



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

Michelson, Melissa R.

Reseña de "LATINO POLITICS" de Lisa García Bedolla

Centro Journal, vol. XXIII, núm. 1, 2011, pp. 231-234

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

Disponible en: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37722223014>

- Cómo citar el artículo
- Número completo
- Más información del artículo
- Página de la revista en redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Sistema de Información Científica

Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina, el Caribe, España y Portugal

Proyecto académico sin fines de lucro, desarrollado bajo la iniciativa de acceso abierto

REFERENCES

- Arrighi, Giovanni, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein. 1989. *Antisystemic Movements*. London: Verso.
- Dubinsky, Karen, Catherine Krull, Susan Lord, Sean Mills and Scott Rutherford, eds. 2009. *New World Coming: The Sixties and the Shaping of Global Consciousness*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press.
- Elbaum, Max. 2002. *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*. London: Verso.
- Fernandez, Johanna. 2004. Radicals in the Late 1960s: A History of The Young Lords Party in NYC, 1969–1974. Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University.
- Laó, Agustín. 1994–95. Resources of Hope: Imagining the Young Lords and the Politics of Memory. *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 7(1): 34–49.
- Rodríguez-Morazzani, Roberto. 1994–95. Linking a Fractured Past: The World of the Puerto Rican Old Left. *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 7(1): 20–30.
- Torres, Andrés and José Velázquez, eds. 1998. *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Young, Cynthia. 2006. *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Latino Politics

By Lisa García Bedolla
 Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009
 288 pages; \$26.95 [paper]

REVIEWER: Melissa R. Michelson, Menlo College

This book is an excellent addition to the literature, filling a crucial need for an accessible and thought-provoking introduction to the field of Latino politics. Drawing on her solid grounding in both Latin American and Latino politics, Dr. García Bedolla presents the mainland-based demographics and experiences of major Latino national-origin groups in the United States, as well as crucial home-country experiences (including those resulting from U.S. foreign policy) that shape the opportunity structures available to Latinos and contribute to continued flows of migrants and ongoing political behavior in the U.S. In other words, to borrow the author's own terminology, the book addresses both agency (individual decisions and actions) and structure (the opportunities and barriers available to individuals). This structure places Latinos within the U.S. racial hierarchy, combines them into a pan-ethnic group, and affects individual social, political, and economic opportunities. In using this book to teach my Latino Politics class, I found this framing very helpful and accessible to students. For example, rather than viewing the issue of undocumented immigration to the U.S. simply as one of economic refugees seeking a better life, they could also see the influence of U.S. policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and internal policies in Latin America such as Mexico's Porfiriato, which transformed subsistence farmers into landless peasants in need of wage labor. Similarly, rather than viewing the issue of Latino voter turnout (or the lack thereof) as one of individual choice, they could also see the role of institutions and of the rules of the game. Overall, students were better able to see the larger picture—the complex overall political systems and policies that lead to what at first glance seem to be isolated personal decisions by individual Latinos.

Of course, the basics are here as well, such as the different levels of income and education of various Latino national-origin groups, and their policy preferences and histories of political participation. Also included are highlights of the history of Latinos in the U.S., such as the Mexican-American and Spanish-American wars and the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. Because her focus goes beyond the usual triumvirate of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, readers are also treated to a brief yet clear *précis* on the history of U.S. involvement in El Salvador and Guatemala. Thus, readers are able to see the clear links between how various national-origin groups were brought into the American polity and the continued state of international relations between Latin American sending countries with the political and economic outcomes generally achieved by migrants and their descendants. For example, the model of “Cuban exceptionalism” is clearly linked to the very favorable treatment of Cuban “political refugees,” while Puerto Ricans were not only treated differently as a country but their efforts to mobilize and empower themselves have been infiltrated and undermined by the federal government. The arrogance and evil of U.S. involvement in Central America, in particular, may be quite a shock to uninitiated undergraduate students. Yet, the role of the U.S. in creating the violence and instability in that region, combined with resistance to accepting resulting flows of refugees and asylum-seekers, is important information for those hoping to understand the level and nature of political activity among Latinos of Central American descent.

It is sometimes easy for those of us immersed in Latino politics to forget how little undergraduates taking an introductory course already know about the subject. I am always surprised, for example, how many of my students do not know that Cubans lean Republican. *Latino Politics* provides just the right amount of background information, combined with current data from sources such as the 2006 Latino National Survey, to both bring students up to speed on the basics and help them make more intellectually sophisticated connections between structure and agency, history, and the future.

Another important theme raised in the book is the issue of representation and power within the majority rule system of the United States. In other words, the structural barriers that influence immigrant and Latino activity in the political arena are compounded by the electoral and legislative rules of the game, which limit Latino power and representation. For example, while the Voting Rights Act of 1965 ensures Latinos are not disenfranchised and that they can achieve some measure of descriptive representation, substantive representation and authenticity in representation are more elusive. The committee system and the power of political parties to control agendas and members means even elected officials, if they do not constitute a majority of a legislative body, may still be unable to enact laws favored by Latinos, as illustrated by perennial failures to enact comprehensive immigration reform or even relief for undocumented Latino students (the DREAM Act).

One example of how her international perspective enriches the topic is in García Bedolla’s treatment of the immigration issue. The usual discussions of why individuals choose to migrate to the U.S. often mention individual economic needs, as well as the continued demand for unskilled workers generated by the agribusiness and construction industries, among others. Some may even touch upon the influence of NAFTA and the 1986 Immigration Reform Control Act (IRCA). But both NAFTA and IRCA are measures passed by the U.S. government, and there are many other structural factors at play. García Bedolla notes: “Immigrants’ decisions to migrate are embedded in macro-geopolitical processes over which their subjects have little control, such as economic recession or dislocation, war, or natural disaster” (p. 10). Further:

Many Latin American migrants worked for U.S. companies in their home countries. Many were directly recruited by those companies to come to the United States, and those companies often lobbied the U.S. Congress to ensure that these migration flows would continue. The economic development policies pursued by Latin American governments, and therefore the economic opportunities available to their populations, particularly employment, often were strongly influenced by the U.S. financial sector and by the U.S. government. (p. 12)

This sort of comprehensive treatment of the immigration issue is but one example of how García Bedolla weaves together her U.S.-based and international perspectives, creating a broad and thoughtful approach to her subject matter.

After the introductory chapter, García Bedolla describes the basics of the largest components of the Latino community, noting the demographic differences between Latinos and the general U.S. population, as well as internal differences between national-origin groups. Rather than dwelling on the degree to which Latinos are or are not monolithic, she turns to important political science issues that are crucial for helping students understand Latino political behavior, such as the difference between descriptive and substantive representation, the impact of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 and majority-minority districts, and evolving notions of citizenship. There is enough here to launch discussion for weeks, but presented in a succinct and clear manner. This is another strength of this book: major debates and issues are covered just enough to spark student interest without making the book unnecessarily long, and allowing the adopting faculty member to use it in combination with other materials without overburdening students. For example, one could supplement the discussion of how low voter turnout among Latinos means their policy preferences are not represented with the use of Zoltan Hajnal's *America's Uneven Democracy: Race, Turnout, and Representation in City Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). The debate about pan-ethnicity could be continued with Cristina Beltrán's *The Trouble with Unity* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Similar branching out is possible using work by David Lublin on the VRA or on citizenship by Rogers Smith. What I particularly appreciated about this book is that it gave me this flexibility, and would allow for subsequent uses of the book over time to focus on different aspects of the material, as warranted by current events and shifts in student interest, all the while ensuring that all students are exposed to crucial basics.

Chapters 3–6 focus on four Latino subgroups: Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and Central Americans. García Bedolla explains how each community became part of the U.S., major U.S. policies affecting their sending countries and their experiences within the U.S., and the activities and successes (and failures) of major civil rights leaders and nongovernmental organizations, including student groups. Each is rich in detail without being overly dense, providing stories and examples to make the political history come alive for students. My one major disappointment with this volume stems from the treatment of Central Americans in Chapter 6. García Bedolla notes that individuals of Salvadoran and Guatemalan origin comprise two-thirds of the Central American population of the U.S.; her chapter thus focuses almost exclusively on those national-origin groups' stories. I cannot help but yearn for a bit more. Perhaps because I lived through the 1980s, I would have liked to see the discussion of Salvadorans paired with a discussion of Nicaraguans. Given its unique situation as a longstanding democracy and an environmental leader, I would have liked

to see a short section on Costa Rica; this could have been used as an example of the sort of internal structure that leads to low levels of immigration (or even of reverse immigration, as many U.S. citizens have chosen to relocate permanently to Costa Rica). In sum, I found the decision to focus on only two national-origin groups disappointing. Most introductions to Latino politics focus only on the “big three”—Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans. Thus, adding Salvadorans and Guatemalans to the mix is a huge step forward for recognizing the diversity of the Latino community in the United States. But in a way it only makes it that much more obvious that that diversity is not being fully addressed. This is perhaps another opening for faculty to add supplemental materials, such as Hector Perla’s recent work on Nicaraguans (*Revolutionary Deterrence: U.S. Coercion & Transnational Resistance by Sandinista Nicaragua*, forthcoming).

For my class last year, we focused on the disconnect between the clear involvement of the U.S. in creating a flow of asylum-seekers and refugees combined with the U.S. policy of claiming the flow was spurred by economic factors rather than political ones. While asylee and refugee policies have improved in the last three decades, these communities face continued political battles—because situations in the home countries have improved, many individuals still face deportation today. Yet the story of these communities is also a powerful and positive one. García Bedolla notes:

These migrants, despite their poverty and uncertain legal status, were able to help to organize a unique, transnational movement which would not only change their situation in the United States, but also influence international public sentiment towards what was occurring in their countries of origin. (p. 177)

This theme is picked up again in the concluding chapter, which discusses the 2006 immigration marches. García Bedolla notes that Latinos frequently engage in collective political activity, and that non-traditional forms of politics (e.g., community organizing and protest) are likely to continue to be necessary. This is, I believe, meant to end the book on a positive note—the “Sleeping Giant” may still be dozing, and the majoritarian nature of the U.S. political system may still be biased against Latino political power, but non-traditional forms of political activity will continue to serve the community’s needs. Yet, to me this conclusion feels disingenuous. Yes, the 2006 marches were a sign of political power—and, as Fraga et al. note, a sign of trust in the system (*Latino Lives in America: Making it Home*, Temple University Press, 2009). But they were also a sign of political weakness, in that no true progress on immigration reform has been made for decades. Despite the marches and intense media and public interest, the 111th Congress failed to act, even on the DREAM Act. The marches may have politicized a new generation of Latinos, but increased personal agency, without structural change, can only go so far.