

Where are Latinos in a Future Multiracial Society?

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In an article posted March 4, 2010, Yes! Magazine's Sarah van Gelder engages a panel of visionaries on “Our Future as a Multiracial Society.” An otherwise excellent discussion, the panel seems to overlook a centrally important issue, one that fundamentally undermines Ms. van Gelder's initial premise:

In the year 2042, people of color will be in the majority in the United States. They already are in many of our cities and farming areas. Yet America still imagines itself—on television, in advertising, and in political rhetoric—as racially white and culturally European. What would it mean to change our self-image and recognize that we're made up of a mixture of races, nationalities, and cultures?

The problem is that People of Color will NOT be in the majority in 2042. Nor anytime soon thereafter. At least, not as long as the Census, government agencies, mass media and other shapers of cultural consciousness (or collective self-image), insist, as it has for the past few decades, on de-racializing Latinos.

Following colonial-period notions of “the one-drop rule,” people of Latin American origins have historically been racialized as something other than “white”: a designation originally reserved for British and other Christians of northern European descent; the Irish, southern and eastern Europeans, and Jews were eventually (and only quite recently) accepted into the white collective.

Yet since the 1960s, demographers have known that Latinos would numerically surpass African-Americans and that, together with other populations of color, would outnumber whites by mid-21st century. Since then, a gradual process of redefining the admission requirements into the white race has been in progress. Latinos are this process' intended new recruits. Hence the invention of the term “Hispanic” that orients one's thinking toward Spain, Europe and whiteness, and away from Latin America, colonialism, resistance, revolution and, most significantly, large-scale and historic racial intermixing among Europeans, Africans and Native peoples. Hence, the reclassification of “Hispanic/Latino” as an “ethnicity”—and NOT a “race”—in the past two censal processes.

So, while the percentage of Latinos in the US will more than double in the 45 years between 2005 and 2050 (from 14% to 29%), we must ask: What RACE will we be considered by 2042? If the Census 2000 was any indicator, 48% of Latinos in the US—and a staggering 80% in the US colony of Puerto Rico—were identified as “white.”

Yet, if we remember that Latinos are already no longer considered a “racial”

group, but an “ethnic” one: will Latinos even be counted as a group—or AT ALL? After all, no other “ethnic” groups are counted in the Census or identified on any school, medical or police records or government forms. What makes us believe that Latinos just won't disappear in—and be burnt by—the good ol' American melting pot?

This is why the Census 2010, currently underway, is so important to anti-racism movement and to the possibility of a future multiracial society. Because only if Latinos (and perhaps Arabs and northern Africans, and others) are successful in resisting this reclassification, will those of us currently considered “people of color” be able to constitute a majority some 30 years from now. Otherwise, by 2042, whites—with the inclusion of about 100 million “apparently white” Latinos—will remain the “demographic majority” and, based on the numbers, may well continue to justify its “political majority” status and “moral right” to dominance; there would be no external motivation to share power with Black, brown and other racial groups unable or unwilling to be assimilated and accepted into white culture.

We should remember that the US has been a multiracial society since the establishment by the British of Jamestown. Therefore, in transforming our current multiracial society to a more just one, it will be important that we move toward becoming an “anti-racist” multiracial society. That is, a society largely liberated from individual, institutional and cultural practices based on notions of racial superiority and inferiority. Clearly, this will take all of us.