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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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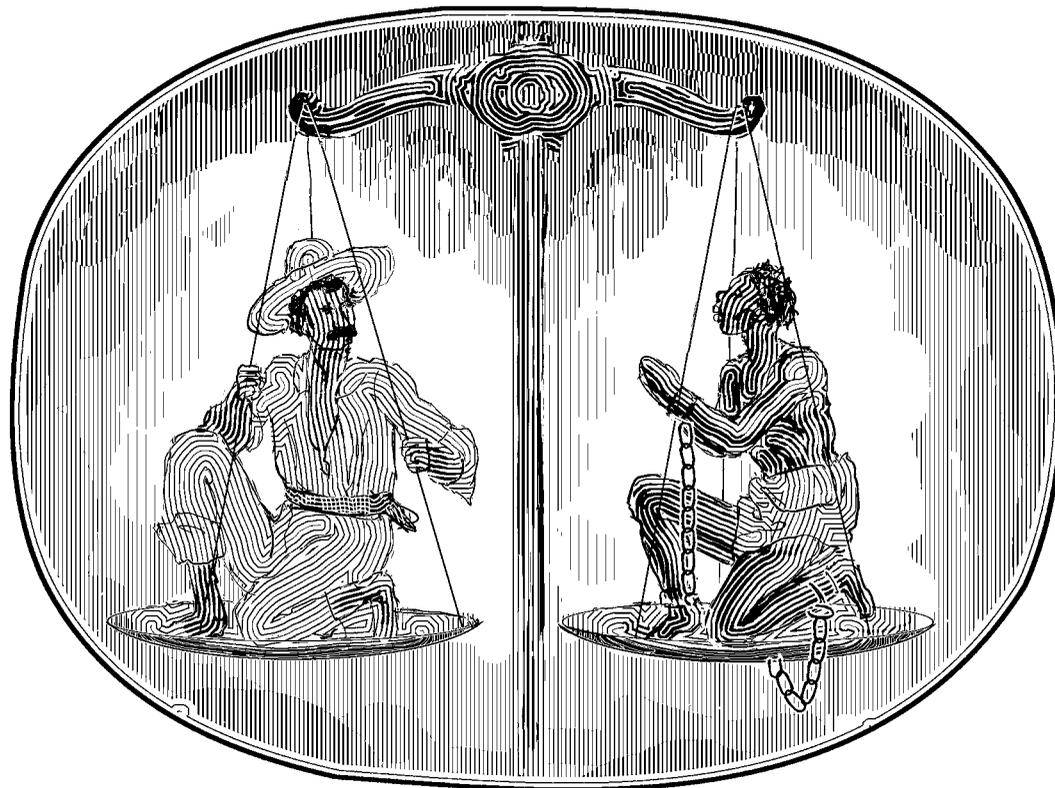
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## THE INVENTION OF HISPANICS



AMERICA'S SURGING POLITICS OF victimhood and identitarian division did not emerge organically or inevitably, as many believe. Nor are these practices the result of irrepressible demands by minorities for recognition, or for redress of past wrongs, as we are constantly told. Those explanations are myths, spread by the activists, intellectuals, and philanthropists who set out deliberately, beginning at mid-century, to redefine our country. Their goal was mass mobilization for political ends, and one of their earliest targets was the Mexican-American community. These activists strived purposefully to turn Americans of this community (who mostly resided in the Southwestern states) against their countrymen, teaching them first to see themselves as a racial minority and then to think of themselves as the core of a pan-ethnic victim group of "Hispanics"—a fabricated term with no basis in ethnicity, culture, or race.

This transformation took effort—because many Mexican Americans had traditionally seen themselves as white. When the 1930 Census classified "Mexican American" as a race, leaders of the community protested vehemently and had the classification changed back to white in the very next census. The most prominent Mexican-American organi-

zation at the time—the patriotic, pro-assimilationist League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)—complained that declassifying Mexicans as white had been an attempt to "discriminate between the Mexicans themselves and other members of the white race, when in truth and fact we are not only a part and parcel but as well the sum and substance of the white race." Tracing their ancestry in part to the Spanish who conquered South and Central America, they regarded themselves as offshoots of white Europeans.

Such views may surprise readers today, but this was the way many Mexican Americans saw their race until mid-century. They had the law on their side: a federal district court ruled in *In Re Ricardo Rodriguez* (1896) that Mexican Americans were to be considered white for the purposes of citizenship concerns. And so as late as 1947, the judge in another federal case (*Mendez v. Westminster*) ruled that segregating Mexican-American students in remedial schools in Orange County was unconstitutional because it represented social disadvantage, not racial discrimination. At that time Mexican Americans were as white before the law as they were in their own estimation.

Half a century later, many Mexican Americans had been persuaded of a very different

origin story. Among the persuaders-in-chief was Paul Ylvisaker, head of the Public Affairs Program at New York's wealthy Ford Foundation during the 1950s and '60s. Though little-known today, he wielded great power and influence to advance a particular vision of social justice inspired partly by socialism and its politics of resentment. Ylvisaker hoped, as he later put it in a 1991 essay, "The Future of Hispanic Nonprofits," that Mexican Americans could be organized into a "united front." That concept, formulated in 1922 by the Comintern, implied a union of disparate groups on the Left into what the Comintern's 4th World Congress called "a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie."

Ylvisaker, who saw philanthropy as "the passing gear" of social change, set off to find out if something similar was possible with Mexican Americans. In 1968, he poured \$2.2 million in seed funding into the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), a national advocacy conglomerate whose headquarters still buzz with activity in Los Angeles today.

He built on foundations laid by the organizing guru Saul Alinsky, who had begun the effort to consolidate the Mexican-American

vote during Ed Roybal's 1949 L.A. City Council election. Roybal, an army veteran and distant descendant of New Mexico's Spanish settlers, was one of many Democrats at the time whose success in local politics owed much to Alinsky's organizing tactics. Alinsky's groups also trained men like Herman Gallegos, Julian Samora, and Ernesto Galarza—Chicano Movement intellectuals who used Ylvisaker's Ford Foundation money (starting with a one-year grant of \$630,000) to found the interest group La Raza in 1968.

What all these radicals sought—and were quite successful at eventually achieving—was to analogize the experience of black Americans to that of Latinos. The term La Raza, literally “the race,” by itself epitomized this process of racialization. Ylvisaker was direct on this point. In 1964 he handed UCLA researchers the then-goodly sum of \$647,999 for a deep survey of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. One of the things he wanted this survey to find out was in what respect the Mexican-American experience was comparable to that of “Negroes today.”

Peter Skerry, a political scientist at Boston College, discussed this movement in his 1993 book, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority*. The idea, Skerry wrote, was to convince people that “like blacks, Mexican Americans comprise a racial minority group. This abstraction poses no problems for the ideologically oriented Chicano activists who see the world in such terms.”

The process would only work if Mexican Americans “accepted a disadvantaged minority status,” as sociologist G. Cristina Mora of U.C. Berkeley put it in her study, *Making Hispanics* (2014). But Mexican Americans themselves left no doubt that they did not feel like members of a collectively oppressed minority at all. As Skerry noted, “[the] race idea is somewhat at odds with the experience of Mexican Americans, over half of whom designate themselves racially as white.” Even in the early 1970s, according to Mora, many Mexican-American leaders retained the view that “persons of Latin American descent were quite diverse and would eventually assimilate and identify as white.” And yet “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” is now a well-established ethnic category in the U.S. Census, and many who select it have been taught to see themselves as a victimized underclass. How did this happen?

### Assimilation and its Discontents

**A**SSIMILATION HAS BEEN A GOAL OF Mexican Americans for most of their history. One hundred fifteen thousand or so former citizens of Mexico chose to

stay north of the Rio Grande after the 1846-48 Mexican-American War. They occupied a territory much like many others that America obtained either through purchase or at the point of a sword. Like the Dutch of New York, or the Cajuns and Spanish of the Louisiana Purchase, Mexican Americans freely inter-

acted with the Anglo-Americans in the 1890s on. Mexican Americans concluded that “the needs and interests of American citizens simply had to take precedence over the problems faced by the growing Mexican immigrant population,” according to the U.C. San Diego social scientist David G. Gutiérrez in his book *Walls and Mirrors* (1995). For most community leaders, “Mexican Americans were in fact Americans and therefore should make every effort to assimilate into the American social and cultural mainstream.”

Two organizations stood out for their support of assimilation. One was LULAC, created in 1929 to help Latinos improve their lot through education and employment; by the early 1940s, LULAC had 80 chapters in several states. The other was the Mexican American Movement (MAM) and its monthly newspaper, *La Voz Mexicana* (the *Mexican Voice*), which ran between 1938 and 1944. A MAM editorial in the *Voice* declared: “If you desire to remain here, if your future is here, you must become a citizen, an American.”

Continued immigration made this process harder. Eminent social scientist George I. Sánchez of the University of Texas told the *New York Times* in 1951 that illegal immigration in large numbers could transform “the Spanish-speaking people of the Southwest from an ethnic group which might be assimilated with reasonable facility into what I call a culturally indigestible peninsula of Mexico.”

After World War II, however, activists started to become very critical of such assimilationist tendencies. Roybal's election campaign drew attention to the criticisms, as did the 1948 presidential run of Henry Wallace, Franklin D. Roosevelt's former vice president. Wallace often spoke to crowds in Spanish while on government business. Scholar Kenneth C. Burt does not exaggerate when he writes in U.C. Berkeley's *Public Affairs Report* of 2002 that these races were “a turning point in American politics.” They opened a new era of identitarianism for those who wished to win the Mexican-American vote. At the same time, sympathetic groups emerged like the Community Service Organization (CSO), financed by Alinsky and supervised by one of his top lieutenants, Fred Ross, from 1947 onward. What the CSO wanted was votes, and thus the politicization of a Mexican-American bloc.

Ross, dubbed “Red Ross” by his critics, feared Mexican Americans lacked “civic organization that could provide a base for people to work on their own problems and to cooperate with other groups that shared similar goals.” Other activist organizations agreed with him. Ross's initiative soon began to pay dividends, however. The CSO registered 15,000 new voters for the Wallace campaign,

#### Books discussed in this essay:

*Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority*, by Peter Skerry.  
Free Press, 463 pages, \$29.95

*Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American*, by G. Cristina Mora.  
The University of Chicago Press,  
256 pages, \$30 (paper)

*Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*, by David G. Gutiérrez.  
University of California Press,  
321 pages, \$31.95

*Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race*, by Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz. Russell Sage Foundation, 416 pages, \$34.95 (paper)

*Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945*, by George J. Sanchez. Oxford University Press, 400 pages, \$35 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper)

*The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority*, by Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, and Ralph C. Guzman. Free Press, 950 pages, out-of-print

*The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*, by Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning. Palgrave Macmillan, 308 pages, \$34.99 (paper)

married with the Scottish, Irish, Scots-Irish, and German Americans who populated the Southwest.

Well into the 1960s, a desire to be absorbed into the great American melting pot made many Mexican Americans suspicious of continued immigration, which was high from the



especially in places like L.A.'s Boyle Heights. In that same article from the *Public Affairs Report*, Burt calls Boyle Heights "a cauldron of leftist political activity" where residents were "radicalized by events in their home countries (including the Russian Revolution and the Mexican Revolution)."

Within a decade, there had emerged what sociologists Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz described in their book *Generations of Exclusion* (2008) as "an explicitly nonwhite racial identity...which provided fertile ground for progressive political activism, including the Chicano movement." Carmen Samora, daughter of La Raza's Julian Samora, argued in her 2011 doctoral thesis for the University of New Mexico that "The CSO effectively politicized the community of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles after WWII."

To the CSO and its new wave of activists, assimilation as embraced by older groups such as LULAC implied a degrading concession that Mexican culture was inferior. "Americanization came to embody the Anglo majority's attitudes," wrote George J. Sanchez, a professor of American studies at the University of Southern California, in *Becoming Mexican American* (1993). For the new generation of activists, identifying with

America felt uncomfortably like disowning Mexico.

Indeed, one of the sustaining creeds of U.S. politics since the founding has been that America's republican form of government and the culture that support it are *superior* to others. Why else would millions of settlers and immigrants over hundreds of years be drawn so steadily to America? Seeking to explain America's distinctive attraction, the social scientist Louis Hartz in his classic *Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) noted (not without some consternation) that America lacked a feudal tradition, and that this made the U.S. uniquely impervious to both socialism and reactionary conservatism. Both those movements thrived in Continental Europe and its colonial offshoot, Latin America, where they *had* experienced feudalism. American liberalism, by contrast, bred an individualistic ethos and an attachment to natural rights and private property.

In other words, a distinctive set of beliefs, customs, and habits supported the American political system. If the Cajun, the Dutch, the Spanish—and the Mexicans—were to be allowed into the councils of government, they would have to adopt these mores and abandon some of their own. It is hard to argue that this formula has failed. Writing in 2004,

political scientist Samuel Huntington reminded us that "Millions of immigrants and their children achieved wealth, power, and status in American society precisely because they assimilated themselves into the prevailing culture."

Mexico has a history of feudalism and a tradition that de-emphasizes private property. Its *ejido* system consisted of communally owned lands that were tilled by individuals, but to which those individuals had no title. Americans desiring the assimilation of Mexican Americans into the national polity might encourage the retention of, say, strong family units that transmit a robust work ethic to new generations. At the same time, they would be loath to see them import other mores that would weaken America's attachment to private property and civic spirit.

So when the activist-scholar Ernesto Galarza complained in his 1973 essay "Alviso" that assimilation made Mexicans in America lose their collectivist traditions, so that "[b]y the beginning of the 20th century these traditions had been replaced by a characteristic version of [W]estern, individualistic society," he was definitely on to something. That was the idea.

Galarza cut his political teeth during the Wallace and Roybal campaigns. Both

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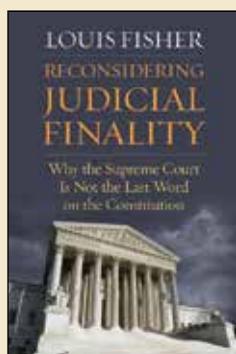
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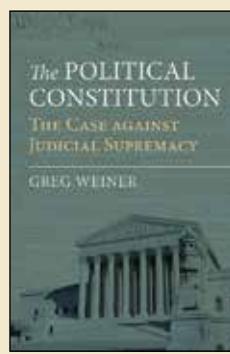
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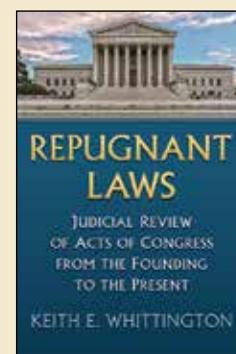
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candidates attracted support from radical elements, including Communists and community organizers who increasingly saw Mexican Americans as a potential source of political power—if only they would consent to being organized around feelings of racial grievance.

### Playing the Race Card

**T**HE ACTIVISTS WHO FOMENTED SUCH grievances had two weapons at their disposal: ideology, and the economic incentives that government and private actors soon began offering to members of groups who claimed to be as oppressed as blacks had been.

On the ideological front, the activists had realized that the vehicle for radical change would not be the workingman, but the identity group. They were influenced by European Communist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who in the 1930s had a transformative epiphany: Marx had promised that the working class would overthrow the bourgeoisie, but the working class had been astonishingly bad at achieving revolution. He and others later, particularly the German-American Columbia University Professor Herbert Marcuse, agreed that it was nearly impossible to instill into the proletariat the feelings of resentment that would conduce to mass organization. Man can aspire to improve his economic condition, after all. What he cannot change is his race or sex.

These weren't just theories: Marcuse took a personal hand. He directly shaped the worldview of the future Black Panther Angela Davis, to whom he taught philosophy at Brandeis. His exhortations to destroy the patriarchal family were repeated nearly verbatim by the feminist theorist Kate Millet, with whom Marcuse held a famous "Dialogue on Feminism and Socialism" at U.C. San Diego in 1975. "All liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude," wrote Marcuse in his 1964 book, *One-Dimensional Man*. The working class, however, had no interest in such self-realization. "[T]hey find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment," Marcuse despaired. The vanguard of the revolution therefore had to come from "the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors."

Thus, whatever their individual aspirations, Mexican Americans (and later Hispanics) had to begin accepting their new status as substratum outcasts. The critical theorists saw the division of the country as a propitious opportunity to create a "counter-hegemony" and up-

end America's value system. President Lyndon B. Johnson's press secretary, Bill Moyers, recounted years later (1978) in the *New Perspectives Quarterly* that he would send LBJ essays by Marcuse on how the Great Society "requires the transformation of power structures standing in the way of its fulfillment." It is hard to believe that Johnson read Marcuse's abstruse writing, but obviously those around him did.

Which brings us to the economic incentives. Activists saw a pot of gold when Johnson decided in the mid-1960s that the government was going to spend lots of money on the Great Society. Benefits such as quotas in government contracts, electoral redistricting, and affirmative action would eventually be dangled as the wages of minoritization. To be able to tell a tale of oppression and discrimination would help get intended beneficiaries anything from a Small Business Administration loan to a spot in the incoming class at Princeton.

The husband and wife duo of Frances Fox Piven (a prominent socialist) and Richard Cloward (then a professor at Columbia

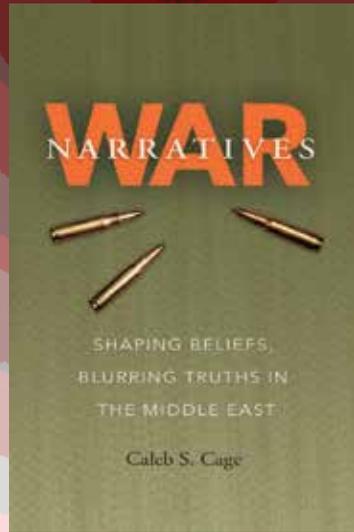
### The Hispanic category was an amalgam of disparate ethnic groups with precious little in common.

University) sounded almost giddy when they wrote in the *Nation* in 1966, "Whereas America's poor have not been moved in any number by radical political ideologies, they have sometimes been moved by their economic interests." Cloward was no mere bystander. His research in 1960 with his fellow professor Lloyd Ohlin had led to the idea of creating local neighborhood organizations to organize and radicalize minorities. That study was then used by the Ford Foundation to justify its "Gray Areas" project, an initiative that got the ball rolling with grants to community organizing groups in Boston, Philadelphia, Oakland, New Haven, and Washington, D.C. When Johnson launched his Great Society, a major source of inspiration was Gray Areas. It was founded and funded by Paul Ylvisaker.

### Broadening the Horizons

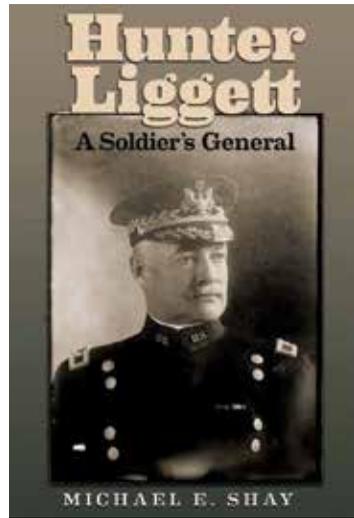
**I**T REMAINED A PROBLEM, HOWEVER, THAT most Mexican Americans simply did not think they had suffered oppression akin to that of blacks. This actually became clear in Ylvisaker's 1966 Ford Foundation-funded

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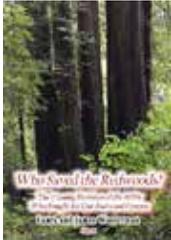
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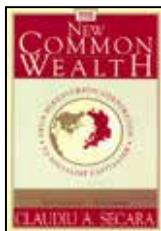
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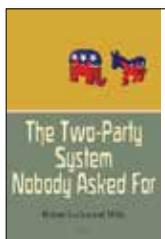
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We accept our two-party system as vital to the functioning of a democratic republic, when in fact the Founding Fathers feared that such a structure would lead to the preeminence of the parties themselves over the commonweal.

Obviously, this has occurred. Our media, especially television, thrive on controversy, often for controversy's sake. They happily highlight spitting contests between political rivals, while pretending to act as a balancing scale. It doesn't work, because the scale itself is broken.

mega-study, which revealed a deep ambivalence on the topic. Based on interviews with 1,550 residents of Los Angeles and San Antonio, the findings were published by UCLA researchers Leo Grebler, Joan Moore, and Ralph Guzman under the title *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority*.

As the title suggests, the study was designed to prove that Mexican Americans constituted a racial minority whose grievances raised (or lowered) it to victimhood and therefore entitled it to benefits. The new leaders that had emerged from the L.A. cauldron "were beginning to recognize that the 'national minority' definition would ease rather than aggravate the group's problems," wrote the researchers. "The concrete gains that would result from a joint classification with other disadvantaged national minorities were increasingly seen as more than offsetting a possible loss."

But even the study's authors admitted that the narrative was flawed. "Prejudice has been a loaded topic of conversation in any Mexican-American community," they wrote. "Indeed, merely calling Mexican-Americans a 'minority' and implying that the population is the victim of prejudice and discrimination has caused irritation among many who prefer to believe themselves indistinguishable [from] white Americans.... [T]here are light-skinned Mexican-Americans who have never experienced the faintest...discrimination in public facilities, and many with ambiguous surnames have also escaped the experiences of the more conspicuous members of the group."

Even worse, there was also "the inescapable fact that...even comparatively dark-skinned Mexicans...could get service even in the most discriminatory parts of Texas," according to the report. These experiences, so different from those of blacks in the South or even parts of the North, had produced

a long and bitter controversy among middle-class Mexican Americans about defining the ethnic group as disadvantaged by any other criterion than individual failures. The recurring evidence that well-groomed and well-spoken Mexican Americans can receive normal treatment has continuously undermined either group or individual definition of the situation as one entailing discrimination.

It is incumbent on us to pause and note exactly what these UCLA researchers were bemoaning. Their own survey was revealing that Mexican-Americans' lived experiences did not square with their being passive victims of in-

vidious, structural discrimination, much less racial animus. They owned their own failures, which—their experience told them—were remediable through individual conduct, not mass mobilization. Their touchstones were individualism, personal responsibility, family, solidarity, and independence—all cherished by most Americans at the time, but anathema to the activists.

The study openly admitted that reclassification as a collective entity serves the "purposes of enabling one to see the group's problems in the perspective of the problems of other groups." The aim was to show "that Mexican Americans share with Negroes the disadvantages of poverty, economic insecurity and discrimination." The same thing, however, could have been said in the late 1960s of the Scots-Irish in Appalachia or Italian Americans in the Bronx. But these experiences were not on the same level as the crushing and legal discrimination that African Americans had faced on a daily basis. That is why the survey respondents emphasized "the distinctiveness of Mexican Americans" from blacks and "the difference in the problems faced by the two groups." The UCLA researchers came out pessimistic: Mexican Americans were "not yet easy to merge with the other large minorities in political coalition."

With the help of the Ford Foundation, however, that would soon change. The crucial breakthrough came in the 1970s, when it dawned on the leaders of radical groups that "Mexican American" was too limited as a racial category. That community's concentration in the Southwest meant that its issues would not get the national attention activists wanted. Thereafter, militants from La Raza, MALDEF, and other organizations put pressure on the Census Bureau to create a Hispanic identity for the 1980 Census—in order, as Mora puts it, "to persuade them to classify 'Hispanics' as distinct from whites."

The Hispanic category was a Frankenstein's monster, an amalgam of disparate ethnic groups with precious little in common. The 1970 Census had included an option to indicate that the respondent was "Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, [or] Other Spanish." But re-categorizing Mexican Americans and lumping them in with other residents of Latin American descent under a "Hispanic American" umbrella was a necessary move, Mora writes, because "this would best convey their national minority group status."

La Raza executive director Raul Yzaguirre made it clear why the Census should reject the questions it had used for decades, which gathered objective information about respondents'

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national origin. “There is a difference,” Yzaguirre wrote in the 1974 records of La Raza’s National Council, “between a minority group and a national origin group—a difference recognized in terms of national economic and social policies as well as a lengthy, broad ranging legal history relative to civil and minority rights.”

On the legislative side, Alinsky’s launch of Ed Roybal ended up paying huge dividends. In 1975, by then a leading member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Roybal authored Public Law 94-311, which mandated special collection of unemployment data for Americans who “identify themselves as being of Spanish-speaking background and trace their origin or descent from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish-speaking countries.” This remarkable piece of legislation goes on to agglomerate descendants from all these many nations into one category of “Americans of Spanish origin or descent,” making PL 94-311 the only law on the books that defines an ethnic group in the United States. Much more importantly, what the law regards as essential to this super-coalition is not actually race, but victimization. The law states that “a large number of Americans of Spanish origin or descent suffer from racial, social, economic, and political discrimination and are denied the basic opportunities that they deserve as American citizens.” The very thing that defined Hispanics was victimhood.

### Changing the Narrative

**B**UT WHY HAVE SO MANY PEOPLE BEEN co-opted into believing in the validity of this invented racial category? Mora explains: “A sort of collective amnesia sets in as organizations begin to refer to the new category’s long history and develop narratives about the rich cultural basis of the classification. By then, the category is completely insti-

tutionalized, and the new classification is, like other classifications, assumed to have existed” since time immemorial.

That this amnesia has prevailed is still surprising. In the 1950s, when a young Julian Samora was at university, he experienced pushback on the idea of a pan-ethnic identity. His academic mentor, George I. Sánchez, then at the University of Texas at Austin, told Samora, “For gosh sakes, don’t characterize the Spanish-American with what is obviously true of the human race.” According to the historian Benjamin Francis-Fallon in his 2012 Georgetown dissertation, *Minority Reports*, Sanchez wrote to Samora in the early ’50s that it takes “a veritable shotgun wedding to make Puerto Ricans, Spanish-Mexicans, and Filipinos appear to be culturally homogenous.” Sanchez was preaching the individual aspiration that the activists loathed: as Francis-Fallon puts it, “Material improvements in jobs, housing, and schools would not only allow [Mexican Americans] to live better but would reveal their fundamental similarity with other Americans.”

Sanchez lost the argument. Samora and radical groups like La Raza made sure that victimhood became the rationale for group formation. Along with fabricating the Hispanic identity, equating the unparalleled suffering of blacks to the condition of Latinos has been one of the activists’ greatest triumphs. We have Spanish-language ballots today, for example, because the Ford Foundation’s grant recipients at MALDEF were able to convince Congress in 1975 that English-only ballots were the equivalent of Jim Crow poll taxes.

Absent these converging phenomena—the ideology, the funding, the advantages of “compensatory justice,” the emergence of determined individuals in powerful positions—Mexican Americans could not have been abstracted into a racial minority, let alone formed into the nucleus of a larger pan-ethnic group. The success of that project inspired other dis-

parate groups—foremost among them the innumerable distinct ethnicities and nationalities which are now classed as “Asian”—to rally behind massive super-ethnicities in the name of victimhood.

Grievance-mongering created for a vast array of American institutions what sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning call *Victimhood Culture*—the title of their 2018 book on America’s current oppression fetish. Victimization, they write, becomes “a way of attracting sympathy, so rather than emphasize either their strength or inner worth, the aggrieved emphasize their oppression and social marginalization.... People increasingly demand help from others, and advertise their oppression as evidence that they deserve respect and assistance.”

This paradigm is predicated on a collectivist understanding of society, rather than the individualist striving that Alexis de Tocqueville identified as the hallmark of early America. Had these groupthink tactics not been so effective, we might not have identity politics today. There was a different path available, and Mexican Americans seemed eager to follow it. As Mora stresses: “*It did not have to happen.*”

Those of us who believe that individual responsibility is a far better route to success than racialization can still reverse what Ylvisaker, Samora, Alinsky, and the rest have wrought. Our first enemy is ignorance. The radicals who victimized America have done their best to cover their tracks: general unawareness of how, and why, the U.S. today is mired in identity politics makes the victimhood narrative harder to defeat. That is the reason the myths still exist, and why we must dismantle them.

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