

The Future of Latinos in the United States
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I have been asked to speak to the futuristic outlook of Latinos in the U.S. I should like to begin by pointing out that my vocation as a historical theologian does not give me the kind of prescience that this question may require. My particular discipline also does not equip me with the expertise on quantitative tools of measurement and analysis that a sociologist or an economist, for instance, uses to prognosticate future outcomes. Thus, while I will attempt to address the question of the “futurity” of Latina/os¹ in the U.S. by relying on quantifiable and analytical resources from these important disciplines, my prognosis will not depend nor be delimited solely by this data. By this I mean to establish that my underlying basis for my cautious but, nevertheless, hope-full prognostication has another fount. That fount is God’s promise never to leave nor forsake us. And, like many of its tributaries, rushing forth vigorously from that very fount is yet another, secondary, basis for my prognosis; that is, the legacy of power and resourcefulness of our peoples. Having said this, allow me to pause for a moment to ensure you that I bring no naïve or romantic view of our peoples and our legacy. Like any peoples, nations and pueblos, we too have things of which we are not proud. These must not be hidden or silenced least we neglect to grieve, repent, learn, and be transformed by them. I will refer to some of these today as the Spirit has led me and in the spirit of *familia*.

The main body of this essay will thus build on the important work of sociologists, and economists² after which I will offer some *pautas* as to the role and call of the church in these areas. I will explore, very briefly, four categories or themes that have been used by sociologists and economists to describe our present socio-political and economic experience in the U.S. and what these may mean for the future. These categories include our political and economic

¹ I will use Latina/o and Hispanic interchangeably.

² The four categories or “themes” I will be using are borrowed from the work of Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Pérez in their edited book, *Latinos: Remaking America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press with the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2002). I focus here on the first chapter where in they lay out the four categories.

situation, and the effects of the racialization and segregation of our peoples.³ Despite my aversion to numbers⁴ and, my awareness of what statistical data can do to an audience's attention span, I have taken the time to scour through them and share some of them here. My hope is that the gravity of the numbers, otherwise named José, Anita, Luis and Margarita—our *hijas, hijos, tías, tíos y miembros de nuestras iglesias*—may give us another, more comprehensive, vista into the depth, height and width of the needs that assail us indicating, also, where some of our energies need to be channeled. In light of this, I believe that church has a prophetic challenge before it that it ignores at the peril of those it serves. I fear that some of us have neglected this call in light of a false or at least deficit spirituality or *santidad*. I will thus suggest that a spirituality that does not tend to the material aspects of life, through such “unholy” or “mundane” venues as politics, for instance, is not only unbiblical; it has, and will continue to have, adverse affects for our future. Some examples will help me illustrate how our theologies and the practices they engender may serve to curtail our political, economic and social muscle or, embolden us for the walk that awaits us. Con ustedes y mis consiervas/os, abrogaré por una teología edificada sobre el legado profético cuyo mensaje vivido da testimonio de las buenas nuevas como algo que se hace palpable en el futuro político, económico y social de nuestros pueblos. Thus, I will emphasize the church's central prophetic role in working for and modeling the socio-political and spiritual well-being of our communities as part of what means to follow after a just and righteous God.⁵ But, first, we must attend to the data...

Politics and Economics

I was struck by some statistics Bill Moyers shared in his speech at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the United Church of Christ regarding the ever widening gap between the haves and have-nots in the U.S. “For years now, our political and economic system has been fixed to favor people at the top.”⁶ The numbers that followed were daunting. In 1960 the gap between

³ I am cognizant that I am leaving out what may also be deemed as other important categories. By choosing these categories, I do not mean to place the blame for all of our woes on discrimination, etc. It is, however, to say that these issues permeate and play a significant role in our very existence and future as Latinos in the U.S.

⁴ See my essay, 2002. Healing an Aversion to Statistics: A Postscript. *Perspectivas: Occasional Papers*. 5 (Spring).

⁵ I realize that none of this is new. My mission here, however, is not to bring novelty, it is to be proclamatory and, thus, prophetic. God's word is *always* prophetic!

⁶ Bill Moyers, “Moyers Challenges UCC: ‘Drive out the money changers,’” *United Church of Christ News* [Speech, 23 June 2007]; available from <http://www.ucc.org/news/significant-speeches/moyers-challenges-ucc-drive.html>; Internet; accessed June 25, 2007.

the top 20% and the bottom 20% was 30-fold. Now, he continued, there is a 75-fold difference. The share of the wealth to the top is up 7%, representing a 7% drop to those in the lower half. 80% of all income gains are benefiting the top 1% of our people. His illustration of a pie unequally divided among 100 guests vividly helped to drive the meaning of these statistics home. “[I]t’s like inviting a hundred people over for some pie, cutting the pie into 5 slices, giving 4 of the slices to just one person, and leaving one slice for the remaining 99.”⁷ It is not surprising, as Bill Moyers reminded us and history has proven, that the many will end up fighting each other for the one slice of pie we have been betokened.⁸ Referring to an article in *The Economist* he stated, “The United States risks calcifying into a European style class-based society.”⁹ In contrast, however, “the typical child starting out in poverty in Europe or Canada has a better chance of climbing out of it than a child born in poverty in the United States”.¹⁰ In fact, statistics show that 34.4 percent of all Latino children are now living below the poverty line. Non-Hispanic children under the poverty line comprise 10.6 percent. Among these, Puerto Rican children are reported to have the highest rate of poverty of any Latino group.¹¹ Hispanic or non-Hispanic, there ought not to be *any* child living under those conditions. Indeed, it is a sad paradox that in one of the wealthiest and powerful empires of the world, we would still have 37 million poor and 45 million without health insurance.¹² A closer look at the Latino situation will reveal that this is the general state of economic affairs wherein our Latino communities struggle—not just to survive, but especially to thrive. The question throughout will be what can and is the church doing to change current projections?

⁷ Moyers, “Moyers Challenges UCC: ‘Drive out the money changers.’”

⁸ “Don’t be surprised if they fight over it, which is exactly what’s happening when people look at their wages and then their taxes and end up hating the government and anything it does.” Moyers, “Moyers challenges UCC: ‘Drive out the money changers.’”

⁹ Moyers, “Moyers Challenges UCC: ‘Drive out the money changers.’”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Suárez-Orozco and Pérez, 26. Trumpbour and Bernard report that 40% of Puerto Ricans living in New York are poor, a rate that “well exceeds the totals for African Americans.” They predict, given the deindustrialization of New York, that the “rapidly expanding Dominican community in New York will suffer a fate similar to that of their Puerto Rican predecessors.” See John Trumpbour and Elaine Bernard, “Unions and Latinos: Mutual Transformation,” in Suárez-Orozco and Pérez, 137-138.

In a recent report, it states that “although Hispanics represented only 18% of all the children in the U.S., they accounted for almost 1/3 (30 percent) of all children living in poverty.” Suzanne Ryan, et al., “Hispanic Teen Pregnancies and Birth Rates: Looking Behind the Numbers,” *Child Trends Research Brief*, publication #2005-1 (February 2005): 6; available from <http://www.childtrends.org/Files/HispanicRB.pdf>; accessed July 9, 2007.

¹² Barak Obama, “A Politics of Conscience,” *United Church of Christ News* [Speech, 23 June 2007]; available from <http://www.ucc.org/news/significant-speeches/a-politics-of-conscience.html>; accessed June 25, 2007.

Despite these economic factors, Latinos are slowly making strides in the political realm where their voices need to be heard and be accounted. Currently, there are 3 Latinos serving in the U. S. Senate¹³ and 23 serving in the House of Representatives.¹⁴ According to *USA TODAY* both the Democratic and Republican parties are “competing fiercely for Hispanic voters, who made up 7% of the electorate in 2000, according to exit polls”.¹⁵ Suárez-Orozco and Paez note that “Latinos are...becoming increasingly relevant actors with influence in political processes” both in the United States and in their countries of origin. They argue that “Latinos...are an enduring, rather than a transient feature of the new American social landscape”. This socio-political landscape, which now also can be called “José,” “Lupita” and “Cachita” are, according to Arturo Vargas, Executive Director of the NALEO Educational Fund, “writing the next chapter of our political history”. “Latinos in states with emerging communities are,” he continues,

demonstrating that they can attract votes from and represent diverse constituents.¹⁶ Latinos serving in top federal and state positions have the power to address the issues that are most important to our community, and all Americans: education, economic opportunity and our involvement in the war in Iraq. Latinos will continue to show that they can provide leadership on these issues for All Americans—our future political progress depends on it.¹⁷

¹³ These senators are Ken L. Salazar (D-Colorado), 2005-present, Melquiades “Mel” R. Martínez, (R-Florida), 2005-present and Robert Menedez (D-New Jersey), 2006-present. See United States Senate, “Ethnic Diversity in the Senate” [Government site]; available from http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/minority_senators.htm; accessed June 25, 2007.

¹⁴ Among these, according to the 2006 report put out by NALEO (National Association of Latinos Elected and Appointed Officials), there are 19 Democrats and four Republicans. Seven represent California, six represent Texas (one of which is Republican), three represent Florida (all Republicans), two represent Arizona, two represent NY, one NJ, one Colorado and, one Illinois. As per 2000, California, Texas, Arizona, Florida and Illinois were among the states with the largest number of Latinas/os (respectively). New Mexico had the highest (42.1% of the total population), but has no Latinas/o representation in the House or Senate. Its present governor, Bill Richardson, Democratic presidential hopeful and is Hispanic. For a table depicting Hispanic population for each of the states, see Suárez-Orozco and Pérez, 14-15. African Americans have 40 serving in the House of Representatives. For the NALEO findings see <http://www.naleo.org/downloads/Latino>Candidate>06Results.pdf>.

¹⁵ See Haya El Nasser, “39 million make Hispanics largest U.S. minority group,” *Census, USA TODAY*, [May 19, 2003]; available from http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/2003-06-18-Census_x.htm; accessed June 28, 2007.

¹⁶ The last election demonstrates that Latinos are increasingly in different political camps. In a *USA TODAY*, 2003 article, Cubans in Miami are described as largely conservative Republicans, Mexicans in Los Angeles and Puerto Ricans in New York as more liberal and largely voting Democratic. See Haya El Nasser, “39 million make Hispanics largest U.S. minority group,” *Census, USA TODAY*.

¹⁷ National Association of Latinos Elected and Appointed Officials, “Latinos Achieve New Political Milestones in Congress and State Houses: Latinos in states with emerging communities are writing the next chapter

There is also good news coming from the economic sector where, we find that well-educated and highly skilled immigrants are finding their way into knowledge-based industries.¹⁸ In California's Silicon Valley almost 40 percent of these businesses are owned by immigrants.¹⁹ The statistics reporting Hispanic female entrepreneurship is, also heartening. A 2002 study by the Center for Women's Business Research, reports that Hispanic females are ahead in the number of businesses owned by minority women, estimating that they own almost half a million of the firms owned by women of color.²⁰ Despite their report that the women are not usually taken seriously or respected by the men in their own ethnic communities, they forge forward as role models, as co-contributors with their male counterparts in contributing to our economy by creating revenue and employment and making a difference in our communities.²¹ This is good news for our future. We need to support our Hispanic women's businesses with our patronage and their *¡Sí se puede!* (Yes we can!)-attitude with our respect.

In short, the saying that "there is strength in numbers" is being played out in the many downtowns, USA and in Capital Hill by Latinos/as who are taking advantage of their growing numbers and buying power as political clout. Recent organized protest marches by legal and illegal immigrants toward immigration reform and the effect it is having in the Senate is but a glimpse, an epiphany, if you will, of our political and economic muscle. However, history has shown us that numbers are not enough. Our future depends on whether we take advantage of our right to vote. It also depends on the extent to which we are willing to engage the time to educate ourselves and our communities on the repercussions and implications of the various issues that

of Latino political history" [Press Release, November 11, 2006]; available from <http://www.naleo.org/pr110906a.html>; accessed June 23, 2007. According to an article in the HispanicBusiness.com, Hispanics are becoming a viable commodity. "At one time, I think Hispanics were viewed by the people who were running campaigns as a little bit of a distraction, a little bit of a nuisance," says Jose Villarreal, a San Antonio lawyer. "Now the community is like an IPO. Everybody wants to invest in it." Susan Page, "Hispanics are returning to Democrats in 2008," *USA Today* [Article, 28 June 2007]; available from http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/2003-06-18-Census_x.htm; accessed July 1, 2007.

¹⁸ Suárez-Orozco and Páez, 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Low-skilled workers, however, are not going to see much change in their status or possibility of upward mobility.

²⁰ Center for Women's Business Research, "Growth is Key Focus for All Women Entrepreneurs" [Organization site, 22 October 2002]; available from <http://www.cfwbcr.org/press/details.php?id=48>; Internet; accessed July 1, 2007. See also John Burke, "Hispanic Women Lead in Minority Ownership," *Bankrate.com* [Article, 13 September 2002]; available from <http://www.bankrate.com/bcr/news/biz/thumb/20020913a.asp>; accessed July 8, 2007.

²¹ Center for Women's Business Research, "Growth is Key Focus for All Women Entrepreneurs."

come before us. And, here is where our theology, our *siervos* and *siervas* and, the work of the church becomes crucial. I will get to this soon.

Racialization and segregation

The next themes, racialization²² and, segregation feed off each other and are very familiar to us for it is our lived experience of marginalization and *lucha*. Our daily struggle and our advocacy against racialization and segregation, however, are often interpreted by others as an excuse for laziness, lack of initiative and strength of character. We, and not discriminatory systems, become the problem. This perception lingers despite years of research attesting to the adverse economic and political effects of racialization in the U.S. A study conducted by Thomas Espenshade and Maryann Belanger, both Princeton University sociologists, looked at the data on American public opinion on immigration through twenty organizations over the span of over 30 years and found that

Latin American and Caribbean immigrants in general, and Mexican immigrants in particular, rank somewhere near the bottom in terms of how Americans view immigrants from different parts of the world. European immigrants are most favored, and Asians fall in the middle.²³

In contrast, with Asians, Latin Americans are viewed as more likely to “commit crimes and take advantage of welfare, and less likely to work hard, do well in school, and have strong family values”.²⁴ Suárez-Orozco and Páez add their voice to our own concerns as pastors, teachers and leaders for the healthy development of our youth who have to fight against the insidious force of self-fulfilling prophecies. In fact, Hispanics, according to the Sentencing Project Report, are the “fastest growing group being imprisoned” for all state and federal inmates.²⁵ Along with being the majority for those arrested for immigration violations, Hispanics “experience discrimination during arrest, prosecution and sentencing, and are more likely to be incarcerated than whites

²² I am defining racialization as the construction and imposition “of a specific image based on a set of assumptions or stereotypes...to a certain race”. Adapted from “What is ‘racialization’ and how does it relate to military advertising,” *United for Peace and Justice* available at <http://www.unitedforpeace.org/article.php?id=3461>; accessed July 1, 2007.

²³ Suárez-Orozco and Páez, 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁵ The report further states that Hispanic women in state prison and jails “are incarcerated at almost twice the rate as of white females (117 persons to 63 persons per 100,000 population)”. See The Sentencing Project [posted August, 2003]; available from http://www.sentencingproject.org/Admin/Documents/publications/inc_hispanicprisoners.pdf; accessed July 9, 2007.

charged with the same offenses”.²⁶ The National Council of La Raza got it right when it said that this amounts to “losing a whole generation of people”--what ought to be seen as a “national tragedy”. I also agree with them that crime and justice issues are “the new civil rights issues of the 21st century.”²⁷

As mothers, fathers, grandparents, and pastors, we are all too familiar with the next set of statistics, teen pregnancy. We have the highest teen pregnancy and birth rate compared to the rest of the population.²⁸ Statistics estimate that almost one quarter of Hispanics will have a child before they reach their 20th birthday.²⁹ They further predict that children born to teens are “more likely to face disadvantages throughout life, including lower educational attainment, a greater risk of poverty and of growing up with a single parent and an increased likelihood of engaging in problem behaviors and in early sexual activity”.³⁰ Indeed, only a strong, committed effort on the part of our *familias*, churches, and pastors working with familial, educational, penal, and other systems will help curtail these statistics and help set our youth on a path toward living out their full potential.³¹

A result of racialization is segregation. This is also connected to white-flight and to a concentration of Latinos in cities and states where low-skilled, service-centered jobs are most available. According to the Harvard Civil Rights Project, Latino children attending U.S. schools “are now facing the most intense segregation (by race and poverty) of any ethnic and racial group in the United States”.³² According to the same study, this trend will increase rather than decrease creating further inequalities in educational opportunities and other benefits. Their

²⁶ See “Report: U.S. criminal justice system unfair, unjust to Hispanics,” *Michigan State University’s Newsroom.msu.edu* [October 14, 2004]; available from <http://newsroom.msu.edu/site/indexer/2172/content.htm>; accessed July 9, 2007.

²⁷ See “Report: U.S. criminal justice system unfair, unjust to Hispanics,” *Michigan State University’s Newsroom.msu.edu* [October 14, 2004]; available from <http://newsroom.msu.edu/site/indexer/2172/content.htm>; accessed July 9, 2007. They call, and provide ideas, for a system that will protect public safety without destroying lives and wasting resources.

²⁸ Suzanne Ryan, et al., “Hispanic Teen Pregnancies and Birth Rates: Looking Behind the Numbers,” *Child Trends Research Brief*, <http://www.childtrends.org/Files/HispanicRB.pdf>; accessed July 9, 2007.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ We are not likely to see much change in teen pregnancy unless we take the time to communicate clearly and openly with our youth about their sexuality. Rather than protest sexuality education classes, we ought to consider supporting them by informing ourselves concerning what is being or not being taught and being ready to respond to our youth’s questions--even making such topics a part of our churches’ programming.

³² See Suárez-Orozco and Pérez, 28.

plight is further exacerbated by a daunting drop-out rate.³³ Although they only comprise 17 percent of high-school aged youth between 16 and 24, Hispanics in 2004 accounted for 40 percent of all high school dropouts, with foreign-born Latinos making up 28 percent of this total.³⁴ What is more, large numbers of our youth are not passing the achievement tests recently instituted as prerequisites to graduation.³⁵

If a high school and post-secondary education are determinants for socio-economic class and status—and they are—then these statistics make for a rather gloomy forecast for most of our youth.³⁶ Nevertheless, we continue to see more “firsts” in our ranks. Many of us are the first to graduate from college and/or receive post-secondary degrees. We, in turn, will expect the same from our children who will eventually come to see post-secondary education as achievable and part of the normal expectations for their lives. The trend will be slow in changing, however, if we do not mobilize at the micro and macro levels to make a difference.

In short, statistics reveal that we face a battle that is *cuستا arriba*. It is daunting to the point of being paralyzing—if we let it. Recent anti-Latino immigration sentiments are only adding to our almost Sisyphean climb. It is not the great statistical rock we have to roll up the hill that we lament; it is the almost sure and disheartening expectation that the rock—our efforts—will be pushed back down the hill again taking with it many casualties along the way. Nevertheless, we have and continue to be willing to “do what it takes” to get it rolling, moving up the raucous mountain defiantly hope-full, obstinately subversive. We have and continue to be a strong people who serve a great God. From one border to another, Latinos/as and our non-

³³ See Richard Fry, “Hispanic Youth Dropping Out of U.S. Schools: Measuring the Challenge,” *Pew Hispanic Center* (2003); iii. Note, the “drop-out” status refers to youth between the ages of 16-24 who have not graduated from High School or completed a General Educational Development (GED). In the year 2000, 21 percent of Hispanics between the ages of 16-19 years did not finish high school. This difference is stark compared to only 8 percent of European Americans who did not complete high school and 12 percent of African Americans.

³⁴ Child Trends DataBank, “Drop Out Rates” [Report]; available from www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/1_PDF.pdf. According to research conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2001, 43.4 percent of Hispanic, ages 16-24 born outside of the United States were high school dropouts. For more information, see National Center for Education Statistics, “Dropout Rates in the United States: 2001,” [Report]; available from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/dropout2001/sec_3.asp.

³⁵ Suárez-Orozco and Pérez (28) state that in 1999 “over one third of all Latino students failed the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).”

³⁶ According to the 2003 Census Bureau, the difference between European Americans with advanced degrees and Latinos/as was \$74,122 to \$67,679—a difference of about 10 percent less in income. The Bachelor’s level, however, accounts for the greatest disparity with European Americans earning \$53,185 or \$12,263 (23 percent) more than Hispanics with an average of \$40,949 annual income. Nicole Stoops, “Educational Attainment in the United States: 2003: Population Characteristics,” *United States Census Bureau*, publication #20-550 (Report, June 2004); available from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-550.pdf>; Internet; accessed July 2, 2007.

Latino/a sisters and brothers are coming together through ministerial associations, political and labor organizations, through the arts and community bases and, they are making a difference. But, more yet needs to be done and here is where I would like to offer a few suggestions.