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Anthologizing the Pluribus : The Domesday Book of Latinos

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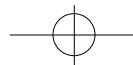
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STATE OF THE DEBATE

ANTHOLOGIZING THE *PLURIBUS*

The Domesday Book of Latinos

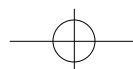
HAROLD AUGENBRAUM

The Latino/a Condition:
A Critical Reader.
Edited by
Richard Delgado and
Jean Stefancic.
New York: New York
University Press.
xix + 715 pages.
\$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

In 1526 King Charles V of Spain granted to one Pánfilo de Narváez the right to rule over thousands of square miles of the North American continent. Narváez had earned this reward by performing for the king a special service: he traveled from Cuba to Mexico to arrest the Marqués del Valle, who happened to be one of the most fearsome men in the world: Hernando Cortés, unscrupulous conqueror of the Aztecs and hubristic nose-thumber of the king's will. Narváez failed miserably: Cortés discovered the plot, had him clapped in irons, and sent him ignominiously back to Spain. Still, the king regarded this unfortunate odyssey as a worthwhile power play and evidence of Narváez's personal loyalty—he was also anxious to counterbalance Cortés's sphere of domination—so he rewarded Narváez with . . . well, yes: North America.

I begin with this historical anecdote because it demonstrates the extraordinary mixture of lunacy, contempt, and apathy with which much of the public policy regarding Latinos in what later became the United States of America evolved. The year after he had received the reward Narváez put together what can only be described as an ill-fated expedition to take possession of North America. According to the expedition's chronicler, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca—who later had his own reasons for deprecating Narváez so as to present himself as the only sane member of an insane essay—Narváez, as the king's stand-in, made every bone-headed mistake imaginable with regard to the native peoples he encountered, a good start for European-style public policy in North America. He treated them more or less as encumbrances, ciphers, or stick figures (the cigar-store Indian is but a visual metaphor); he shunted them aside or used them as the Europeans saw fit. In subsequent expeditions and colonization native women were wedded or raped; often there was little difference between the two. Civil government, seen from a remove of 450 years, is god-awful stuff.

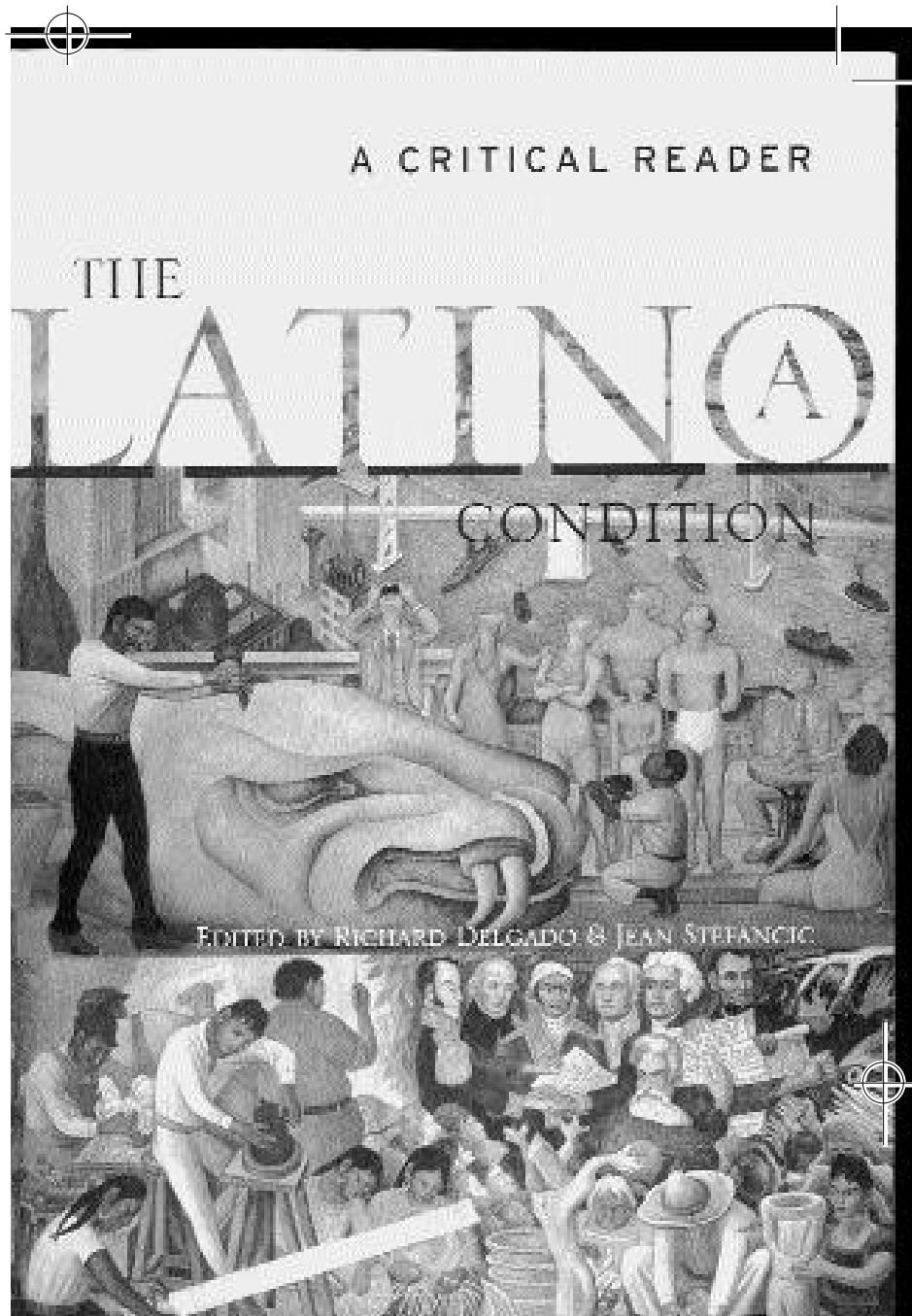
The interaction between the *conquistadores* of the Narváez expedition may be characterized as groundwork for the development of what we now call *lo latino*, for in the next two hundred years or so, the Spanish state and church collaborated in an unholy alliance to assimilate the indigenous population of the New World, making decisions based on a self-interested mix of European mysticism, legend, and avarice. During this time the Spanish made public policy for the colonies from far and near, creating in the process a new "race" of people, actu-



ally an amalgam of races, political groupings, and decision makers. The blood of Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and even Asia mixed in the Americas, to the point that today we have white, black, brown, and yellow Latinos: some who look like the indigenous peoples of these continents, others who resemble southern Spaniards, others who seem to be of African descent, and still others who look Chinese, speak Spanish, and cook their "national dishes" using subtropical produce from the Caribbean. Miscegenation, if not encouraged, was not discouraged as long as it was accompanied by marriage (a requirement introduced to reduce the numbers of soldiers engaging in prostitution, rape, and unsanctified cohabitation). One result of this haphazard realpolitik is that, while race as a dominating demographic factor prevails for all other groups, Latinos are categorized on government forms across the United States as "Hispanic: Can Be of Any Race." Ay . . .

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In Spanish, the word *latino* means "Latin"—as in *la lengua latina*—which refers to the language spoken first in the hills of central Italy, later throughout the Roman Empire, and in the end only in Catholic churches and English public schools. Recently, when I told an old Spanish friend of mine about the scholarly work I had been doing, she asked if I had become a classicist. Appropriated by American English, *latino* refers uneasily to the contemporary denomination of U.S. residents whose Western Hemisphere ancestors spoke Spanish and overlooks Portuguese- and French-language speakers of the Americas. In English, a land in which few words have gender, Spanish words with gender stand out, forcing writers, and even careful speakers, to incorporate idiotic slashes into their expression, making weird grammatical English sow's ears from the silk purse of Castilian dialect. If *Latino* has become a word whose accepted meaning has significance only within the borders of the United States, then Latinos of all national backgrounds have this identity only within those bor-



ders: to create such an imagined community, one must jettison some outside loyalties; to do so, one must also acknowledge the equality of all members of the group on the national stage and admit the common notion of "a Latino condition."

In 1993 I participated in a panel discussion in which a highly respected Nuyorican novelist responded to a question from the audience with the challenge "What do I have in common with a Chicano from Los Angeles?"

How to formulate, or even explain, a coherent and useful public policy for such a hybrid group, whose histories vary so widely, is a challenge that Delgado and Stefancic have undertaken with admirable intentions but mixed results. (*Condition*, by the way, strikes me as not a propitious

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choice for a volume on public policy, since it echoes the nineteenth-century terminology for chronic malaise.) In the seventeenth century, to get a handle on his holdings, the viceroy of New Spain based in Mexico City assigned one of his advisers to produce as accurate a census as possible of the peoples of New Spain's northern frontier, a kind of Domesday Book of Spanish North America. The administrators of the area, which later became the southern tier of the United States, could hardly understand what or who was there. East of the mouth of the Mississippi River, beyond the Delta's French settlements, migrations from the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico and Cuba had created an eastern bloc of Spanish-speaking peoples, with communications sent to Madrid and Mexico City through La Habana. West of the great river, the vast territory was populated by migrants from Mexico and dominated by missions and missionaries sent from religious centers like Zacatecas. A very brief period of consolidation followed the census, but it fell apart in a few years.

In the nineteenth century the Spanish empire began to lose its distinct administrative districts one by one to nationalist fervor. Mexico became independent in 1821, Cuba in 1898, and Puerto Rico in the same year (though the peripheral vision of Puerto Rico's independence is still a bit fuzzy). In 1848, jumping on the spoils-of-war bandwagon, the United States appropriated half of Mexico's territory and made U.S. "citizens" of several million bewildered natives who in living memory had had three nationalities without moving an inch. The two major regions that would provide Spanish-speaking citizens for the United States had thus developed: the Caribbean and the former Mexican territories.

Throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite some attempts at cohesive political power—the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, for example—the two axes generally have experienced bipolar isolation from each other. In 1993 I participated in a panel discussion in New York City in which a highly respected Nuyorican novelist, in all seriousness, responded to a

question from the audience with the challenge "What do I have in common with a Chicano from Los Angeles?" No one on the panel ventured a response, not even an obvious one. The unspoken implications of that retort, however, were much more interesting and disturbing: questions about current group loyalty among Latinos, about imagined community, and about what overall public policy could be developed for members of a group who did not see themselves as part of the group. The development of a distinct and effective public policy for Latinos, both from the outside and within, has been made difficult by the two-pronged nature of the community's development. Actually, there are many more prongs, but for the purposes of this discussion I limit myself to the eastern one of former Caribbean migrants and the western one of former Mexican and Central American peoples.

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Delgado and Stefancic's *Latino/a Condition* is an extraordinary compendium of excerpts from articles, mostly from law journals, about law, public policy, and Latinos. In particular, the series of articles that focus the Latino situation with regard to the black-white racial dichotomy—which dominates U.S. racial politics—is excellent. In this and other areas of inquiry the editors have done a superb job of layering their entries so that one article overlaps the next just enough to ensure an understanding of how each circumstance relates to another. But the book falls prey to a central organizational conundrum that confronts the editors of every anthology about Latinos. To recap legal and public policy developments among U.S. Latinos, one needs to present the history of each area, discuss how that particular legal situation evolved, and suggest what political wrangling in Washington, D.C., and in state capitals led to its current circumstances. Perhaps what is needed is to draw out the essential similarities with regard to affective decision making. One might also recognize the struggles of the past century and a half by reprinting the legal and public policy essays, articles, and

newspaper editorials of the time (from *El clamor público* or the writings of Eusebio Rafael and Urbano Chacón in New Mexico), which would include, in the West, responses to discriminatory land-use laws of the 1850s and, in the East, the postcolonial demographics of immigration laws, the Jones Act of 1917, and various presidential, congressional, and Immigration and Naturalization Service posturings over the migrations of Cubans after the Revolution and of Dominicans after several U.S. military interventions on that half-island. Though *The Latino/a Condition* discusses in detail Chicano activism and its effect on public policy, as

intended to discuss their circumstances. One is reminded of the many Latino writers across the country who have said that they began to write because they could not “see themselves” in the books they had read, and of Piri Thomas shouting from the rooftop of an apartment building in New York City, “Hey, world, it’s me, Piri!”

Even in the West the book might be perceived as biased, since it is mainly about the Mexican American struggle, including a dozen articles based on California’s Proposition 187. This implies that the Latino struggle for legal and public equity is dominated by Mexican Americans.

In 1848 the United States appropriated half of Mexico’s territory and made U.S. “citizens” of several million bewildered natives who in living memory had had three nationalities without moving an inch.

one reads further into the book, the eastern populations are left behind: there is no Young Lords or Puerto Rican Liberation Front, no Fidel Castro or Marielitos, no Trujillo, no discussion of the sociological makeup of eastern migrations to the United States or its effect on image, law, and policy (the work of Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and Ramona Hernández, for example).

A book cannot be expected to include everything, but if one purports to discuss policy about Latinos, then, to avoid alienating important Latino groups, it must be inclusive, especially since Latinos as minority groups have experienced decades of discrimination in education, labor, and law. If it is not inclusive, it treads on dangerous ground. To use such a book in the classroom in New York City, for example, one would have to be cautious. For a long time Dominican Americans, with a current U.S. population of just under 1 million, have been omitted from most books about Latinos, including one of my own (Ilan Stavans’s *Hispanic Condition* and Earl Shorris’s *Latinos* are exceptions). Yet Dominican Americans are virtually invisible as a distinct group in Delgado and Stefancic’s anthology. To students of this heritage, the book would serve only to say that their own immigrant experience counted for little; once again they have been erased from the population, even in a book

Even though 60 percent of Latinos *are* Mexican American, discussions of civil rights should not yield to a tyranny of numbers.

Yet, despite its shortcomings, *The Latino/a Condition* is a welcome publication, a well-researched gathering of thought-provoking essays, owing to the extensive reading, cyber-searching, and Lexis expertise of its two editors. (Delgado is Jean Lindsley Professor of Law at the University of Colorado, where Stefancic is a research associate.) It will elicit animated arguments in the classroom, where it is obviously meant to open the eyes of law students and undergraduates in political science courses, few of whom will have come into contact with the host of ideas the book offers. Its bibliography and index are first-rate; the former provides enough avenues to provocative reading material to compensate for any bias.

But caveat lector (and magister): You will need to rebalance its imbalance with Lexis searches of your own. ♪°