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Reseña de "Latino Politics in the United States: Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in the Mexican American and Puerto Rican Experience" de Víctor Manuel Rodríguez
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New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37719218
This book is more of a collection of essays than a traditional monograph. Despite its limitations, it could be very useful in undergraduate Puerto Rican, Latino Studies, or Politics courses and contains some important contributions to discussions of racialization. The book’s structure centers on the claim that the racialization of American Latinos is a central aspect of all Latino politics, including the colonial politics of Puerto Rico. A useful aspect of the book is that it attempts to conceptualize the process of racialization as a historical and dialectical process. The book is organized around an interpretive essay that compares the broad historical process of racialization of Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s. This chapter is followed by four distinct (and relatively disparate) case studies that emphasize contemporary political conflicts and movements. The book’s essays are tied together in a loose fashion by a historicized, if mechanical, approach to racialization. This stage-based approach to racialization is presented most clearly in the first chapter and repeated (and applied) schematically in the book’s other chapters. The approach to racialization that is offered in the book—especially in chapter one—appears too general and schematic to be useful in studying the many variations in the context and historical experience of United States Latino populations, especially because it focuses on a stage-based periodization. Nonetheless, the proposal presented in this first chapter is rooted in important literature, contains many suggestive interpretations, and is applied in an interesting and coherent manner in two of the case studies.

The initial chapter, a conceptual discussion of the role of racialization as a historical process, could be useful in the classroom context, but is not developed enough to stand as a coherent theoretical contribution to the study of the relationship between racialization, the history of Latinos, and Latino politics. Besides a very well organized and synthetic review of the experience of Puerto Ricans and Chicanos/Mexican-Americans as part of the United States, it stands out for its attempt to conceptualize racialization as a four-stage process. The four “stages” (which the author explains need not follow each other in a linear manner) are “imposition and subordination,” “ideology and institutional arrangements,” “placement in the racial hierarchy,” and, finally, “organization of a racial identity.” Despite the claim for possible non-linearity, these neat stages might seem too mechanical, schematic, and all-inclusive for most historians of race and ethnicity in the United States to find useful as a consistent tool of analysis. Nonetheless, the discussions of racialization—even its most abstract parts—and the case studies are peppered with many materials drawn
from Puerto Rican and Chicano history and provide multiple points for discussion and departure. It could provide students a useful starting point for discussions of race, politics, and history.

The case study essays vary in quality and depth, and in their ability to apply the author’s approach to racialization. The two chapters that contain extensive direct research by the author himself (interviews especially) provide the most important contribution. Embedded in longer discussions are sections that contain important original material on the history of Puerto Ricans and the independence movement in the West Coast and Latino struggles for power in Santa Ana (California).

The first case study looks at the 1992 Los Angeles “rebellion.” It considers the multiracial character of the events and their relationship to the region’s political economy in a globalizing world. The author strained his approach in trying to prove that “the violence that pervaded this city was indicative of a social insurrection” (p. 51). But given the bipolar model of false opposites that he relied on, contrasting a social approach to the violence with a dated behaviorist model, the conclusions are predictable. There are more diverse and complex forms of arguing the roots of urban racialized violence that the author simply does not address.

The final essay discusses the development of the movement to end the use of Vieques, Puerto Rico, as a target for United States Navy bombings. Based on research published by other authors, the essay reviews the story and does an excellent job of relating different aspects of the emergence of the movement. But it is too short to truly situate the discussion in the larger politics of Puerto Rican colonial history and the author stretches the usefulness of his approach to racialization.

The author is at his best when discussing American-based political movements. Chapters three and four discuss Puerto Rican and Latino movements for empowerment in the West Coast. In these essays the author makes important interpretive and empirical contributions to these little-studied movements. Chapter three looks at a small circle of independentista activists on the West Coast while providing a broader summary of the experience of Puerto Rican communities in California. Chapter four examines the origins of political conflict in Santa Ana after attempts by a coalition of Latinos to wrest control of county and educational institutions from an Anglo-dominant and highly conservative elite. This is the longest of the chapters, and here the author displays his extensive knowledge of California politics and Latino struggles for empowerment. Reading this essay would contribute greatly to any Latino politics course.

Despite the book’s title, discussions based on gender scarcely go beyond a few mentions of women activists, and the text fails to articulate a coherent analysis of class dynamics within the racialized Latino or island Puerto Rican contexts.

The volume includes a CD with supplementary teaching materials, including PowerPoint slides that outline the major points and data of each chapter. Teachers of Latino studies and politics courses will find this book useful. Despite the simplistic or unilateral arguments and the only partially representative use of relevant literature, most of the chapters can provide useful departure points for classroom discussion.