Jordan, Howard
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REVIEW ESSAY

Pan-Latinism:  
Out of many cultures, one people

HOWARD JORDAN

*Latinos and U.S. Foreign Policy: Representing the “Homeland”?*  
Edited by Rodolfo O. de la Garza and Harry P. Pachon  
192 pp.; $22.91 [paper]

*Muted Voices: Latinos and the 2000 Elections*  
Edited by Rodolfo O. de la Garza and Louis DeSipio  
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004  
288 pp.; $32.95 [paper]

*Latino Politics in America: Community, Culture, and Interests*  
By John A. Garcia  
312 pp.; $34.95 [paper]

*Latino Political Power*  
By Kim Geron  
Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005  
247 pp.; $22.50 [paper]

*The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict between Latinos and*  
*and What it Means for America*  
By Nicolás C. Vaca  
256 pp.; $13.95 [paper]
In the year 2006 immigrants marched throughout our nation protesting proposed immigration laws that would “criminalize” the foreign-born in the United States. Nearly a million protestors filled downtown Los Angeles to express their contempt for Wisconsin congressman Jim Sensenbrenner’s proposed bill (H.R. 4437), which would make it a felony to assist undocumented immigrants. In Washington, D.C., Congress for the first time in years gave serious consideration to a resolution establishing English as the official language of the United States. Why the growing resentment against U.S. Latinos? Despite numbering over seven million in the U.S., why have Latinos not created a unified political force that would send shudders throughout the American body politic and put to an end this anti-Latino animus? At the heart of the Latino problem has been the reality that Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans remain seriously divided and politically fragmented. Leadership of varying nationalities has failed to construct a pan-Latino identity that will allow us to emerge as a unified political force.

This article reviews some of the primary perspectives held by Latino scholars who have explored issues related to the creation of a Latino ethnic identity and prospects for the integration of Latino nationalities. Some of the critical areas of focus will include the importance of language, immigration, intragroup relations between nationalities, and the formation of coalitions.

The scholarship in this area has been uneven; it varies between those who take the unity of Latino nationalities as a given, and others who focus on a specific “community of interest” as the cornerstone of a renewed Latino social movement. One of the clearer expositions on identity formation is John A. Garcia’s *Latino Politics in America: Community, Culture and Interests*. The author focuses on “the creation, maintenance, and redefinition of community” as essential to the formation of a Latino identity crucial to Latino political empowerment in the United States. In his introductory chapters Garcia explores what he terms the bases for community. A community, he argues, exists when individuals are linked by their participation in a common culture. He views the concept of community as “the connection between persons to formulate a sense of place, being and membership to a larger whole.”

While most studies indicate that “Latino” communities prefer to be referred to by their respective nationalities (Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican), Garcia supports the designation “Latino” or “Hispanic,” arguing that they can function as positive terms for the development and growth of the Latino communities. These umbrella labels, according to Garcia, have been influenced by many different factors. The category “Hispanic” was designed by the census to gather together in a term the populations of people from more than twenty Spanish-speaking countries, while media pronouncements use “Hispanic” to cluster national origin groups. Finally, the category “Hispanic” has emerged as an identifier by the community. Crucial to the construction of a Latino identity, Garcia maintains, are the links of common language, cultural traditions, and experiences in the United States. The author provides the reader with a brief overview of the body of literature that gave birth to this concept of pan-ethnicity. He cites the seminal work of Padilla (1986), who championed the creation of Latino consciousness beyond the limits of national identity.
provide some of the glue for the formation of group consciousness. Garcia points to the need to examine the transformation of ancestral groups into minority groups in American society. He notes “minority status is associated with differential treatment and, identifiably group awareness. For Latinos, language, custom and phenotype and social networks help promote that identifiability.” He adds that the similarity of Latino age structure, educational attainment, household income, and religious affiliation forms the contours of a group consciousness. This, coupled with the oppression of Latino subgroups, serves to cement a collective identity.

Such an argument is compelling when we examine the thought of racial and ethnic predecessors of other communities, including W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey, who championed pan-Africanism. Dubois, the leading African-American intellectual of the 20th century, and Garvey, who led an international organization of one million African members, argued that the common history of people of African descent united Africans of every nationality. Pan-Africanism emerged as a philosophy on the belief that African people share common bonds and objectives. The idea initially developed outside of Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a reaction to European colonialism in Africa. Diaspora pan-Africanism thus relates solidarity among all black Africans and peoples of black African descent outside the African continent.

With pan-Africanism as its example, a similar pan-Latino concept of identity could form, based on the solidarity of all Latin-American people. Garcia’s view connects with that of many Latino scholars, who see those Latin Americans in the United States as moving not from an immigrant to mainstream assimilationist model but from immigrant to caste status determined by a shared language. It may well be that Latino consciousness, as presented by Garcia, is the Latino American counterpart to modern-day pan-Africanism.

In the chapter on culture and demographics Garcia provides the reader with the two common bonds that define the Latino community: language and nativity (foreign born). Speaking Spanish, he notes, is “still a universal experience for most Latinos.” Almost two-fifth of all Latinos in the U.S. are foreign born. There are almost 28 million foreign-born persons in America, 35.1 percent are Hispanic. Of this population 35.1 percent of all Americans are naturalized citizens, compared to 21.6 percent for Hispanics. The cross-fertilization of the born and “immigrant” Hispanics living in our areas of residence or meeting in work and business will provide the exchange that results in Latino identity.

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A multiracial category, come in all nationalities and racial backgrounds. The presumption that the term Latino encompasses all Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans without an examination of the racial identifiers of each group is problematical to the unity or creation of community. Approximately 3.9 million of the 38.8 million Hispanics in America identified themselves as both Hispanic and of African descent. It is estimated that between 10 percent and 80 percent of Latinos who hail from countries such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, Belize, and the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico have African ancestry. The racial oppression many “Latinos” of African descent feel is a serious stumbling block to the formation of identity—as Afro-Puerto Rican lawyer and activist Ramón Jiménez has indicated in his statement, “I was black before I became Latino.” The creation of Afro-Latino organizations, and efforts by Latinos of African descent to reclaim their heritage, are crucial to an examination of Latino identity formation. Unfortunately, Garcia gives little space to Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other nationalities who must fall under the term “multiple identifiers” of race and ethnicity.

_Latino Politics in America: Community, Culture and Interests_ examines the various political empowerment movements of Latinos of varying nationalities, including Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexican, and Cubans, but gives only brief anecdotal treatment to Latinos who share dual nationalities and the pivotal role they play in limiting the emphasis many place on national origin. The increasing rate of intermarriage between Latinos of diverse national origin groups and the creation of terms like “dominicoboricua” or “chicanoriqueños” attest to the importance of this growing trend among Latinos. Garcia makes only passing reference to a telling anecdote involving a Puerto Rican man and Mexican woman, who had a three-year-old daughter. When an activist remarked that one day the parents would have to decide the nationality of the child, the parents simultaneously responded, “She does not have to decide that; she is Latina.” As a new identification, the label “Latino” makes it easier to dream the same dreams.

One of the most thought-provoking aspects of the Garcia book is the examination of the obstacles to growing Latino political participation in the electoral arena. Looking to give further credence to his concept involving a community of interest, Garcia examines Latinos in the political arena. Borrowing from the literature, he examines the three-step process of political incorporation (integration) as an indicator of growing political muscle in the Latino community. Garcia takes a look at the first step of incorporation, which involves the socialization of new groups, and then addresses the second step, that is, the development of organizations. The final stages of the process result in the societal absorption of this group. The author notes the structural barriers to full political voter participation, including citizenship, low levels of participation in voter registration, age, and discrimination. However, in seeking to fortify his view of community, Garcia adopts an overly optimistic view of this electoral process, which is based on rising voter registration among Latino voters and local electoral victories. This overly optimistic view of “upsurges in the electoral liveliness of Latino communities” is not borne out by the major surveys of Latino voting patterns.

Even so, while providing an overview of Latino development, Garcia is careful not to create a rose-colored view of a pan-ethnic Latino world in which group consciousness translates into political power. He offers the reader three perspective scenarios. The first suggests that continuing Latino political development and subgroup exchanges lead to greater forms of political involvement, propelled in part...
by a growing anti-Latino animus in American society. The second view suggests that
Latinos do not have sufficient links even to create a mostly symbolic community
that would concentrate on common ground issues. And in the third scenario, perhaps
the most negative, Latino communities are composed of subgroups that pursue
their own limited narrow nationalist agendas, leaving little room for compromise
and negotiation toward collective freedom.

A major issue running through Garcia’s book and the rest of the literature is
the paramount importance of immigration to the formation of Latino identity.
Immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean provide a constant source
of renewal in Latino communities in the United States. It is clear that a continued
flow of Latino immigrants to America can translate into significant voting power.
Perhaps equally significant is the effect such a pattern has for the role that Latinos
can play in areas of foreign policy.

The anthology *Latinos and U.S. Foreign Policy*, edited by Rodolfo O. de la Garza
and Harry P. Pachon, presents a compelling case for the connection between immigration
and an increased Latino consciousness. After all, Latino immigration flows to the
United States are directly connected to the growth of American imperialism.
Acknowledging an ever-larger Latino community in America, the editors assess the
need for a growing Latino involvement in international affairs. The authors examine
U.S.-Latino relations in regard to Latino immigrants’ lands of origin, and the
U.S. foreign policy, basing their research on a survey of Latino elites, community
leaders, U.S. diplomatic officials, and government leaders in Latin America.
Among the findings: Puerto Ricans and Cubans express greater concern over trade
than do Mexican Americans. Of all the subgroups Cuban Americans are the most
influential on international policy regarding the Castro regime, in large part because
of their greater focus and resources on this issue.

The survey offers some interesting implications for the political identity of Latino
subgroups in the U.S. If Latinos of different nationalities hold divergent views on
foreign affairs, how would these views impact on the relations between them?
Will the politics of Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Columbia
cooperate or create a wedge between nationals of these nations in the U.S.?
Moreover, as American-born Latinos and long-time residents begin the process
cultural cross-fertilization, will recent immigrants from Latin America upset this
mix by remaining involved with the politics of their country of origin?

The conceptualization of a pan-Latino identity need not have a divisive character.
It can, instead, emerge as a progressive movement that forces change in the
Latin American community. A unification of nationalities in the Latin-American diaspora could
lead to global changes in the distribution of resources to Latin American and Caribbean
communities. Once joined together, Latinos of various origins would be able to
increase their demands and express support for liberation and decolonization
movements.

A more national view on the emergence of pan-Latino identity as a united
force is offered by the authors of the anthology *Muted Voices: Latinos and the 2000 Election*.
In this series of articles, edited by Rodolfo O. de la Garza and Louis DeSipio,
the authors conclude that that Latinos did not have an enhanced impact on the
election results and that population increases among Latinos will not inevitably

numbers. The title *Muted Voices* best expresses the author’s lament that while the electoral process is more sophisticated in reaching out to Latinos and Latino voting has increased, efforts to mobilize this constituency have been dismal.

De la Garza and Desipio reject the conventional political wisdom of Latinos as a “bloc vote,” shifting between Democrats and Republicans according to who best serves their agendas. Limiting their analysis to the nine states with the largest Latino populations, they provide quantitative verification that Latinos had influence in less than one in three states in presidential elections between 1988 and 2000. They add that in New York, California, and Illinois, Latinos had minimal influence in the past presidential elections as well. Even more troubling, the account of de la Garza and Desipio determines that by the time the presidential campaigns reached these Latino- influenced states, each political party had selected their party’s nominees.

*Muted Voices* acknowledges that the failure of Latino communities to act and view each other as *una familia*, a problem that contributed to their lack of influence in presidential elections. Even the method by which the chapters in the book are organized attest to the segregation of Latino subgroups and their inability to make Latino votes felt. Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans are described within the nationalistic trapping of the group that predominated in a particular state. As a result, when the book examines voters from Chicanos in California or Puerto Rican voting bloc in New York, the reader is never provided an understanding of how coordinated efforts by Latinos in respective voting regions might have augmented the influence of the Latino voting base.

Perhaps this lack of a collective consciousness or a united front is why the national presidential campaigns ignored the Latino immigrant base. The parties, the authors state, were only interested in likely voters, a category which ignores the growing demographic of Latino immigrant voters. As it turns out, non-citizen voters constitute 39 percent of Latino adults nationally and played no role in the presidential campaign of 2000.

The failure of Latinos to act collectively can also perhaps be explained by the elites of each respective Latino nationality being marginalized from their own constituency. How could Puerto Ricans unite with Mexican-Americans in a national vote when the leadership of the Puerto Rican community was distant from the Puerto Rican masses? Political scientist Angelo Falcón, in his chapter “Pues at Least We Had Hillary,” notes that Hillary Clinton received more votes for the Senate than the presidential candidates managed to muster. He concludes that “by propping up the largely marginalized Puerto Rican politicians, the state and national Democratic Party organizations maintained the Latino in a marginalized position.”
They include the growth of a mobilized statewide Latino electorate, the increase in Latino elected officials, and a newfound respect for Latinos by the two traditional political parties.

Although the authors of *Muted Voices* offer a realistic view of Latino efforts aimed at increasing political influence, they ignore the importance of political leadership in setting the agenda for a major mobilization of this crucial voting constituency. While the structural barriers to Latino mobilization are real, the nature of political leadership remains unexamined. With a broader vision of Latino consciousness would the Latino leadership of varying nationalities have been able to coordinate a unified Latinos vote that could have influenced the presidential election? Missing from the assessment is how voter apathy has been fed by ineffectual leadership and the perception by some Latinos that aggressive participation would only yield limited results. Too often established political leadership depresses the broadest expression of Latino political power, as expressed by grassroots movements for social change.

In this respect the *Latino Political Power* by Kim Geron fills an important gap. The book describes “the transition of Latinos from disenfranchised outsiders to political leaders” and observes the relationship leaders have with their ethnic communities as candidates and as elected officials. Summarizing political history, Geron examines the movement of Latino communities from local grassroots activism to full participation in national politics. The reader is treated to a narrative taking in the protest politics of the Chicano and Puerto Rican movements and the rise of electoral strategies in the 1980s. This short narrative of the rise of Latino electoral strategies provides a telling version of what is a more complex manifestation of the quest for political power. To make his point, Geron constructs a political pyramid of four levels. The first level is formal representation, empowering officials to act for others through an election. The second tier is descriptive representation, in which the elected leader reflects the social characteristics of his constituency. The third level is symbolic representation, whereby the leader is supported by those who voted for him. The final stage is substantive representation, which occurs when elected officials come to champion the rights of those who put him or her in office.

Geron accepts the commonly held views that Latinos of various nationalities have evolved from living in marginalized communities to participating more fully in the American electoral system. He takes the reader through a rich history of struggles that includes the politics of protest in the militant era of the 1960s and the evolution of legal strategies in organizations such as the Mexican and Puerto Rican Legal Defense funds, finally analyzing coalition politics. He covers with a sense of complexity how annexed Mexican Americans struggled toward Chicanismo and how migrant Puerto Ricans formed militant groups such as the Young Lords in New York City. Geron moves the reader from a treatment of Mexican and Puerto Rican outsiders to a survey of the growing numbers of elected officials in the rainbow politics period from 1983 to 1993. According to Geron, during this period political incorporation of Latino elected officials in the United States increased by 48 percent.
A group of Latino immigrants arrives and attempts a transition into the U.S. This uneven development and varying timelines of Latino arrival to American shores makes it difficult to solidify different populations into one major voting bloc.

One of the major contributions of *Latino Political Power* are the chapters that address Latino elected officials (LEOs) in the political process. Geron notes that there are three types of LEOs. First, there are those who make ethnic identification the primary focus of their candidacies and have limited experience outside their own constituency. Second, there are those officials who combine an ethnic predisposition with behavior as “non-ethnic-specific politicians.” Third, there are the cross politicians, who play down their ethnic affiliation and attempt to build a political career outside of their ethnic community. Latinos, he argues, have expanded the breadth of their elected officialdom. He concludes that our politicians are no longer limited to careers as community activists or staff members of elected officials.

While Geron does not attach a value judgment to any particular approach of our elected officials, he does give the reader an overview of some of the key aspects of this new political leadership. Among LEOs 66 percent are of Mexican origin, 9 percent are puertorriqueño, and 4 percent are Cuban. Spanish-speaking persons comprise 72 percent of first-generation Latinos, while many among the second generation are bilingual but prefer speaking in English. Even though most LEOs operate in English, they acknowledge the importance of Spanish to their identity and effectiveness as political leaders. Also, most LEOs are working-class. The salary of Latino-elected officials in 2001 was $44,678, exceeding the median household income of $33,447. Most of these officials ran for office because they were dissatisfied with their political leadership. Priority issues for these political representatives are increasing social services, affirmative action, education, and employment. Geron concludes that LEOs are more fiscally liberal but socially conservative than their white counterparts. They are also better educated, older, and better off than the Latino constituency they represent.

While providing an excellent overview of some of the central demographics of Latino-elected officials, Geron refrains from raising serious questions about the ability of Latino leadership to transcend their privileged status or narrow nationalist trappings. As his own numbers indicate, Latino elected officials sometimes fall into the trap of marginalizing themselves from the day-to-day operations of their own communities. Indeed, LEOs often become merchants of misery who maintain the poverty of neighborhoods while seeking the compromising acceptance of white political elites. In essence, even though LEOs are elected by the people, their economic circumstances isolates them from the poverty of their constituents. As such they can emerge as brokers for the oppressed groups that exploit our barrios.

**The building of coalitions**

The building of multiracial coalitions has become central for most Latinos in the United States. Much of the literature by the Latino scholars reviewed for this review speaks to the need for coalitions. Some authors advocate intra-Latino coalitions as a way of building pan-Latino consciousness and as an indispensable method of acquiring power. “Intra-Latino integration” is based on the argument that before Latinos can become major players in the American electoral system, they must transcend local and regional competition.
such idealism unrealistic and believe close-knit cooperation between Latinos of varying nationalities is the most we can aspire to, given the danger of collapsing the historical experiences of the Latin America diaspora in the U.S.

John Garcia’s book identifies the lack of contact between Latino subgroups as an inherent obstacle to “forging a Latino community.” But because of the diversity of these subgroups, the author falls prey to focusing on group discrimination, the so-called “discrimination plus model” and positive sentiments or cultural similarity between each other as the primary elements in the forging of coalitions. Such an analysis is limited by the fact that Latinos, no matter whether they hate others or love each other, will not necessarily succeed in forming the infrastructure of a long-term coalition. However, Garcia does evidence the limited optimism that native-born Latinos are quicker to embrace similarities than foreign-born counterparts. This would seem to indicate that as Latinos subgroups become “Americanized,” they are more ready to embrace a pan-Latino consciousness within the broader U.S. society.

In *Latino Political Power* Geron adopts a more realistic view of coalition building. He sees it as a tactic, not a strategic necessity. Where Latino subgroups are dominant and can take political power with limited coalitions they will do so. And where they need other Latino nationalities or whites or African Americans to build a coalition they will do so. A case in point was the mayoral election in Los Angeles. Candidate Mayor Antonio Villariogos, a Mexican in an overwhelmingly Mexican city, was able to build a coalition with other ethnic groups. In contrast, in New York Fernando Ferrer, the Puerto Rican candidate, was much more hard pressed to win, in part because the Puerto Rican presence forms less than 50 percent of the Latino population. The challenge to Villariogos was to consolidate the Chicano vote, while Ferrer had to court a more diverse Latino base. The differences led in part to Villariogos’s victory and Ferrer’s loss.

The other point raised by Geron is that issues such as poverty and low-wage labor markets can serve to unite varied Latino communities. He notes that a unification must include a leadership with a broader vision. Geron is fond of the old activist axiom that “when everything else fails to organize the people, conditions will.” Socioeconomic status, he argues, is a key factor in mobilizing Latino and African-American voters. Ideology and group size also influence coalition building.

**Black-Latino alliance?**

While most of authors mentioned concentrate on the structural and political obstacles to intra-Latino integration, Nicolas C. Vaca in his book *The Presumed Alliance* departs from the intra-Latino perspective to focus on the relationship between Latinos and their African-American brethren. The prominent Chicano scholar and lawyer professes to present the “unvarnished truth” about the relationship between Latinos and Blacks. He seeks to explore the “economic, social and political implications of the power struggle between Blacks and Latinos in America.” Vaca analyzes elections in New York, California, and Compton, and describes the intragroup hostility between African-Americans and Latinos. **
the black-Latino disparity. One of the concepts is that Latinos are the largest minority and Blacks will never gain this position. In an attempt to free Latinos of “white guilt,” he notes that Latinos have a history of oppression and are not responsible for the conditions of African Americans. Vaca concludes that he is deconstructing the so-called “minority monolith.”

The central weakness in Vaca’s exposition is that his Black-Latino conflict may be a West Coast phenomenon. His brown-versus-black construct attempts to homogenize the problem. One can take issue with his history of Mexican-African American relations; moreover, Vaca ignores the historical and political experiences of Latinos in the Caribbean. In fact, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans have a history of working with African Americans. Also, many Puerto Ricans and Dominicans identify themselves as black and would totally reject this brown-versus-black revisionist history. New York-based groups like the Caribbean Cultural Center and the Afro-Latino Project have as their primary focus Latinos as black people. While Vaca is well intentioned, he could have devoted a chapter to describing how Latinos and African Americans have worked together on numerous alliances and underscoring the benefits the dominant white culture might receive by fostering a division between these historic allies.

Conclusion
Witnessing the millions of Latinos who protested U.S. immigration policy, we realize that we have begun the creation of a pan-Latino identity. Indeed, the attacks on our community (specially the efforts to impose English as the official language of the nation, the different laws that aim to restrict immigration and the negative stereotyping of Latinos by the mainstream media) and our expanding U.S. interactions aid in the construction of such an identity. The cross-fertilization of Latino subgroups and the protectionist mode Latinos have had to adopt have compelled us to examine and redefine our relationships.

But the unity that outside forces are driving must also be complemented by conscious actions within Latino communities. The leadership of these communities must work to create an ethos of unity. In addition, Latino intellectuals should have a broader understanding of the complex historical, sociological, and political connections between Latino subgroups. Latino elected officials must also seek to consolidate Latino candidacies that enjoy the support of Latino communities of every nationality. As demonstrated by some of the reviewed scholars American Latinos are in a unique position of unifying cultures of Latino descent and creating a new people. Latinos need only transcend narrow nationalist interest and embrace a one-for-all and all-for-one philosophy.