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Hispanos: Ethnic Identity in Cañones

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the substantive and theoretical contributions of anthropology to the ethnic identity controversy regarding Hispanos in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Drawing on ethnographic data from Cañones, New Mexico, the paper argues that the rural agro-pastoral village tradition has contributed decisively to the evolving contemporary Hispano identity in the region.

## Introduction

A recent controversy over the ethnic status of Hispanos in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado, as a subset of Mexican-Americans or Chicanos in the U.S. Southwest, has made it abundantly clear that the ethnic composition of Chicanos is problematic. This debate, carried on over several years in the Annals of the Association of American Geographers (AAAG), has been conducted largely without the benefit of the ethnographic data and theoretical frameworks which have been developed by anthropologists. This paper will first outline the nature of the controversy, and then discuss the theoretical insights that may be derived from the work of anthropologists in the Southwest. Finally, the question of Hispano ethnicity will be examined drawing on ethnographic data from the community study of Cañones, New Mexico.

## The Controversy

The Hispano ethnic identity controversy revolves around work first undertaken more than a decade ago by the geographer, Richard Nostrand (1970, 1975, 1980). Using the U.S. census schedules beginning in 1850, Nostrand identifies Hispanos by their surnames, racial designation, nativity and parentage in a five-state region of the Southwest. Based largely on this demographic analysis, he identifies a core "Hispano Homeland" in north-central New Mexico and south-central Colorado. Although he marshals some sociocultural data to characterize this Homeland population, his analysis is not really supported through the use of historical data and the ethnographic

literature devoted to Hispanos. In fact, as Rodríguez (1985:9) has observed, he infers cultural content from geographical distribution, thus assuming what he needs to prove.

The critical response from some quarters, principally Chicano Studies scholars (see Blaut and Rios-Bustamante 1984), is rather vitriolic. Their strident criticism appears to be influenced by their political philosophies. They take Nostrand to task because the concept of a distinctive Hispano Homeland denies, indirectly, the unity of Chicanos in the Southwest. Be that as it may, however, they properly point out Nostrand's historical and anthropological naivete regarding Norteño Mexican culture and the cultural characteristics of Chicanos who reside in the Southwestern states formerly part of Mexico. Blaut and Rios-Bustamante do allow that a "regional variant of Norteño Mexican culture, which is found in New Mexico, is indeed distinctive, but is no more so, and no less Mexican, than the cultures of other portions of northern Mexico and formerly Mexican parts of the U.S." (1984:159). They also acknowledge that the old land-owning Mexicano classes in Texas and California were deposed after 1848 and submerged by the arrival of many people from various parts of Mexico and that the old regional culture was largely buried. They appear to be unmindful of a fact most students of Northern New Mexico know: that a distinguishing characteristic of this Mexicano population is its enduring attachment to the land.

In his rejoinder, Nostrand (1984) focuses on this particular point, asserting that the Mexicanos in New Mexico created a unique landscape, residing in small semi-dispersed rural villages or plazas, as they are called. In his mind the proportion of people living in farming/pastoral villages gave a distinctive stamp to the cultural landscape.

In short order, others entered the fray in the pages of the AAAG—historians, sociologists, as well as geographers. D.W. Meinig, a broad-gauged geographer, sums up the difficulty of resolving this issue rather well: "matters of ethnic self identity are notoriously complex, elusive, subject to change historically, and cannot be resolved by the kinds of evidence offered in this case" (1984: 171).

In general, those who have worked among Hispanos in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado find that the Homeland concept has some utility, even while taking exception to some of Nostrand's supporting data and conclusions. As Meinig commented, we find in this region an Hispanic society which is deeply rooted in the land. It has undergone a common "... experience of conquest, subordination, penetration, widespread local displacement, and continuing pressure upon its integrity" (1984:171). From this perspective, the regional Hispanic tradition is unique and distinctive, which is not to say that it is unrelated to Mexicano culture in other sections of the Southwest and northern Mexico.

In reality, the dispute appears to be principally over the degree of sociocultural distinctiveness. The arguments, however, have been muddled by lack of agreement about what ethnicity and ethnic identity are. Is ethnicity an explanatory principle, capable of illuminating significant aspects of social and material life, or is it an object of analysis, something to be explained? Should the study of this phenomenon be pursued with an etic or emic approach? Do its roots lie in so-called "primordial" consciousness, or is it a reaction to a particular sequence of historical experience (Comaroff 1987)?

For my purposes here, Comaroff provides useful working definitions of

ethnicity and ethnic consciousness. To wit,

ethnicity refers to the manifest ordering, in both categorical and organizational terms, of material, political, and social relations between groupings defined by presumptive biological and/or cultural criteria. Ethnic consciousness denotes the apprehension by experiencing social actors of such relations, as well as the imputation to them of the capacity to influence individual and collective action in the world (1987:nl).

Further, following Comaroff's understanding, although ethnicity always has its genesis in specific historical forces, within any society its meaning and functions are transformed over time.

#### Anthropology's Contribution

It is little wonder that anthropologists have not contributed to this discussion. For despite the centuries-long multi-ethnic tradition in New Mexico, anthropologists have given scant attention to a comprehensive treatment of the various ethnic groups and their integration into the region's social structure. There is, of course, the Harvard University Laboratory of Social Relations' "Comparative Study of Values in Five Cultures," carried out from 1949 to 1955 in western New Mexico. A portion of this massive study focuses on intercultural relations (see Vogt and Albert 1966). However, the analytical framework is based on contrasting "value orientations," rather than on a broad concept of ethnicity.

In 1967, González published a synthetic account of the social science literature on Spanish-Americans or Hispanos in New Mexico. Without elaboration, she observes that the major differences between Hispanos and Mexican-Americans of other states are derived from each group's distinctive articulation with the larger society of which it is a part

(1967:202).

Edward Spicer makes the similar point that Chicanos cannot be understood in isolation. His interest in ethnic groups as one variety of persistent cultural systems (Spicer 1971) led him to organize a conference devoted to plural society in the Southwest, which encompassed Northwestern Mexico as well as the U.S. Southwest. In his contribution, Spicer identifies a total of 42 ethnic groups, including five "varieties" of Mexicans— Rural Norteño, Urban Norteño, Mexican-American (Chicano), Mennonite, and Hispano.

These varieties are distinguished on the basis of small dialectal differences and profoundly different historical experiences. Hispanos lived only briefly under the Mexican political system and do not identify with Mexican social and political events of the past 140 years. While the Chicanos have lived, like the Hispanos, under the U.S. regime, it has been under totally different circumstances; for the most part, they have been immigrants, a landless proletariat. They have no land base as part of their identity (Spicer 1972:31-35). I hasten to add, however, that Chicano scholars claim otherwise (see Chávez 1984).

More broadly, Spicer thinks in terms of two major kinds of ethnic identity systems, those which have as an important element symbolic roots in the land which are supernaturally sanctioned (this includes all of the Indian groups) and those which are secularized with respect to land. The latter group, which thinks of land in terms of utility and power, human qualities, includes the Anglos and Mexicans (Spicer 1972:41-42). Spicer does not mention that Hispanos are an exception to this generalization; however, they clearly belong in the first category.

Ernesto Galarza, a participant in the same conference, follows the theme

of discussion developed by Spicer, and elaborates on the sociocultural types of Mexicans in the Southwest. He discerns eight regional groupings: San Francisco Bay basin, metropolitan Los Angeles, the Central Valley of California, the Salt River Valley of Arizona, Texas, Denver, the "Border Belt," and the upper Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico and Colorado. The Hispanos of the upper Rio Grande have survived as one of the "historic cultures"; differences in environment and resources for subsistence lend a distinctive stamp to the New Mexican villages (Galarza 1972:266-267). In sum, as Renato Rosaldo (1983:65) noted, this conference points out the need to consider a variety of sociocultural histories for the Chicanos; a single story will not do.

It is a telling comment on the state of scholarship in this field that in a recent review article, Chicano Studies, 1970-1984, Rosaldo finds the upper Rio Grande Valley to be the area most fully studied from a regional perspective; yet only a single ethnography of an Hispano village has been published (1985:413). This village is Cañones, in Rio Arriba County, near Abiquiu, where I have been associated with a group of anthropologists conducting ethnographic and ethnohistorical research for two decades (see Kutsche & Van Ness, 1981). Thus, it should be worthwhile to examine the question of Hispano ethnicity from the perspective of a "typical" rural community which has been the subject of extensive study. This exercise will afford an opportunity to make some comparative observations with the current research being carried on by Sylvia Rodríguez in Taos, a somewhat more urban setting where the perception of ethnic boundaries between Hispanos, Pueblo Indians, and Anglos has been heightened by the pressures of tourism and resort development.

Perhaps it would be most efficient to review quickly the work of Rodríguez in Taos and then turn to Cañones. Before proceeding, however, I should enter one caveat: generalizations solely from Cañones and Taos must be drawn very carefully. We must acknowledge the limits on generalization inherent in the community study mode of anthropological research (see Weaver 1968 on this point). Further, although it will be argued that essential roots of the Hispano identity in the region are derived from the rural village tradition, the present demographic reality is that the majority of the Hispanos live in urban centers— principally Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

Drawing on extensive ethnographic research in the Taos region, Rodríguez (1984, 1985, 1986, 1987) has employed a reactive model for analyzing the historical genesis of Hispano identity. Nostrand's formulation, in her opinion, is based far too much on the notion that Hispanic ethnicity is the product of a primordial essence and that it is preserved through geographic isolation. Rather, the work of Earth (1969) and Spicer (1971, 1972) has contributed to her working model, which views ethnic consciousness as a product of intergroup contact. That is to say, ethnic consciousness is derivative of an oppositional process which serves to create and maintain sociocultural boundaries.

In keeping with Spicer's perspective, Rodríguez views the persistent Hispano identity in Taos as a product of land and water loss. She argues persuasively that expropriation of land and water stimulated the crystallization of land as a symbol of Hispano cultural survival and social self-determination. This line of argument is quite cogent because Taos is so thoroughly enmeshed in a tourist/resort economy which caters to wealthy Anglos from other sections of the country. This economy has spawned luxury resort

development and, thus, intensive competition for land and water rights.

Rodríguez focuses on the contemporary ethnographic scene while acknowledging the historic importance of the elements of the Hispanos' identity rooted in the corporate landholding village, where cooperative irrigation-based farming and animal husbandry were the means of livelihood. She notes the importance of the traditional organizational structures inherent in communal land tenure and irrigation, which have provided the nucleus from which contemporary political action groups have been built. However, her formulation fails, in my estimation, to accord sufficient importance to these ethnohistoric realities as elements in the formation of the present Hispano sense of ethnicity. Further, her reactive model is not as useful in coming to terms with the nature of the Hispano ethnicity outside of Taos, particularly regions where the impact of tourism and resort development has not been as significant.

Fundamentally, my views are not at odds with Rodríguez. It is more a matter of emphasis than of competing interpretations. Looking at Cañones simply affords us an opportunity to highlight the contribution to contemporary Hispano identity derived from the traditional (primordial) village way of life. This is possible due to the fact that while the Cañoneros have experienced considerable land loss, they have not experienced the intensive assault on their very social being that Rodríguez documents in the Taos region.

#### The View From Cañones

Like many Hispanic plazas in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, Cañones is situated in a micro-basin that forms a natural ecological, economic

and social unit. The plaza was first settled at the turn of the nineteenth century and has been home to approximately two hundred and fifty farmers/ranchers for nearly two centuries.

The Cañones micro-basin is clearly bounded: mountains ring it to the east, south, and west, leaving only a narrow passage for Cañones Creek to the north. One senses that social and psychological boundaries are virtually written on the land as one traverses the canyon-valley system; the place seems a distinct entity. The micro-basin's drainage flows approximately twenty miles to its outlet in the Chama River; it is approximately eight miles wide at its headwaters, and as narrow as a quarter of a mile downstream. The micro-basin encompasses roughly seventy thousand acres (110 square miles), ninety percent of which now lie within the Sante Fe National Forest. Only a small portion, some three hundred acres, is touched by the acequias (irrigation ditches) and capable of being farmed; the balance is too high and too steep. The elevation in the micro-basin ranges from six thousand feet to more than eleven thousand feet on the highest peaks, encompassing three distinct vertical life zones.

These physical characteristics describe the natural resources on which the community was built. In the nineteenth century and in this century until World War II, Cañoneros subsisted largely through small-scale farming in their irrigated fields and through animal husbandry. Sizeable herds of sheep, goats, and cattle grazed on the adjacent uplands.

This livelihood was organized and carried on through the vehicle of the small corporate community. The village was the primary unit of rural social organization, landholding, and agro-pastoral production. (The general Iberian and Latin American antecedents of these villages have been fully discussed in

a previous article, see Van Ness 1979.) The corporate village provided the organizational basis for control and management of the two basic factors in production, land and water. In addition to structuring and regulating economic life, the corporate community provided for the greater part of all the individual's social and religious needs.

In this Hispanic village tradition, adapted to meet the needs of the New Mexican uplands, landholding is not merely a dimension of political and social organization. The meaning attached to land is very significant, for the concept of human community is based on place. Cañones refers to both a physical place on the surface of the earth and also the people who belong to that place. People, society, and geographical place are conceptually integrated in traditional Hispanic thought. That is to say, to talk of people *is* to talk of where they live; to talk of a given land area is to talk of the people who have resided there in the past; to talk of where people reside is to talk of the natural resources they call their own and from which they draw their sustenance. (I am obliged to Julian Pitt-Rivers 1971 and Rubén Reina 1965 for these insights.)

The second crucial element in the traditional community identity system is the acequia system. The system in Cañones is complex despite the small amount of irrigated land because not all fields can be served by one ditch due to the topography of the micro-basin. In all, there are twenty-four acequias in Cañones. Constructing and maintaining these irrigation ditches and presas (diversion dams) was no mean feat. The Cañones system has worked for generations through a series of informal water-sharing agreements among community residents. Water for fields, livestock, and domestic purposes was and remains largely dependent on the acequia system. It is not necessary

here to describe this system fully; rather, I want to point to the role of the acequias in the traditional sense of identity. The irrigation system in Cañones has served to integrate people, land, and water over time and space.

Orlando Romero eloquently describes villagers' feelings about the acequias:

Just as the veins and arteries crisscrossed their bodies so too did the little ditches provide life-giving water to their thirsty fields. From this relation has grown a communal existence that is both physical and social ... physical and cultural survival is and always has been dependent upon the ditches (1979:30-32).

In the practical act, circumscribed by ancient ritual, of cleaning and repairing the ditches each spring, and at other times as needed, communal bonds are renewed—feelings of camaraderie and meaningful participation in community life are heightened (Romero 1979:33).

The irrigation-based agro-pastoral subsistence system has contributed to the maintenance of the ecologically bounded micro-basin in Cañones. The system has clear-cut spatial and temporal dimensions, which controlled the rhythm of life and created an enduring attachment to a particular place on the face of the earth. Further, it served to maintain important psychological ethnic boundaries.

The erosion of Cañones' land base, which began at the end of the last century, culminated in the sale of the commonlands surrounding the plaza to the federal government in the late 1930s. Without access to upland pastures for livestock and the natural resources of the woodlands, the traditional subsistence system was no longer viable. Farming alone had never been sufficient to maintain a viable economy. The elements of community social organization that were concerned with managing the communal lands and cooperative grazing of the community's livestock have

largely disappeared. The acequia system, however, has remained under local control and management. Legally and politically, Cañones remains an unincorporated rural hamlet. Its only salvation has been that most of the schemes for commercial economic development of the surrounding lands during the past century have not been realized. In spite of adversity brought on by erosion of community control over the micro-basin, the manner in which Cañoneros perceive the territorial base of the community has not changed. Symbolically, the micro-basin's land and water still serve to define the Cañoneros. The idiosyncrasies of the local geography are an inseparable part of the Cañoneros' identity, and hope remains that in the future the community's commonland will be restored.

Passive and, occasionally, active resistance to outside domination have been regular occurrences. The Cañoneros have carried on an active battle with the Forest Service for decades over access to the grazing lands. Also, Cañones is in the middle of the region which gave birth to the political land rights organization known as the Alianza in the 1960s. It cannot be overemphasized that the Cañoneros feel very strongly about their land. Whenever discussions of land sales occur, one invariably hears the remark "what would our children and grandchildren say if we sell?"

#### Conclusion

Nostrand's concept of a core Hispano Homeland in north-central New Mexico and south-central Colorado has validity. The distinctive rural corporate communities, settled through Spanish and Mexican land grants, had been developing for more than two centuries in this region before it became a

territory of the United States. It was well into the twentieth century when the Anglo population in this region exceeded that of the Hispanos. Thus, the rural Hispanic sociocultural tradition has left an indelible stamp— not found elsewhere in the Southwest —on this region. The agro-pastoral village tradition, which imbues people with a profound sense of attachment to the land, has contributed distinctive elements to the evolving contemporary Hispano identity. These primordial roots have been transformed in recent decades and their meaning and functions adapted to serve the current social, economic, and political realities of life in the region.

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