



DISCUSSANT RESPONSE

by

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to Fernando I. Soriano's

U.S. HISPANICS AND THEIR FAMILIES: A SOCIOLOGIC PORTRAIT

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Mr. Soriano's paper is a well documented sociological piece of research on the divergent perceptions of the so called "Hispanic" experience within the continental boundaries of the United States.

His emphasis is placed successively, on the Hispanic family units and the Hispanic culture, in addition to some of the social, health and economic challenges facing the Hispanic families and their probable future station in the American society.

Mr. Soriano stresses heavily the diversity in literacy, income and social disorganization among the main sub-groups of the Spanish speaking population in the United States, (that is, the Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban, which alone constitute eighty per cent of the Hispanic population in that country). However, he also emphasizes in the cultural common values of these sub-groups and of the others of Spanish origin not subjected to the same scrutiny (about 20% of the total).

According to Mr. Soriano, most sociological and anthropological research done in the United States has evidenced the paramount importance of family life for those who identify themselves as Hispanic (or Latino, as they have also been labeled).

The social weight of family ties and family relevance for the individual Hispanic has been viewed variously as a hindrance, an asset or a neutral factor for the upward mobility of Hispanics. These reflect what Mr. Soriano calls respectively the pejorative, sympathetic, and empirical views of Hispanic families and culture.

Mr. Soriano makes more than a passing reference to the ethnic discriminatory practices of the past by the Anglo-Saxon majority and also to the historical fact that all Hispanics experienced colonization and subjugation by Spain. This seems to imply that the present unfavorable position of the bulk of the Hispanic population vis-à-vis the white non-Hispanic ethnic groups in the United States is in part traceable to that unfortunate past.

Among the dominant cultural traits of the Hispanic people, Mr. Soriano has chosen "familism" and what he calls, in my view somewhat misleadingly "colectivism" (personal appeal or "simpatía", an enhanced conscience of self-worth or "personalismo", and the respectful approach to anyone in authority, particularly the father of the family).

The demographic profile of Hispanics that Mr. Soriano offers us, draws mainly from data of several national censuses of the United States, which confirm the growing numerical importance of that population group. As a whole, Hispanics have the highest

fertility rate of all ethnic groupings in America, the youngest median age, the lowest divorce rate, the largest numbers of functional illiterates, proportionally the largest amount of women working in low paying jobs, the strongest exposure to drug-usage and related diseases -such as AIDS- and the greatest geographical concentrations (California and Texas for Mexican-Americans, New York for Puerto Ricans, and Florida for Cubans).

According to the prognosis of the Census Bureau, which Mr. Soriano makes his own, the Hispanic population, which today constitutes slightly over eight per cent of the total population of the United States, will become the largest minority in twenty years, and one in every five Americans will be an Hispanic a century from now, if present trends continue.

These forecasts, naturally, are based on the statistics of the last two decades and are, consequently, subject to manifold unforeseen future variables.

I would attempt now to state some qualifications to Mr. Soriano's presentation, with which I find in general little to disagree with.

Mr. Soriano relies too heavily on the Chicano experience, which differs far more from the Cuban one than the one that an uncritical reader might infer from reading his paper. The eastern seaboard of the United States saw the Spanish presence, based in Cuba, earlier than the Southwest. Nor have there been the wars and historical animosities between Cubans and Americans in general that have permeated Mexican-American relations since El Alamo. Most Cubans, furthermore, have come to the United States for political reasons, not economic ones, many arrived even before Cuba's Independence: for instance, the first bishop of the city of Saint Augustine, in the state of Florida, -the oldest continuous European settlement within the boundaries of today United States- was a Cuban priest, named Félix Varela, exiled in the early nineteenth century for his Liberal views. Cubans are fond of remembering that some of the most rousing speeches of their national hero, José Martí, were delivered in Tampa to the substantial colony of Cuban tobacco workers who had fled their native country because of their opposition to the Spanish rule. In Cuba there was even a movement to annex Cuba the United States in mid nineteenth century, which is still alive in the growing Cuban community of southern Florida.

Two of every ten Hispanics in the United States hail today from national communities other than Mexico, Puerto Rico or Cuba. Unfortunately, no analysis is available about this important segment of the Hispanic population which, if given, might further enliven the rich variety of the Hispanic experience.

Nor is any mention made by Mr. Soriano of the many

thousands of Latin American college students who come on temporary visas to the United States but stay on after graduation having signed contracts with American corporations.

It isn't clear, either, from this paper, the contribution made to Mr. Soriano's demographic profile by the illegal immigrants, particularly those who in growing numbers come from South America, specially Argentina and Perú.

Although Mr. Soriano mentions President Bush's Initiative of the Americas, he doesn't delve in to the economic analysis of the impact that the Caribbean Basin Initiative is already having on the rates of migration to and from the United States.

Even more, I believe I detect a certain anti-capitalist bias in Mr. Soriano's paper, when he states on page four that "soon after gaining control of the island of Puerto Rico in 1898, the U. S. established a succesful capitalistic system that benefitted mostly American investors". I disagree in this point: investment is a two way street that benefits both members of the equation. The smallness of its territory, the welfare mentality, the easiness of transportation and legal entry, and the opportunities of a larger market account far more for the Puerto Rican presence in the Northeast than the "capitalistic investments" which might, on the contrary, have kept many possible migrants back in their native soil.

In his forecast of the medium and long term prospects for the Hispanics in the United States he does not include what might happen if a sudden change of regime in Cuba in the near future reverses the present flux from Cuba to southern Florida.

The role of religion is also absent from his cultural analysis, and Mr. Soriano seems to be unaware of the growth by leaps and bounds of the new free market individualism that is sweeping most of Latin America and will, undoubtedly, have an impact even in the short term on the Hispanic community of the United States, both in the number of new arrivals and in the scale of values of that community.

The most important limitation of Mr. Soriano's paper, due probably to the lack of time, is the absence of the presentation of comparative trends in schooling, health care, and upward social mobility of the Hispanic community, insofar as it relates to the processes of acculturation and assimilation. From this angle, it is possible to imagine a quantum jump in all of these categories among Hispanics of the younger generations now growing up in American soil. The question of bilingualism versus English monolingualism could have been adressed here.

I thank Mr. Soriano for his otherwise excelent paper, and I must confess that I was unfamiliar with most of the literature

on which he bases his findings, although not with the different aspects of the Hispanic community in the United States he deals with.

Coming from Guatemala, Central America, of Cuban origin, and been born in New York City, I cherish his appreciation of the importance of a stable family life in the to a successful adjustment to the dominant Anglo-Saxon mentality by the Hispanic immigrant. My personal experience in innumerable cases confirms this.

In a more philosophical vein, I personally consider this Hemisphere of ours a Hemisphere of individual freedom, which, if left unhampered by excessive government intervention on both sides of the cultural divide, -North and South, English-speaking and Spanish-speaking-, will blend us all into a more homogeneous community than the one being attempted now in Western Europe.

This might be wishful thinking; but it might also turn into fact if we let freedom under the rule of law to run its course.

Papers like this may make this last option a reality for all of us to enjoy in the coming centuries.

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