Review of “Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective”

Samuel O. Imbo
Hamline University

Time, and logic, are on Jorge Gracia’s side. Census 2000 revealed that Hispanics have surpassed African Americans in numbers in the US. As a consequence, there is now a more pressing need to frame social issues facing the country in ways that transcend a black/white duality. In this book Jorge Gracia makes a formidable case for a non-essentialist Hispanic identity. Lurking behind his arguments is a case for rethinking two other kinds of identities - what it means to be an American, and what it means to be a philosopher. Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective moves smoothly between these often muddled layers of identity and by the end offers insights that can only be enriching to an American philosophical community typically perceived by non-whites as indifferent, even hostile.

Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective is divided into seven chapters and a conclusion. Gracia points out in the preface that the chapters can usefully be read independently. He is right, but I found the force of the whole work read sequentially to be greater than that of any essay taken singly. The first three chapters are the core of the book. In Chapter One (What Should We Call Ourselves?) Gracia goes through the objections that can be raised against a sense of identity built around the terms “Hispanic” or “Latino/as.” Four broad arguments – empirical, political/sociological, logical, and pragmatic – receive particular attention. The empirical argument against using either of the terms, or indeed any of the other terms like Ibero Americans, Latin Americans, raza, or Chicano, is that there is nothing the folks lumped together by these terms share in common. The political/sociological argument is that there is not a cohesive group of people spanning countries as diverse as those of Latin America and their erstwhile colonial powers such as Spain and Portugal. To be blinded to the legacy of domination in the relationships of these peoples by a patina of seemingly shared culture is to be unfair to both Latin America and Europe since there is no evidence that “Hispanics/Latinos” think of themselves as one people. The logical argument that there is no Hispanic or Latino natural kind is the most straightforward. Nothing is gained by classifying any human society on the basis of such superficial and accidental characteristics as cultural or ethnic differences, the argument goes. The pragmatic argument against usage of the terms Hispanic or Latino is that over time the terms have become saddled with negative connotations and thus have become excellent tools for those bent on oppression, marginalization, and manipulation. To use them is to acquiesce to one’s own dehumanization.

Chapter two (What’s in a Name?) promptly strikes down each of the arguments Gracia so carefully reconstructs in the previous chapter. It is clear immediately that there is a Hispanic identity Gracia considers worth defending. “In short, a name tells us something, and because of it a name can be a dangerous thing. A name is a message to others; it is what we want the world to think. A name is a tag
we put on things; it can be a badge of honor or a mark of shame.” (p. 38) Gracia’s strategy here is to keep the name “Hispanic” but to use it anew in ways that undercut the aforementioned objections. He succeeds. A name need not necessarily pick out essences. Seen thus, Hispanic identity is best anchored in the “…web of historical connections which continues to this day and which separates these people from others.” (p. 49) The encounter of Iberia with America that begun in 1492 forces, 512 years later, a Hispanic identity that transcends any regional or national boundaries. Importantly, it is an identity that does not imply the existence of a natural kind. Gracia uses three tools to cement the argument – the notion of *mestizaje* (“…a principle of union without implying the kind of homogenization which obliterates the contributions made by different ethnic and racial elements.” [p. 109]), the metaphor of a game, and that of a family. Just as there is no common property all games share, there is no requirement that members of a family share genetic characteristics. There are two important consequences of this inclusive view of identity. In the first instance, ignorance of Hispanic history does not preclude membership in the community. What is crucial is the “…history and the particular events of that history… (p. 49) Secondly, this non-essentialist view brings to the fore aspects of Hispanic reality that would otherwise be obscured. Hispanic experience has been characterized by *mestizaje* rather than a purity any narrower view would entail.

The central portion of *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* offers supporting arguments for this fluid notion of identity. Even though Gracia does not explicitly make these connections, his suspicion of homogeneity echoes the late Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Feminists and African philosophers too challenge the oppression of essentialist constructions in the spirit Gracia does. Interestingly, Gracia argues that though they can be allies, Hispanics are on stronger ground in this struggle. “History ties Hispanics together in a way that is missing in the cases of Asians, Asian Americans, Africans, Amerindians, and Native Americans.” (p. 55) Gracia’s controversial foundation of identity on historical and familial elements opens up avenues for dialogue with conservatives and liberals alike – the former on the importance of essences for identity and the latter on the centrality of colonial struggle for identity formation.

Chapter six (The Search for Identity) does an excellent job of outlining some of the main Hispanic philosophers and the issues that have been most pressing for them. Though brief, it is crucial for the uninitiated.

Gracia’s parting shot – Chapter Seven (Foreigners in Our Own Land) – is one that should not miss its target. That target is the American philosophical community. Despite their numbers nationally, there is a dearth of Hispanic philosophers. Further, the few Hispanic philosophers find they have to research and teach primarily in areas unrelated to Hispanic reality if they are to gain the respect of their colleagues. Gracia contrasts this state of affairs with that of African Americans in philosophy who have gained prominence by working in areas intrinsically connected to black experiences in America. Gracia’s lament is well-taken. Our discipline, if it is to be relevant to blacks and Hispanics, must continue the slow shift in attitudes. Gracia is right that just as American social discourse should transcend the black/white duality, the philosophical landscape will be truer to reality if it transcends the analytic/continental divide. In the graduate schools, in hiring, and in publications, how much longer will Hispanics remain foreigners in their own land? Here is how Gracia concludes the book: “I trust the book is taken as a statement of hope and an argument against any kind of polarization between Hispanics and Anglos, Hispanics and other ethnic and social groups, or even among Hispanics ourselves. Let us recognize our unity in difference and make this the basis not just for tolerance, but for acceptance and the recognition of the
value of each other.” (p. 192)

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