global level. Many will succeed in maintaining a relative equilibrium between tradition and change. But, without some dramatic and radical transformations, very soon we'll face a situation where there is a massive and growing population of unskilled, poorly educated and semi-literate workers who will find themselves immersed in a technologically advanced and capital intensive society.

Now and into the future, we may have a population demanding housing, health, education and employment services in a nation whose own developmental logic of development leans toward not providing such services. We will see the extenuation of an already existing polarization between elder white groups—who have an ever greater monopoly on wealth, resources and power—and the rest of the population composed or growing minorities. Demographic tendencies suggest a much younger population, primarily not white and numerically dominated Latino children of immigrants, who will have to struggle at a disadvantage to gain and maintain their access to institutions and resources in which the groups holding power have no interest in helping to fund.

The uncertain international situation implies that we are facing a world defined by massive displacements and a lack of solutions on local levels. Great cultural and psychological difficulties—the pressures that affect the values and life patterns of families, gender roles, the constant surveillance and persecution by the legal infrastructure, criminalization and gentrification, new forms of drug trafficking and informal economy which the displaced and unemployed come to see as their only chance to survive; the reproduction of gangs as the answer to institutional violence; the lack of access to educational, health and credit services; and the sharpening of racialization, discrimination and stigmatization. Nevertheless, while the Latino situation involves the harm and hurt that communities continue to suffer, it also involves the possible reactions that result from the map of the future. Latinized cities are the spaces where reside the possible positive changes. We see the formation of new Latino sectors that have achieved a consciousness of the problems enumerated; and we can see too a renewed political commitment to change.

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NOTES

¹ This essay is a greatly modified, condensed version of an article we wrote in relation to the essays collected in "Identidades urbanas enflujo: Los latinos en las ciudades norteamericanas," the introduction to our co-edited volume, *Orbis/Urbis Latino: Los "Hispanos" en las ciudades de los estados unidos* (Houston. LACASA. 2008). In the editing process, most citations were eliminated. While a few are restored here, we refer the reader to the original article for precise references which are presented in relation to the bibliography which we have retained for its appearance at the end of the text—only here, as Works Consulted. We further note that this article would be very different if it also referred to the Latin American groups which have settled in Spain, Italy and other countries in recent years. Overall, the modifications presented (and the few specific references) highlight the perspectives of Marc Zimmerman, as set forth in the introduction to Báez Hernández, Bencomo y Zimmerman, coord. (2007) as well as in his cited articles of 2000 and 2003.