Hispanos or Latinos... what are we?  (Part One)

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In the nations of the American continent, from the Rio Grande to Patagonia, 'Día de la Raza' is celebrated on October 12, a day which evokes the encounter of the ethnic groups and cultures that took place in 1492. Nevertheless, we have not been aware of the conceptual error that this idea implies; when in reality Spanish presence only added another element to the ethnic and social conflict that existed within pre-Columbian societies. In our nations no one dared to say that they were 'hispano'. In the same way Spaniards didn’t identify as such. Is 'hispanicity' a race in Hispanoamerica? I think not!! What exists in our countries is above all a national consciousness. We define ourselves in terms of national identity, and as such, we claim that we are Mexican, Argentine, Uruguayan, or Colombian, Catalan, or Basque, but not 'Hispano'. The concept of a 'raza hispana' does not exist. It is a conceptual error that reduces diversity to a sole component. Is it not the case that the Maya-Quiche indigenous population hails from Guatemala? It would be offensive to ask an indigenous person from Guatemala if he is 'hispano'. Does the concept and celebration of 'hispanicity' not exclude the indigenous population? 'Hispanicity' in the way it has been treated is strictly in North American construction. It is the social and economic platform of the U.S. that allows us to speak of a hispanic identity. In this way, the only country where the hispano is considered both a concrete concept and an ethnicity is the U.S.

Recently, the proposal by some theoretical studies in relation with hispanic presence in the U.S., has been to distance the significance of the celebration from the connotations associated with the misnomer "discovery of America". Why? First of all, it is obvious that the context and implications of this celebration changed. Part of the social tradition of the United States has been to treat people as individuals, except Afro-Americans who, from the very beginning, have been treated as a group. This could explain the collective consciousness of the African-American population in their social struggle against the establishment and society. Hispanics, conversely, began to be a group as a result of the massive and constant immigration and their cultural differences which denote a big contrast. Maybe it is only in the U.S. that this diversity of types, accents, and cultural particularities; this 'amalgamation' as named by Fernando Ortiz -- is condensed and simplified as a result of the exposure to mainstream American culture. These differences and cultural hues, in reality are discarded when so called hispanics, hailing from all latitudes, confront the same problems and have before them the same social and economic challenges. The particulars of cultural identity are sublimated by the general imperatives and a collective consciousness begins to emerge, that makes skin color, accents, regional particularities of secondary importance to the collective interest of the group. And this amalgamation that in our countries of origin would be deemed 'artificial' if not outright ridiculous has an inherent meaning in the United States and as a result, its usage is widespread.

The social and economic problems that affect immigrants of Mexican origin in California, could in the near future, affect Dominicans, Central Americans, Cubans as well as citizens of other Latin American nations. These circumstances, exclusive to the U.S. social environment, have determined that this plural and diverse collectivity be established as a group, and expressed as Latinos.

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(Part Two will be published in the next issue) ☞