## Chapter 4 - Defining Race and Ethnicity between Latin America and the United States

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### Defining Hispanic/Latino/Latinx: the US Census

The presence of people of Latin American origin in the United States, whether they have family roots in the region or are recent immigrants, is undeniably significant. According to US census data, in 2020 Hispanic or Latino people numbered over 60 million, accounting for an estimated 18.7% of the population, or nearly one in five US residents ([Jones et al](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html)). It has become commonplace in the US to view individuals of Latin American origin as belonging to a unified population—usually called Hispanic or Latino—in part because the census counts them this way. (Note that the census does not use the gender-neutral term Latinx that has gained traction in recent years, but is still widely debated. The term latine, whose ending is a common one in Spanish, is a competing gender-neutral expression for this idea).

However, the apparently self-explanatory grouping “Hispanic or Latino” is not as straightforward as it might seem at first glance. For example, should individuals with family roots in Brazil be considered Latino because that country is part of Latin America, even though their cultural origins are not Hispanic because Brazilians speak Portuguese rather than Spanish? Should Hispanic/Latino be considered a **race**; that is, a social grouping based on individuals’ physical characteristics? Should it be considered an **ethnicity**, a category that implies a shared cultural background? The 2020 census form asks respondents to indicate whether they are of “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” and then choose a racial identity from among the following options: White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; one of nine Asian and Pacific Islander nationalities, including Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese; or “some other race” ([United States Census Bureau](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires.2020_Census.html) 2020). The form specifies that “For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.”

<Fig. 4.1 here>. *A sample copy of the 2020 US Census form.*

While this might seem to clarify matters, responses to the census questions on Hispanic origin and race suggests a mismatch between official definitions and their own understandings of their identity. In the 2010 census, over a third of individuals who stated that they were Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish checked “some other race” (Navarro A11). This proportion increased significantly in 2020, with over 42 percent of respondents of Hispanic origin selecting “some other race” ([Jones et al](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html)). These respondents might have considered Hispanic or Latino to be a distinct racial identity—one survey suggests that half of US residents with Latin American roots do (Fraga et al. 82)—or simply felt that none of the provided categories were a good fit. Reflecting changes to the design of census questions, as well as understandings of Hispanic/Latino/Latinx identity as rooted in racial mixture (discussed in more detail below), in 2020, more than five times as self-identified Hispanics/Latinos chose “two or more races” as their racial identity than they did in 2010 ([Jones et al](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html)).

The race options on the census overlap closely but not exactly with the racial categories widely used in the United States. For example, “Asian” is commonly understood as a race, but is not an option on the census. There is an even greater gap between the census categories and how many individuals of Latin American origin understand their racial identity. This is due in part to significant differences in how race is defined and understood in the United States versus in Latin America, which are explored in more detail in the second half of this chapter. This mismatch does not mean that the US census is simply incorrect. Rather, it highlights how racial and ethnic categories are socially constructed (Rodríguez). That is, these categories are a product of a society’s widely held ideas about human difference, which can shift over time and vary across social contexts.

The Hispanic/Latino census category is a useful example of the social construction of race and ethnicity, partly because it is so new in historical terms. Despite the fact that it is firmly established in our everyday thinking about race and ethnicity, the category was added only in 1980. Up to that point, individuals who would today be considered Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx were generally counted as white, though they were certainly not always treated as such. The sole exception was the 1930 census, when “Mexican” was added as a racial category. It was removed in 1940 following public outcry from Mexican Americans who objected to being classified with African Americans as “colored,” suggesting anti-Black sentiment and fears of losing social privilege (Gratton and Klancher Merchant 537, 548). Again, it would be misleading to conclude that the pre-1980 census categories were simply inaccurate or ignoring an obvious reality. Rather, the category of Hispanic/Latino emerged over time in response to changing circumstances.

As Cristina Mora notes, before the 1970s the largest segments of what we now call the Latinx population—namely Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans—generally viewed themselves as distinct groups. For the most part, they lived in different areas of the country and their political interests did not necessarily align (Mora 2). Several factors converged in the creation of the Hispanic census category—the term Latino was added to the relevant question only in 2000 (United States Census Bureau)—and the popularization of the idea of Hispanic/Latino as a **pan-ethnic** category that grouped people of different national origins under a single umbrella. As the Mexican American and Puerto Rican social movements of the 1960s gained momentum, organizers realized that there was “strength in numbers.” Building a sense of solidarity between different groups of Latin American origin and presenting themselves as a demographic of significant size could boost their political power, even if their priorities differed (Mora 15). Government officials began using the term Hispanic, which was all but non-existent in English before the 1970s. “Hispanic” was modeled on the term *hispano*, which had a narrower meaning, referring to individuals with longstanding family roots in what is now the US Southwest (Mora 108). These officials advocated for the creation of a census category as a means of tracking a growing population of Latin American origin and more effectively providing them with public services, helping to head off radical demands for social change (Mora 14-15).

Alongside these political considerations, advertising, marketing, and media played a key role in popularizing the notion of Hispanic/Latino identity. The rise of Spanish-language TV networks that broadcast from coast to coast, namely Univisión (originally called Spanish International Network) and Telemundo, in the 1970s and 1980s allowed advertisers to target a nationwide market of people of Latin American origin for the first time (Dávila 45-46, Mora 15-16). Spanish-language networks actively promoted the Hispanic census category because cementing the idea of a unified Hispanic/Latino identity benefited them. It allowed them to charge premium prices to advertisers by promising them access to a sizeable, unified group of potential customers instead of smaller, more localized markets made up of Mexican Americans in the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in the Northeast, Cuban Americans in Florida. This development was tied to the rapid growth of advertising and marketing agencies targeting the Hispanic/Latino population, which further promoted the notion that individuals from anywhere in Latin America shared an ethnic identity (Dávila 48-49).

Yet despite the many forces that converged to popularize the notion of a shared Hispanic/Latino identity, not all individuals who indicate they are of “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” on the census identify this way first and foremost. One study found that ninety percent of Latinos born abroad and over and eighty percent of those born in the United States identified somewhat or very strongly with a specific nationality, such as Mexican, Cuban, or Salvadoran. For comparison, approximately sixty-five percent of both groups identified somewhat or very strongly as Hispanic or Latino (Fraga et al. 79-80). This finding also suggests that the Hispanic/Latino identity category is largely relevant in the United States. Although the idea that former Spanish colonies share some kind of cultural kinship dates back to the early 1800s, when they became independent nations, individuals living in Latin America typically identify with their nationality, not as Latino.

The history of the census suggests both the limitations and the advantages of the Hispanic/Latino census category. It can help create a sense of solidarity between different national-origin groups and allow for collective political action, while also benefiting government and commercial interests. Yet the census category of Hispanic/Latino does not fully account for differences in race or color that decisively shape individuals’ everyday experiences and life opportunities. These differences must be acknowledged if we are to grasp not only how the Latinx community as a whole is affected by race-based forms of oppression in the United States, but also to understand race-based forms of oppression *within* this community, including anti-Blackness and anti-indigenous attitudes. Understanding how notions of race differ in the United States and Latin American nations reminds us of the constructedness of racial categories while shedding light on the different forms of racism that affect the community.

### Race and Color in Latin America and the United States

Racial categories have an immense social weight. However, they are not meaningful from the perspective of human biology, according to current scientific consensus. Specific genes do account for differences in physical appearance such as skin and eye color, hair texture, and the shape of one’s nose or eyelids. But these physical differences are not linked with the overall degree of genetic variation between populations and cannot be mapped onto other genetic traits with any consistency (Boyd 8). In fact, since humans developed on the African continent, and a subset of this population then migrated to other parts of the world, all non-Africans are more closely related to each other, however distantly, than Africans are. That is, the genetic diversity *within* African populations, whose members are generally considered to be the same race, is much greater than the genetic difference *between* all non-African populations (Tishkoff and Kidd 522). Keeping this in mind, social scientists use terms such as “racial formation” (Omi and Winant) to stress that racial categories are constructed and are intimately tied to power relations within a society.

Dominant ideas about race in Latin American nations typically stress a history of racial mixture between European colonizers, the indigenous population, and enslaved people from Africa and suggest that this mixture gave rise to a new racial identity shared by the country’s population. Yet often, as in the case of Mexico and the Dominican Republic, the contributions of African-descended people are downplayed (Telles and Paschel 865). Similarly, the significant presence of people of Asian origin in nations like Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru usually goes unacknowledged in conversations about national identity (Chang 10). The widely held idea that all of a nation’s citizens belong to the same race, at least in theory, is implied in the Mexican term *la raza*, which refers not only to a shared racial heritage, but also a shared culture and nationality.

This does not mean there are not significant differences of race or color in the population. Typically, in Latin America, an individual’s race or color is determined by their appearance rather than the race or color of their parents. When describing themselves, individuals choose from several different terms that describe appearance and/or ancestry, such as *mulato* (meaning of white and Black ancestry), *pardo* (meaning brown or dark), *trigueño* (meaning wheat-colored), or *blanco* (meaning white). Individuals’ self-identifications may change over time or in different contexts. By contrast, definitions of racial identity in the United States historically have been more rigid, and racial mixture has been discouraged or widely outlawed. The so-called “one drop rule,” which meant that an individual with any known or visible African ancestry would be considered Black, was enshrined in law in several states (Murray 22, 39, 90, 164, 237, 358). Anti-miscegenation laws made marriage between whites and Blacks illegal in all but seven US states by the 1940s, and it remained illegal in sixteen states until the Supreme Court declared such laws unconstitutional in 1967 (Kitch).

This does not mean that Latin American nations are necessarily more racially equal than the United States, even if racism takes forms that seem subtle if compared with Jim Crow-era segregation. **Colorism**, or the practice of giving preferential treatment for individuals with lighter skin or more European features, is widespread across the Americas. In many Latin American countries, the term *indio* (indigenous) is used in an insulting manner as a synonym for “ill-mannered” or “lacking in education.” Because indigenous and African ancestry are often stigmatized in daily life, even if they are celebrated in the abstract, many individuals describe themselves with terms that negate or downplay this ancestry. This seems to be borne out by the results of the 2010 census in the United States. In the absence of a Hispanic/Latino racial category, 53% of those who checked the Hispanic/Latino box identified as white, while only 2.5% identified as Black and 1.4% as American Indian (Almaguer 215). While the 2020 census brought a drop of more than half in the number of Hispanics/Latinos identifying as white and the number identifying as American Indian more than doubled, significantly, the percentage identifying as Black actually dropped by over six percent ([Jones et al](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html)). Of course, these differences reflect both changes in the population since 2010 and individuals who changed their racial identification.

Regardless of their own racial self-identification, an individual’s physical appearance and family background have a decisive impact on their experiences and life outcomes. In Mexico, on average the lightest-skinned individuals have more than twice as many years of education as the darkest-skinned, while the darkest-skinned individuals have more than fifty percent less wealth than the lightest-skinned, even when other variables are controlled for ([Zizumbo-Colunga and Flores Martínez](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/ITB031en.pdf) 3-4). While Mexico is the third-most racially unequal country in Latin America and the Caribbean, skin color is correlated with wealth in every nation in the region ([Zizumbo-Colunga and Flores Martínez](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/ITB031en.pdf) 3). For comparison, in the United States, whites are more than twice as likely than Hispanics/Latinos to have a college degree, and 1.5 times more likely than Black individuals, while the average income of white households is nearly twice that of Black households and its household wealth (including homes) thirteen times greater ([Pew Research Center](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2016/06/27/1-demographic-trends-and-economic-well-being/)).

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that the racial ideology of the United States is no longer defined by a Black/white binary. Rather, following the civil rights movement of the 1960s, it is moving closer to a racial power structure comparable to that of Latin American nations, marked by forms of racial discrimination that are more subtle and less open (3-4). Bonilla-Silva suggests that in this emerging racial order, some non-white individuals, including light-skinned Latinos and some Asian Americans, come to be considered “honorary whites” (4). That is, they share in some of the social and economic benefits that whites enjoy to a greater degree than other racial groups in the United States, and do not necessarily have a sense of solidarity with other individuals who experience a greater degree of race-based discrimination (4, 11).

If the racial power structure of the United States has begun to converge with that of Latin America, both have their roots in shared histories of colonialism whose paths diverged in terms of racial ideology. The colonization of what we now call North and South America by white Europeans in the 1500s proved to be a pivotal moment for the development of notions of race that continue to shape our world today. Europeans were well aware of African, Middle Eastern, and Asian populations who looked physically different from them before their colonization of the Western Hemisphere. However, these groups were not divided into specific races or generally assumed to be inferior to Europeans. Though slavery existed in many societies, being enslaved was not tied to race—many enslaved people were prisoners of war or convicted of crimes—nor was it necessarily permanent (Golash-Boza 7-9). The belief that whites were superior to Africans and indigenous people developed over time, in part to justify the genocide of indigenous people, who died on a mass scale in military conflicts and from Old World diseases to which they had no immunities, and the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, which facilitated the extraction of profit from colonized territories through agriculture and mining precious metals.

In both British and Spanish colonies, slavery was not initially based on race, but it became a race-based system over time (Smedley and Smedley 97, Cottrol 30). In the United States, Black and white servants—individuals who worked without wages for a set period or indefinitely, typically to pay off a debt or because they were convicts or prisoners of war—initially worked side by side. Yet a series of laws referred to as **slave codes** increasingly assigned Black servants a lower social status than their white counterparts and stripped them of their rights (Smedley and Smedly 101). These incremental changes led to a system of race-based slavery. In Virginia, for example, by 1705, “Negro, mulatto, and Indian” servants were made slaves permanently, and intermarriage between whites and non-whites had become illegal (Hening 447-448, 453-454). These changes were motivated in part by the desire to suppress servants’ rebellions against their masters by using the logic of “divide and conquer” (Smedley and Smedley 109-110).

Although their histories of colonization are parallel in many ways, the population profile of the British colonies was considerably different from territories occupied by the Spanish and Portuguese, which played a role in the racial ideologies that would later take shape there. Although it is very difficult to estimate the number of indigenous people that inhabited the Western Hemisphere before European colonization, one estimate suggests that 3.8 million people lived in North America, 22.8 million in Mexico and Central America, 3 million in the Caribbean, 15.7 million in the Andean region, and 8.6 million in the rest of South America (Denevan 370). Between Columbus’s arrival on the island of Hispaniola in 1492 and 1650, the total indigenous population is believed to have dropped by nearly 90% (Denevan 371). Despite this unimaginable devastation, their numbers remained significant in many regions, particularly in the territories occupied by the Mayan, Aztec, and Inca empires. In addition, nearly 95 percent of enslaved people forcibly brought to the Americas arrived in Latin America: close to 7.3 million, including 5.5 million to Brazil alone ([Slave Voyages Consortium](https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates)). Under half a million enslaved people were brought to what is now the United States ([Slave Voyages Consortium](https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates)). In addition to generating huge amounts of wealth for white elites, Africans and their descendants had a far-reaching cultural and demographic influence in colonized territories.

If slave codes in the British colonies were designed to create an impenetrable social divide between whites and non-whites, the barriers separating racial groups in colonial Latin American generally proved much more porous. In addition to interracial sex outside marriage—whether consensual or forced, as was often the case—intermarriage between European, indigenous, and African-descended people became increasingly common. By 1750 mixed-race individuals made up about twenty percent of the Mexican population (Seed 24-25). In this period in Mexico, **cuadros de castas** (caste paintings) emerged as a form of visual art that sought to assign clearly defined racial identities to mixed-race individuals, even though class identities were in flux and it became more difficult to judge someone’s social status solely by their background (Katzew). The cuadros de castas were comprised of images of families that illustrated a complex racial terminology, showing the mixed white and indigenous couple who gave birth to a *mestizo* child. Despite the cuadro de castas’ efforts to assign each individual a clear place in a social hierarchy, the laws of the Spanish empire sometimes treated race as surprisingly fluid. Provided they had sufficient wealth and status, some mixed-race individuals of African ancestry could actually purchase a royal favor known as a “gracias al sacar” that would allow them to be legally reclassified as white (Twinam).

<Fig. 4.2 here> *Anonymous* cuadro de castas*, 1700s, from the collection of the Museo del Virreinato in Tepotzlán, Mexico. New York Public Library Digital Collections.*

A clear hierarchy in which whites occupied the highest position and Blacks the lowest, with mixed race and indigenous individuals in the middle, had taken shape across the Americas by the 1700s. Yet explicit references to race before this historical moment were uncommon. Modern ideas about race took shape as part of a growing interest in science, a pivotal aspect of the broad cultural movement referred to as the Enlightenment. Yet these new ideas about race, often referred to as **scientific racism**, were not based in methods we would consider rigorously scientific today. Influenced by the racial prejudices of European researchers, they used approaches we now recognize as pseudoscience, such as the belief that measuring the size or shape of a person’s head provided useful information about their intelligence and character (Gould). During the 1800s, particularly with the popularization of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, scientists became deeply interested in attempting to classify variations in the human species and determine which populations were more “evolved” than others. Reflecting these scientists’ prejudices, whites inevitably were classified as the most advanced. Disregarding the fact that Darwin’s theory applied to changes in species that took shape over millennia, Herbert Spencer’s concept of social Darwinism applied the notion of “survival of the fittest” to human societies, suggesting without strong evidence that some racial groups were better equipped than others to thrive under the conditions of modernity.

The flawed principles of scientific racism had a significant impact on public policy in both the United States and Latin America, encouraging the anti-miscegenation laws discussed above and shaping immigration policy. In the United States, they influenced the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a ban on Chinese immigration that was expanded to all of Asia and parts of the Middle East in 1917, as well as provisions in a 1924 law that limited immigration from Southern Europe in favor of Northern European countries. In Latin America, scientific racism led many government officials and elites to believe that a whiter population would bring benefits like greater economic productivity. As a result, they encouraged large-scale migration from Europe (Cottrol 91). Argentina, for example, more than doubled its population through immigration between 1880 and 1930 (Cottrol 97). Even today, Argentina styles itself as a white, European nation, often negating indigenous and African ancestry within its population. Elsewhere in Latin America, given the significant presence of people of indigenous and African descent, policymakers and academics found themselves obliged to revise core ideas of scientific racism as formulated elsewhere. Many US and European supporters of **eugenics** (the effort to “improve” the human race by careful control of reproduction) argued that mixing between races led to “**degeneration**”; that is, physical and mental weakness in an individual that contributed to a broader social decline or regression to a more “primitive” state. This idea was unpopular in Latin American societies that were already marked by a high degree of racial mixture. Instead, many scientists and policymakers in the region contended that white ancestry would eventually “win out” over indigenous and African heritage in their populations because white ancestry was believed to be superior (Telles and Paschel 867-868, Cottrol 96-97). This **ideology of** **whitening**—which persists today in the notion that having children with a lighter-skinned person is “improving the race” (*mejorar la raza*)—was based on an unfounded belief in white superiority and a basic misunderstanding of how genetics work.

In the early twentieth century, some Latin American thinkers began to argue that racial mixture was not a negative, nor simply a necessary step towards the ultimate goal of whitening the nation. Rather, it should be viewed as a positive force that gave nations resilience and cultural richness. Perhaps the most famous example of the ideology of ***mestizaje*** (racial mixture) is José Vasconcelos’s concept of **la raza cósmica**, or the cosmic race. This concept was developed in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, a conflict that overthrew dictator Porfirio Díaz but then devolved into a devastating civil war. The revolution threw light onto deep divides in Mexican society, including between Spanish-speaking populations and indigenous communities. Vasconcelos predicted that in Latin America, these divides would disappear through a process of racial and cultural fusion, foreshadowing a future “cosmic race” that would unite all existing races and be superior to them all. These ideas were a clear contrast with the obsession with racial “purity” evident in the United States and the segregation of African American and indigenous communities. Yet the notion of la raza cósmica is not as progressive as it might appear at first glance. Problematically, Vasconcelos championed the disappearance of indigenous peoples as distinctive groups through their assimilation into the dominant society and suggested that racial mixing would eliminate undesirable African heritage altogether. He also described Asians in derogatory terms while idealizing European ancestry and culture (Manrique). By championing racial mixture, ideologies of race that emerged in Latin America in the early twentieth century have often facilitated efforts to deny the historical and present-day impacts of racial discrimination. These ideologies have been challenged by activists in recent years, who demand the recognition of racial inequality, the persistence of indigenous peoples, contributions of Afro-descendants to nations’ cultural heritage. In a symbolic but significant change, in 2020 Mexico added a new census category which counted people of African descent for the first time.

The racial power structures of the United States and Latin America intersect to shape the daily lives of members of the Latinx community living in the US. Many non-Latinx people are unaware of the racial complexity of this community. They may read Afro-Latinx individuals as African American while treating light-skinned Latinx individuals as white—or not, depending on their language abilities and accents. As a result, individuals who are grouped together in the Hispanic/Latino category may experience a wide range of privilege or discrimination. Furthermore, different national-origin groups within the Latinx community may stereotype each other, drawing on beliefs about race forged both in the United States and in Latin America. Tomás Almaguer notes that many Puerto Ricans associated Mexican Americans with stereotypes of the “Indian”—uneducated, unsophisticated, and passive—while many Mexican Americans associated Puerto Ricans with stereotypes associated with Blackness—lazy, violent, and criminal (216-217). Ideologies championing racial mixture may contribute to a sense of pride, unity, and solidarity for Latinx individuals, but by downplaying difference, they can also make it more difficult to confront colorism and anti-Black and anti-indigenous sentiment within Latinx communities. Understanding the constructed nature of the Hispanic/Latino/Latinx category and the complexities it conceals can prepare us to better confront these inequalities.

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