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The Hispanic Presence in the United States

The Latino population in the U.S. has grown by nearly 500% over the last four decades. Today, there are over 40 million Hispanics, and they represent the largest ethnic minority in the nation. They constitute 14% of the total population. Their numbers will likely reach over 50 million in 2020, and about 100 million in 2050. Demographic estimates suggest that in the next 50 years, one out of every four inhabitants in the United States could be Hispanic.

In spite of rapid demographic growth and many contributions of Hispanics in the U.S. society, Hispanics still face problems concerning social acceptance, discrimination, and equality of opportunities in education, work, and income. The rhetoric of acceptance in the United States has been widely publicized but daily experiences of a large number of Latinos regarding their living conditions, work opportunities, and social acceptance, reveal a pattern of systemic exclusion.

The presence of Hispanics in the United States is not a recent phenomenon. About 150 years ago, the states of California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado were Mexican territories. Soon after declaring its independence from Mexico, Texas joined the U.S. in 1845. A year later, as a result of the war with Mexico in 1846, the U.S. incorporated and annexed the rest of the mentioned territories. This explains the profound Hispanic sentiment expressed by a high number of those old Hispanic families originally from these places. On the other hand, a high proportion of Latinos in the U.S. are individuals who were born in this country and have taken an active part in North American society. This is the case, for example, of 62% of Hispanics of Mexican origin, 58% of Puerto Ricans, 27% of Cubans, and a little more than 30% of children of Central or South American parents.

In recent years, the migratory current of Hispanics to the United States has increased, especially with the arrival of a high number of those persons born in Mexico and in more than 20 countries of the Caribbean and Central and South America. Statistics on the foreign-born U.S. population indicate that in 1996 more than 27% were from Mexico, 10.5% from the Caribbean region, 7% from Central America, and 4.9% from South America.

The states with the major percentage of Latinos are California (34%), Texas (19%), New York (9%), Florida (7%), Illinois (4%), and Arizona, New Mexico, and New Jersey with three percent each. This demographic concentration can be seen in the cities of Los Angeles, New York, and Miami, where 37% of Latinos reside.
Beyond the demographic impact, diverse processes shape the form in which Latinos are changing the appearance, likes, habits, and customs of the country. The new generations of Latinos have both entered and excelled in the diverse areas of art, sports, commerce, politics, science, education, journalism, and work. Economically, the buying power of Latinos in the North American market represents approximately $300 billion annually. In politics, for the first time in the history of the country, the 'Latino factor' is discussed as decisively influencing the results of national elections. Accordingly, intense efforts were recently made to register more than 3 million new Latino voters. The presence and contributions of Hispanics in the labor force can be seen in all sectors of agriculture, industry, commerce, professions, and services. The Latino presence in the industrial and administrative sectors as well as in different areas of social and political leadership is beginning to grow. Haubegger (1999), in an article appearing in Newsweek indicates with optimism:

After all, the Latinos are true Americans, some of the original residents of the Americas, Spanish was the first European language that was spoken on the continent… Just as we are more Americans, the U.S. is simultaneously arriving to be more Latin. The U.S. knows Latinos as artists and athletes. But, very soon, all the children in the U.S. will be able to dream and aspire to be writers such as Sandra Cisneros, astronauts such as Ellen Ochoa, or judges such as Jose Cabranes…

PROBLEMS OF INCORPORATION AND INCLUSION

Despite some degree of success achieved by a few Latinos, the vast proportion of them is affected by serious challenges imposed by the social and economic structure. Problems of income inequality and lack of acceptance in North American communities reflect the limitations impacting the lives of a high percentage of the Hispanic population.

Beginning in 1960, with the composition of immigrants changing and the number of persons from Europe being surpassed by those coming from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia, a diminishing of opportunities traditionally offered to European immigrants is observed. A dangerous reduction in educational and work opportunities, salaries, and other programs and services to meet the needs of new immigrants has resulted, with a negative impact on the Latino community.

Hispanics, in general, have experienced relatively low levels of assimilation into the North American system in the past. Langone (1993) indicates that to be Hispanic in the U.S. means, at times, to have to live in a divided world. The socio-economic situation of Hispanics reveals the presence of two unequal worlds where the structure of opportunities is still limited for a high number of Hispanics in the U.S. The socio-economic, educational, and work situations of Latinos reveal a picture that requires urgent improvement.

A brief analysis of some of the factors which structure and maintain conditions of inequality for Hispanics in the United States must include, therefore, basic information about education, work, and income.

1. Education

The educational system in the U.S. has not been successful in overcoming some of the sources of educational inequality. Differences between the public and private sectors are maintained, and there are also great differences in quality and resources between schools and school districts. The least favored are the districts where Hispanics and other minority groups happen to live. The resulting differences between Hispanics and non-Hispanics in educational achievement are alarming. As indicated in a national report presented in 1998 to the President of the United States by the Commission on the Excellence in the Education of Hispanic-Americans:

The magnitude of the crisis is unparalleled. According to every educational indicator, Hispanics have progress levels that are alarming, from preschool to primary school and from intermediate and secondary school to higher education. The cumulative effect of this negligence is obviously detrimental not only for Hispanics but also for all the country. (Report on Hispanic American Education, 1998).

The report maintains that Hispanic children in the U.S. are not registered into preschool educational programs despite the importance of this period in the growth and development of individuals. Both the deficiencies of the educational system and the difficulties of some Hispanic parents to direct and stimulate the educational development of their children contribute to a high school dropout rate of 28% for Latino youths between 16 and 24 years of age. The school dropout rate of Hispanics is higher than that of African-Americans (14%) and three times higher than that of Caucasian youth (8%).

This situation has serious repercussions for post-high school and university studies where the number of Hispanics is disproportionately low. In 1997, only 10% of the Hispanic population in the U.S. had earned a university bachelor's degree, compared to almost 30% of Caucasians. In the case of doctorate degrees, in 1994 of a total of 43,261 Ph.D's granted by all universities in the country, only 946 were awarded to Hispanics – about 2%. This figure is substantially low when compared with the 26,137 Ph.D's received by Caucasian candidates (60.4%), the 11,530 Ph.D's obtained by foreign students (26.7%), the 1,943 doctoral degrees of Asian-Americans (4.5%), and the 1,344 Ph.D's granted to African-Americans. In areas of science and technology, the problem appears equally critical. According to NASA, between 1988 and 1997, less than half of one percent of all the Ph.D's in science and technology were awarded to Latino candidates.

The 1998 report on education relates the described situation with the mechanisms of acceptance or rejection of Hispanics in the U.S., saying:

The nature of the problem of the education of Hispanics is rooted in a refusal to accept, to recognize, and to value the central role of Hispanics in the past, present, and future of this nation. The education of Hispanic Americans is characterized by a history of neglect, oppression, and periods of wanton denial of opportunity (p.13).
2. Work
The relation between education and work has been clearly established in modern society. Those with more education are generally successful in finding better jobs with more ease and retention than those individuals with less educational achievements. Unemployment levels demonstrate that Hispanic workers are most affected by unemployment. The unemployment rate among Hispanics tends to be approximately two times higher than that of Caucasian workers. Contrary to stereotypes describing Hispanics as lazy, the number of workers by family group among Latinos demonstrates the high level of work participation of this population. The experience of the three million migrant agricultural workers and their families is alone enough to reject these stereotypes.

More than 90% of all migrant workers who labor in the U.S. agriculture and agro-industry are Hispanic. The majority of the time their living and work conditions are bad, and the services that they receive are deficient. In recent testimony before the U.S. Congress, the Organization of United Agricultural Workers declared that there were more than 800,000 children of migrant workers employed on North American farms. Many of these children are in conditions of great danger because of the nature of the work and excessive use of chemical products. Because of the use of contaminated water, the incidence of parasitic infections and gastric-intestinal illnesses among migrant agricultural workers is 35 times higher than the levels registered for the rest of the population. Many of them have a high risk of suffering from dental problems, deficient nutrition, and accidents on the job. Their children are vulnerable to having high levels of mortality and infant deaths, as well as problems in their future physical and social development.

The participation of Latinos in the labor force is certainly more ample and intense than what the dominant members of American society are willing to acknowledge and reward. In part, this could explain why a large number of Latinos still occupy positions in occupational categories of low salary. A comparison with Caucasian and African-American workers in various sectors reveals that Hispanics tend to be over-represented in agriculture, mining, and minor services, but with low representation in administrative positions, transportation, communication, finance, and insurance.

Data pertinent to the distribution of workers in the state of Minnesota where there is a Hispanic population estimated at 175,000 persons show that in comparison with Caucasians, Latinos are scarcely represented in the occupations of highest income (that is, executives, professionals, sales, and administration). It confirms, also, the national picture that indicates a high proportion of Latinos concentrated in the service sector.

3. Income
Patterns of income distribution allow us to appreciate most directly the socio-economic disadvantages of Hispanics in the U.S. North American society has a relatively high income inequality with a Gini coefficient of .33, compared to the Netherlands, Belgium, Japan, Switzerland, and other Western European nations with a Gini coefficient of less than .30. It is well known that in social systems with high economic discrepancies between rich and poor, members of vulnerable groups and minority populations are usually most affected. The average annual income of Latino families, for example, estimated in 1998 at $28,330 is considerably lower than that of Caucasian, non-Hispanic families with average incomes of $42,439 for the same period.

Today, more than 20% of Hispanic families live in poverty, compared to less than 9% of non-Hispanic Caucasian families. Despite this, the number of workers in relation to the family group is higher among the poor Latinos than among Caucasians. As Aponte (2000) demonstrates, in 1998 around 29% of poor Latino families had the head of the household working all year long, compared to 24% of poor Caucasian families and 19% of poor African-American families. Poverty, independent of race, color, or country of origin, leads to a number of social problems that affect society as a whole. Similarly, discrimination and exclusion practices against Hispanics or individuals of other groups end up hurting the entire social system. Discrimination towards Hispanics has been documented not only in areas of work and salaries, but also in access to loans, health, and other services. One report about bank practices for home loans and other financial services reveals that one of the largest banks of New York denied home loans to about 46% of Hispanics who applied for them, compared with 17% of denials to Caucasian and non-Hispanic clients (New York Newsday, Oct. 1991).

In addition, more than a third of the Latinos in the U.S. lack a minimum health insurance. This is worst among migrant agricultural workers and their families who, because of job mobility, lack of knowledge about the system, absence of health services in rural areas, and lack of economic resources to pay for medical attention, are more vulnerable to illnesses and accidents.

SOME THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
What are some of the social theories studying adaptation of individuals in a society and, more specifically, issues concerning system's acceptance and exclusion?

Early theories dealing with adaptation of immigrants emphasized the importance of socialization for a successful integration process (Handlin, 1941; Portes, and Manning, 1986). Park’s Cultural Assimilation perspective (1926) suggested that adaptation depends on learning the values, norms, and conducts of the new society. He maintains that the nature of ethnic relations is principally evolutionary and tends to improve as immigrants, members of a minority, adapt to the new culture. Myrdal (1944) expands the notion of the assimilation of minority groups, arguing that in the framework of ethnic relations a cultural change is produced that simultaneously affects the members of the dominant society as well as those of the minority populations.

The Multicultural Paradigm (Berry, 1993) maintains that the relation of diverse ethnic groups entails exchanges by which individuals make arrangements to maintain elements of their ethnic identities. In this process, the individuals and the communities arrange to maintain basic elements of their own ethnic identities and are able to develop the fundamentals for a greater degree of socio-cultural pluralism (Glazer and Moynihan 1970; Alba and Chamlin 1983). This perspective, in addition to emphasizing to the benefits of a pluralistic society, also acknowledges the importance of cultural and ethnic diversity in modern society.

In recent years, the World Economic System Model (Castells, 1975) focusing on international labor migration observed that the displacement of human resources and adaptation of immigrants are responses to movements of transnational capital. This perspective analyzes the international
migratory movements from the point of view of the displacement of labor and demand for workers in other countries. The scope and emphasis of this approach are on the world economy as a system. (Castells 1975; Portes 1978; Sassen-Koob 1978). In a segmented labor market, the necessities of lowering costs and increasing earnings translates into a greater demand for workers with the lowest salaries which tends to absorb immigrants and seasonal workers. The concentration of immigrants in those occupations that usually require low levels of education and are poorly paid translates into conditions of limited opportunities and maintaining the poverty levels among those workers. It could argue, then, that this operational framework of the capitalist world economy tends to concentrate ethnic minorities in extractive and manufacturing jobs and is functional for the necessities of the dominant groups.

The Ethnic Relations Network (Tilly, 1990; Portes, 1995) and the Social Capital theory (Coleman, 1988) suggests that common ties among members of the same ethnic group allow them to trust each other and act together in a foreign environment. According to these perspectives, immigrants bring along with their ethnic and cultural backgrounds some important contributions to the new society (Portes 1995; Tilly 1990). The value of social relations and networks between individuals of a common ethnic group reside in the capacity of its members to develop potential resources in the new society. Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) recognize the positive effects of these relations in economic transactions and the reduction of formal contracts in their work. This symbolic capital is based on the faith, interpersonal understanding, and group relations that many-times play a key function in the maintenance of the relations network that facilitates the access to work and living opportunities and other community resources. Although residential proximity helps the development of this type of social network, residential concentration of ethnic groups may also reflect diverse levels of racial or ethnic segregation as indicated in the studies done by Massey (1993) and Lin Yuan and Kosiuski (1994). Massey (1995) discusses that the high concentration of Latino immigrants in certain areas may contribute to reduce their necessity to learn English well, which contributes to maintaining their isolation from the dominant groups.

Coleman (1988) defines the concept of social capital as a factor of the social structure that permits individuals and society to reach specific objectives. The elements of social capital are, among others, the confidence of individuals to relate and act together and the conduct of solidarity and reciprocity with other subjects. Among members of the same ethnic group, some of these elements are easier because of the sense of pertinence, of common cause, and of something that Marsden (1988) and Friedman and Krackhardt (1997) call social homofilia, something significant in common. The importance of this concept for the study of the processes of acceptance and rejection of immigrants or Hispanics, in the U.S. is based on the effect that social capital may have on the relations of individuals of these minority groups with the dominant society. Also, if the notion of social capital is considered as a public good, necessary for the better functioning of the entire society, then the formation of social capital must be of benefit for all sectors and groups of a social system.

In a highly competitive and exclusive society, social capital of some could be interpreted as a possible threat or loss of power of others. Ibarra (1993) observes, for example, that a certain sense of integration and homogeneity between members of an ethnic group may create a barrier between this group and the dominant majority. This situation, if successful in connecting individuals from a minority group, may well accelerate the accumulation of social capital among members of an ethnic group.

Finally, the concept of Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1984) also called attention to those elements used by dominant groups in a society to determine and maintain boundaries of acceptance or exclusion of new members. Interested in the study of factors of exclusion of minorities by dominant groups and sectors, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) introduced the concept of cultural capital, which represents those signs and elements utilized for social and cultural selection. Bordieu (1984) maintains that in the social system, dominant groups use cultural capital to determine cultural distance or proximity or to incorporate or exclude new members. An important part of this cultural capital may be the judicial norms, cultural patterns, residential and organizational barriers, and services exclusive for the dominant groups.

THE SOCIOCYBERNETIC PERSPECTIVE

Although these theoretical approaches have made important contributions in this area of study, the need for a system’s perspective to deal with issues of exclusion and discrimination in a global society is still deeply felt. Sociocybernetics may offer sufficient depth and breadth to examine issues of immigration, cultural diversity, and inclusion within the context of a dynamic and complex social system. The system approach may well provide us with the tools to explain the present and explore future improvements.

Although the cultural assimilation perspective and other approaches take into consideration some of the analytical elements of earlier systems theory, the emphasis seems to be on social control and system’s equilibrium. As Buckley (1967) suggests, the implicit notion is that “such mechanisms as those of defense, adjustment, and deviance control, all aimed at adaptation of the actor to a given dominant structure” (p.30). Accordingly, immigrants and members of ethnic minorities are required to adopt established social norms. This early conception of systems theory rests on the idea of stability and equilibrium which may lead to rather simplistic explanations of social systems as resistant to change. Contrary to this static notion, Geyer and van der Zouwen (1991) state that “sociocybernetics inevitably tends to concentrate on problems associated with change and growth, rather than with stability.” A few years later, Geyer (1995) returns to this issue, arguing that “Since complex modern societies—as compared to simpler ones—are highly dynamic and interactive, and thus change at accelerated rates, they are generally in a far-from-equilibrium situation” (p.24).

Bertalanffy (1968), a pioneer of the General System Theory, recognized early on the importance of the individual and values as key elements for change in social systems. He implicitly accepts the recursive nature of social systems and emphasizes the importance of values and the inherent dangers of the control of communication of values. Such control tends to minimize creativity and change, and when that happens, the system loses not only opportunities for all its members but also “the specifically human features of responsibility, free decision, and true human values” (p.125-126).
Also Buckley describes the advantages of modern systems theory in terms of the capacity of the social systems to change, adapt and modify their structures. Systems Theory, he says:

transcends the equilibrium reference...in recognizing the very different problem of the complex, open, adaptive system which depends not simply on mutual relations of parts, but on very particular kinds of mutual interrelations. In addition, the important problems of primacy of some parts over others and the varying degrees of connectedness of some parts of the system to others are made subject to analysis (p.79).

This statement may well be applied to view immigration not as simply an arrival of individuals to a new place followed by varying levels of integration, but as a complex process of system's change and adaptation. This approach can be better-understood analyzing relationships of diverse groups as part of the entire social system. In this case, the entire U.S. society where many of the problems facing Latinos are based on stereotypes, negative attitudes, and ethnocentric values that are institutionalized in the North American culture. Regarding this issue, an important lesson from Beer’s “Viable System Model” (1972, 1975) that can be applicable to an understanding of the Latino experience in the U.S. is that if society as a whole, wishes to maintain itself ‘adaptively’, it must allow for the self-realization of its members.

Luhmann (1990), also provides important conceptual insights for the study of inclusion of individuals in a social system. The concepts of inclusion and exclusion are without doubt key concepts to assess social system’s performance. In practical terms, inclusion and exclusion become essential parts of everyday life of immigrants in a new cultural setting. According to him, “the concept of inclusion means the encompassing of the entire population in the performances of the individual function systems” (p.34). The notion of inclusion also helps to delineate the opposite in terms of exclusion that emerges in a society where through a number of conscious actions denies segments of the population benefits and opportunities. Exclusion is, therefore, the “conscious retention of marginality” (p.34) which denies participation of some groups in social performances.

CONCLUSION

Application of sociocybernetics to the future of Hispanics in the United States requires recognition of Hispanics as part of a complex, adaptive system. The statistics on Hispanic participation in the United States social system do not reflect inclusion and integration (as a form of system's autoeposis) for this growing segment of society but rather increasing marginalization and exclusion. The situation for Latinos in the United States is a clear example of the potentially allopoietic nature of social systems described by Maturana (1972) when he refers to:

A human being that through his interactions with other human beings participates in interactions proper to their social system in a manner that does not involve his autoeposis as a constitutive feature of it, is being used by the social system but is not one of its members. If the human being cannot escape from this situation because his life is at stake, he is under social abuse (Maturana Pp29ix).

A large segment of the population cannot be expected to continue living indefinitely under social abuse. If one accepts that the statistics on education, work, and income reflect an allopoietic situation for Hispanics in the United States, then one must also accept that the situation is not contributing to the realization of society as an adaptive, or viable system. The future of the entire social system of the United States must be envisioned, therefore, as integrally interwoven with a better and prosperous future of the Latino population.

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