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Written in spring 2006

Title: Conversation about the Latin@ Label and my self-labeling as a Puerto Rican

by Hiram José Irizarry Osorio

Dear Laura¹,

Hello. Please read below some brief comments on each of your questions. I would recommend you to visit “Qué Pasa OSU?” (Spring 2005) <http://quepasa.osu.edu/issues/sp05/index.htm>. The edition was dedicated to the issue of “Latin@” labeling and you can find some interesting reactions and positions that might enrich the content of your paper.

Another issue that I did not include below, but I think is relevant and usually not discussed, is the racialized implicit nature of this debate: “Latin@s.” As I mention below, generally this labeling has historical connections with European imperialism and colonization of the Americas. Thus, the usage of the label somehow underscores a heritage toward Spain and Portugal (or France). Nevertheless, even though there is mentioning of the “mixed” nature of Latin American societies, we usually end-up emphasizing the white portion (“European-ness”). What about the indigenous and African population, heritage? What about the Asian heritage?

In the specific case of Puerto Rico, you might state; well Hiram, but you have selected that labeling, which was a creation of Spanish imperial forces. I would say that you are right. But on my defense, I would also underscore that even though the label Puerto Rico was created by the Spanish authorities, an unofficial and parallel label has existed throughout history: Borinquen/Boriquén/Borikén. This was the label for the island used by the indigenous pre-Colombian population: the Taínos. This is why people from Puerto Rico even today say that they are “Boricuas.”

Nevertheless, another piece of information and that relates to the issue of contestation, would be the second colonization of Puerto Rico by the U.S. The U.S. at the beginning refused to recognize that label for the island and unilaterally labeled it: Porto Rico. Thus, Puerto Rico after some time stopped being a Spanish imposition and became a liberation labeling quest; however, we still need to realize the racialized and biased reality within which those confronting the U.S. authority worked. Many of those Puerto Rican elites also work within the assumption of European/white better. But in the end, any label can

¹ Invented name of the student that submitted these queries over email.

and should be contested to serve a liberation cause, to serve as a mean to something and not an end in and of itself. And I think that that end should be a common humanity composed of diverse experiences and expressions.

Thank you for inquiring about my thoughts on these issues. Take care, good luck on your present and future life endeavors, and I hope that you have a nice day. And please feel free to contact me again for clarification purposes or regarding anything that you might think I could be of help.

“Abrazos/Abraços,”

Hiram

Laura: What do the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" mean to you?

Hiram's response:

{When I mentioned the issue of colonized countries below, I mean countries throughout the Americas and not elsewhere.}

As I stated in class, these labels could mean something or not, and that is why I perceive them as being political labels. Although today “Hispanic” is usually referred to those people that are original from countries that were colonized by Spain and reside within the U.S., this categorization is historically erroneous. But before stating why, let me comment on the “Latin@” label. “Latin@” today is used instead of “Hispanic” to be a bit more inclusive, but not completely. It is used to refer to people whose countries of origin were colonized by European countries that spoke a Latin language and reside within the U.S. Nevertheless, in practice it is basically making reference to countries colonized by Portugal or Spain and not including those colonized by France even though French is a Latin language (e.g., Haiti).

Returning to the misuse of the term “Hispanic,” I state this because historically what was labeled as “Hispania” (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hispania>) in Roman times included what we know today as Spain and what came up to be “Lusitânia” (today’s Portugal). Hence, this is why I state that this is a mislabeling; because usually when the term “Hispanic” is used, does not include those colonized by Portugal (we could even argue this for the term “Latin@”).

Nevertheless, instead of debating historical accuracies or inaccuracies, these contradictions just underscore the contested (and political) nature of these labels. They are contested not for contesting sakes, but because issues of wealth, power, and status underlie such fights.

Laura: Do you feel that these (or one of them) terms are too comprehensive? Do they group together too many diverse groups of people? What makes these groups different?

Hiram's response:

Thinking of the “Latin@” label as being a political one, I would not necessary say that it is too comprehensive or that diversity within a “group” is something negative. What I would say, is that the “Latin@” label is gaining more acceptance and mobilizing power within the U.S., as we have seen in recent weeks regarding the immigration debates. But what I wish is that whatever ends-up filling the content of this “Latin@” label, with its mobilization potentialities remains progressive (i.e., with liberation potential for those within the label and those without; e.g., “Blacks,” “Asians,” “Whites”...). Furthermore, the so-called issue of “diversity” within a “group,” this is true for every group. Homogeneity is not something that is, it is something that is created; thus, it takes time and common experiences. What I mean by this, and again underscoring the political nature of any labeling, when we talk today about Argentines, Cubans, Chinese, Italian, Germans, among others, did not always mean the same thing or was widely accepted; it was fought and debated for...The same has been written for what is labeled within the U.S. as “ethnic Whites” (i.e., Italian, Jews, Polish, Germans, among others) and around WWII how they became “Whites.”

Laura: Now that you are living in the United States, do you identify with the idea of "Hispanic" and/or "Latino," or do you consider yourself Puerto Rican?

Hiram’s response:

Having stated all of the above, and like I stated in class, I consider myself a Puerto Rican. Like any other label it is still a contested one, which I would like to underscore and not attempt to mean that it is an obviously accepted label (i.e., at least its content). But, why choose Puerto Rican and not any other label? Because I think that one of the most important aspects related to labeling is the need to contextualize and make it contingent upon other labels and factors. This grounding action will not eliminate the conflicts and contested nature of any labeling process, but at least it makes it more transparent with liberation possibilities.

Accepting the criticism that any chosen label, at least discourse-wise, camouflages other relevant labels, I think that that camouflaging could only be uncovered through communicative action (see Jürgen Habermas). Hence, giving relevance to your specific plight (i.e., in my case Puerto Rican colonization), but remaining open, inclusive, and paying attention to other repressive structures (e.g., racism, gendered reality, homophobia...), which will remain pertinent to your particular liberation cause. And this is true because there is not one sole label that identifies and encapsulates every repressive structure. Why? Because of the stated need for contextualizing and making contingent upon the plethora of possible repressive structures, to really start talking and walking toward human beings’ liberation; in other words, to really strive to become human beings.

Having stated all this, I do not want to deny that others would or might put me within the Latin@ category. I would not get angry, but because of political reasons, I cannot accept that self-labeling until the Puerto Rican situation is addressed. Nevertheless, I would and do empathize and express solidarity to a progressive perspective of the “Latin@” plight. This is also true regarding the Puerto Rican situation. I just do not advocate for any type

of Puerto Rican liberation, but for and within a progressive perspective that remains attentive and inclusive of other relevant and important repressive structures beyond the colonialism issue (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, work arrangements). Thus, this would be a contestation from within and without, that can only be channeled by communicative action (i.e., like this opportunity that you have given me of expressing my thoughts; like our discussion in class the other day; and hopefully, many other possibilities of engaging on this subject matter).