

The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity: A Reply to Jorge Gracia

by Steve Tammelleo

English Abstract

In responding to Jorge Gracia's most recent book, *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity: Jorge Gracia and His Critics*, in this essay, I defend three claims. First, I argue in support of Gracia's assertion that a metaphysical account of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity should be independent from politics. Second, I argue that by maintaining a strict division between metaphysics and epistemology, Gracia's account fails to recognize how discursive practices constitute social kinds. Third, in opposition to Gracia, I argue that the current inhabitants of Spain and Portugal are not Hispanic/Latino/a for two reasons: (1) the wars of independence that established independent nation states in Latin America marked a decisive break with the Iberian countries and (2) at the time of independence, the demographic make up of Latin America was significantly different from Spain and Portugal.

Resumen en español

Al responder al libro más reciente de Jorge Gracia, *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity: Jorge Gracia and His Critics*, en dicho ensayo, defiende tres afirmaciones. Primero, sostengo que una consideración metafísica de la identidad hispano-latina debería ser independiente de la política, tal cual lo defiende el mismo Gracia. Segundo, sostengo que al mantener una estricta división entre metafísica y epistemología, García falla en reconocer la manera en la que las prácticas discursivas constituyen clases sociales. Tercero, contrario a Gracia, mantengo que los actuales habitantes de España y Portugal no son hispanos o latinos por dos razones: (1) las guerras de independencia que establecieron las naciones independientes en América Latina marcaron un quiebre decisivo con los países Ibéricos y (2) al momento de la independencia, la constitución demográfica de América Latina difería significativamente de la de España y Portugal.

Resumo em português

Ao responder ao mais recente livro de Jorge Gracia, *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity: Jorge Gracia and His Critics*, defendo, neste ensaio, três afirmações. Primeiro, argumento em apoio à afirmação de Gracia de que uma interpretação metafísica da Identidade Latino-Hispânica tem de ser independente da política. Segundo, defendo que, ao manter uma divisão estrita entre metafísica e epistemologia, a interpretação de Gracia não consegue reconhecer como as práticas discursivas compõem os tipos sociais. Terceiro, opondo-me a Gracia, defendo que os habitantes atuais da Espanha e de Portugal não são Latino Hispânicos por duas razões: (1) as guerras de independência que estabeleceram as nações independentes na América Latina marcaram uma quebra decisiva com os países ibéricos e (2) na época da

independência, a constituição demográfica da América Latina era significativamente diferente das de Espanha e Portugal.

Like many others, I can still remember my excitement when I read Gracia's first book on Hispanic Identity. As a graduate student, I was interested in Latin America, but until I read Gracia's book, I didn't know how to connect my interest in Latin America to my interest in metaphysics. Gracia's work created the space within which it was possible to talk about Hispanic Identity in a philosophically rigorous way. I want to thank Gracia for creating this space. In addition, I'd like to say that the 2005 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute on Latin American Philosophy was awesome and amazing! Many thanks to Susanna Nuccetelli and Jorge for organizing it.

Section One:

In reading the work of some scholars working on the nature of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity, it is clear that they have particular political goals in mind. For example, in his book, *Race, Racism, Reparations*, Angelo Corlett states that he aims to develop an account of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity that can be used to implement affirmative action policies.[1] In Linda Martin Alcoff's influential essay "Latino vs Hispanic: The Politics of Ethnic Names", criticizing the history of U.S. domination of Latin America is a political goal that influences the account of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity that she develops.[2] In evaluating the work of these scholars, political bias emerges as a potential problem. It seems possible that their historical accounts of the formation of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity are biased in favor the political agenda that they hope to support.

One of the most praiseworthy features of Gracia's work is that his account is not guided by a political agenda. In undertaking a conceptual analysis of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity, he attempts to answer three broad questions: What type of concept or category is the term Hispanic/Latino/a? What are the historical origins of the formation of this category? Which individuals should be included as members of the group? For Gracia, these questions are best answered by metaphysical and historical analyses, not by a political analysis, or even worse by a political ideology. A few of the contributors to *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity* have suggested that Gracia should alter his account of Hispanic Identity to fit better with their political concerns. For example, Robert Gooding-Williams has argued that in order to place greater emphasis on African contributions, Gracia should change his account, moving his starting point for the formation of Hispanic/Latino/a identity from 1492, the year of the Encounter, to 1441, the year that the Portuguese ships first landed in West Africa.[3] Similarly, Richard Bernstein objects to Gracia's claim that Hispanic Identity has its origins in the year 1492, because 1492 is associated with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal and with the beginning of European colonial violence in the Americas.[4] I am pleased to see that in this volume Gracia rejects the suggestions of Bernstein and

Goodings-Williams and reasserts his commitment to the ideal that a philosophical account of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity should be independent from politics.[5] In his response to Eduardo Mendieta, Gracia offers a robust critique of those who would allow social and political agendas to play a central role in guiding their conceptual analysis. Gracia states:

By focusing on particular social agendas, (Mendieta's approach) misses the big picture. But by missing the big picture, it actually misses the smaller ones as well. Mendieta wants an identity that forgets history and its results, and this is a serious mistake. ... It is misguided. To try to have politics and social agendas dictate metaphysics, or, to put it differently, to have ideology and values dictate facts leads to mistakes. [6]

I agree wholeheartedly with Gracia's approach. Although each person is situated in terms of their personal history and their location within social hierarchies, when, as scholars, we engage in historical analysis or metaphysics, we should aim to be fair, balanced, open-minded and avoid the influence of political goals.

Section Two:

In writing about ethnic identity, Gracia wants to maintain a strict division between metaphysics and epistemology. On Gracia's account, at the metaphysical level, ethnic kinds are what they are in a way that is uninfluenced by our knowledge of them. In his critique of Gracia in this volume, Richard Bernstein points out that on page 49 of *Hispanic Latino/a Identity*, Gracia explicitly claims that "Knowledge does not determine being." [7] In responding to Bernstein, Gracia makes some minor concessions, but reasserts his commitment to the separation of metaphysics and epistemology. Gracia states:

When I say that "knowledge does not determine being", a claim Bernstein questions, I do not mean that knowledge does not affect being. What I mean is that knowledge of a fact does not alter that fact, even if knowledge of the fact (1) may produce other facts that otherwise would not have been produced or (2) may modify certain facts that otherwise would not have been modified. My knowledge of who hit me over the head may alter my future conduct, but that knowledge cannot alter the bump I have on my head or the identity of the person who caused it. [8]

A number of metaphysicians, such as John Searle and Ian Hacking, have argued for a distinction between natural kinds and social kinds. In relation to natural kinds, I would agree with Gracia's claim that "knowledge of a fact does not alter that fact." For example, as an oak tree is a natural kind, the metaphysical nature of an oak tree is determined by its DNA, not by our cultural knowledge of oak trees. However, with social kinds, the very being of the social kind is constituted in large part by our systems of knowledge. To take an example from John Searle, think about money. As a social kind, a dollar bill is what it is, as a result of our knowledge of it. A dollar bill can function as money, and not merely as a piece of paper, only on the basis of widespread discursive

practices that constitute a cultural knowledge of money and banking. In relation to the case at hand, I would argue that ethnic groups are social kinds: in metaphysical terms, ethnic groups are more like dollar bills than oak trees.

In my opinion, the most insightful analysis of the ways in which knowledge creates types of human subjects emerges in the work of Michel Foucault. As an example of how knowledge creates new social kinds, consider Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that in the early 19th century, the widespread adoption of the prison enabled inspectors and wardens to make detailed observations about the behavior of prisoners. On the basis of these observations, a new form of knowledge, Criminology, gradually emerged. The knowledge of Criminology was used to develop new treatments and interventions that aimed to rehabilitate prisoners. In responding to these treatments, a new type of human subject, the delinquent, was born. Although Foucault's analysis is much richer, nuanced and detailed, in a simplified form, we can summarize Foucault's as saying this: the power to put criminals in jail provided the basis for a new form of knowledge, and, when this knowledge (Criminology) was applied to the rehabilitation of prisoners, it created new forms of human subjectivity (the delinquent). Foucault makes similar claims about the modern homosexual. Although there are historical records of men having sex with other men going back to the ancient Greeks and beyond, Foucault argues that as a social type the modern homosexual emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. Foucault's claim that the modern homosexual emerged as a new social type from networks of discourse and power has played a central role in the development of queer theory.[9]

If Foucault's analysis is correct, then in relation to social kinds, knowledge does determine being. In fact, Gracia's own account of the emergence of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity acknowledges that the social forces of 1492 created something new. And, he seems to recognize that discursive practices played a role in creating a new type of identity. Thus, he seems to acknowledge that cultural knowledge has played a role in constituting a new type of social being.

In debating the issue of whether or not "knowledge determines being" it could be the case that Gracia and I are talking past each other. In insisting that "knowledge does not determine being", Gracia wants to insist that a person can be Hispanic even if other people don't know that she is Hispanic. I would agree. However, in asserting that knowledge does determine being, I would assert that that the discursive practices that started to emerge in 1492 played a central role in constituting Hispanics as a new social kind. I think that Gracia should accept this claim. Foucault's account of how knowledge constitutes new forms of human subjectivity seems to fit nicely with Gracia's historical description of the formation of Hispanics as an ethnic group. However, Gracia's insistence on a sharp separation between epistemology and metaphysics seems incompatible with Foucault's account of social kinds.

Section Three

In the remainder of this essay, I'd like to present some criticisms of Gracia's account of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity. Gracia offers the following account of Hispanics:

My thesis is that the concept of Hispanic should be understood historically, that is as a concept that involves historical relations. Hispanics are the group of people comprised by the inhabitants of the countries of the Iberian peninsula after 1492 and what were to become the colonies of those countries after the encounter between Iberia and America took place, and by the descendants of these people who live in other countries (e.g. the United States) but preserve some link to those people.[10]

Thus, according to Gracia's account, people who currently live in Spain or Portugal and have never lived in Latin America are Hispanic. As several critics have noted, this claim seems to conflict with our ordinary understanding of the term 'Hispanic'. In responding to this aspect of Gracia's account in his essay for this volume, Richard Bernstein argues:

Gracia's proposal departs from the ways in which many of those who think of themselves as Hispanics conceive of their identity. When the expression is used in the United States or even in Latin America, it is not commonly used to include ancestors or current residents living in the Iberian Peninsula. And I doubt that those residents of the Iberian Peninsula after 1492 (and their descendants) think of themselves as Hispanic – and certainly not as Latinos/Latinas.[11]

I agree with Bernstein's criticism here, I don't think that my friend Ana Calvo Tello who was born and raised in Madrid is Hispanic or Latina. In fact, I've been trying to convince Gracia that the current inhabitants of Portugal and Spain aren't Hispanic or Latino/a since I first met him in 2005. So far, my attempts to convince Gracia on this point have been unsuccessful, but as arguing with Jorge is always a pleasure, I'm delighted to have the chance to debate this issue with him again today.

For those members of the audience unfamiliar with my previous engagement with Gracia, allow me to briefly summarize my previous criticisms. After doing so, I will present a new response to Gracia's account. In an essay published in 2011, I presented two different arguments for why the current inhabitants of Spain and Portugal are not Hispanic/Latino/a.[12] First, I argued that the Latin American wars of independence in the 1820's marked a decisive turning point in Hispanic/Latino/a Identity. In the 1820's, a majority of the countries in Latin America gained independence from Spain and Portugal. As a result of their successful revolutions, Latin Americans established independent nation states that were free from colonial rule, and, in the years after the revolution, the dominant trading partner for most Latin American nations was not Spain or Portugal, but England.[13] These revolutions marked a decisive break with the colonial past. For example, after the revolution, the Mexican government passed a decree that expelled all Spaniards from Mexico.[14] In my

interpretation, prior to independence, the inhabitants of Latin America and Iberia both participated in a common culture formed in large part by the legal, political, and social structures imposed by the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies. However, I argued that after the wars of independence, the inhabitants of Spain and Portugal were no longer part of the same ethnic group as the Latin Americans living in their former colonies. On my view, after the 1820's, the inhabitants of Spain and Portugal are no longer Hispanic/Latino/a.

As a second argument, I tried to elicit some common intuitions concerning former colonies and the countries that had ruled them. For example, we don't think that Haitians are French and we don't think that U.S citizens are British. Gracia himself acknowledges that "the Philippines may have at one time been part of this (Hispanic) world but it is certainly not so at present."^[15] In each of these cases, the colony had a significantly different demographic make up from the parent country at the time of independence. This is also the case in Latin America. Of the roughly 10 to 15 million slaves that entered the Americas during the slave trade, approximately 7.2 million slaves arrived in Latin America.^[16] Although European diseases had a terrible and tragic impact on indigenous Americans, at the time of independence, there were still significant numbers of indigenous people in Latin America. In 1825, 41.7% of the population of Spanish American and 9.1% of the population of Portuguese America were indigenous.^[17] In 1825, in both Spanish America and Portuguese America, the indigenous, blacks, mulattos, and mestizos were collectively more than 75% of the population.^[18] Similar to Haiti, the United States, and the Philippines, the countries of Latin America had a demographic make up that was significantly different from their mother countries. After independence, Latin American politics, culture, and identity developed independently from the Iberian countries. Having summarized the arguments from my previous work, let me now present a new argument that aims to show why Gracia might make this mistake.

In what follows here, I want to argue that there are two phenomena that create an illusion of similarity between a mother country and its former colonies: the experience of sharing a common language and the spread of cultural forms that result from globalization. As a result of the superficial similarities that result from these two phenomenon, a common language and globalization, one might mistakenly assume that a person living in a former colony is a member of the same ethnic group as someone from the country that had colonized them. In my view, Gracia could be guilty of making this mistake, it could be one of the reasons that he believes that the current inhabitants of Spain and the current inhabitants of Latin American are members of the same ethnic group.

Allow me to present a thought experiment. Let us imagine that a U.S. citizen named Bill is traveling in Germany. While staying at a youth hostel, Bill meets a number of travelers from other countries. As he studied Spanish in college, Bill is able to engage in basic conversation with other travelers from Spain and Latin America. One night he goes out drinking with a group of guys from Madrid. Bill very much enjoys

talking with the guys from Madrid. However, communicating in a foreign language is difficult. Bill cannot communicate the full complexity of his ideas. It is difficult for Bill to tell jokes or to understand them, and, after hours of speaking in Spanish, Bill often feels mentally exhausted. Let's imagine that during the next day at the hostel, Bill meets David, a traveler from England. From the very beginning, Bill feels that he and David have much in common. With David, conversation is quick, smooth, and effortless. Bill can communicate his ideas with nuanced complexity; and, he doesn't need to ask David to speak more slowly or to repeat things that he has just said. As this example shows, the experience of sharing a common native language can create feelings of affinity. This feeling of sharing a common culture is reinforced by the distribution of cultural commodities that has resulted from globalization. For example, we can easily imagine that Bill and David discover that they are both fans of *The Beatles* or *Nirvana*. Bill and David might find that they both like *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*.

We can imagine that a similar experience of common culture might take place between Carlos a young man from Spain and Miguel a young man from Mexico. In addition to the comfort and effortless efficiency of communicating in their native language, as a result of the circulation of Spanish language cultural goods produced by globalization, Carlos and Miguel might have common interests in music, literature, or television. They might discover that they both like the films of Alejandro Inarritu or the music of Manu Chao.

In the early stages of their encounter, Carlos and Miguel might mistakenly assume that they are members of the same ethnic group and that they share a common culture. Yet, if they spend more time together, strong cultural differences would emerge. Over time Carlos would come to understand that Miguel's ethnic identity has been shaped by influences that are unique to Latin America, for example, the influence of Indigenous culture, the influence of African culture, the political and economic situation of dealing with the United States, etc.

In summary, I've tried to argue that the experience of a common language and the spread of cultural commodities resulting from globalization produce superficial commonalities that create the illusion of a common ethnic heritage between the members of a former colony and its mother country. Yet, in thinking about the nature of Hispanic/Latino/a Identity, we should not let these superficial commonalities lead us astray. The current inhabitants of Spain and Portugal should not be considered as members of the same ethnic group as the current inhabitants of Latin America for two interconnected reasons. 1) The wars of independence established a political, economic, and cultural rupture between the Iberian counties and their former colonies. And, 2) at the time of independence, the Latin American countries had a demographic makeup that was significantly different from the demographic makeup of Spain and Portugal. As a result of the cultural influence of indigenous Americans, Africans, and mixed race groups, after independence, a uniquely Latin American ethnic group gradually emerged. For these two reasons, in opposition to Gracia's position, I would conclude that the current inhabitants of Spain and Portugal are not Hispanic/Latino/a.

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Notes

[1] Corlett, Angelo. *Race, Racism, and Reparations*. (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2003).

[2] Martin Alcoff, Linda. "Latino vs Hispanic: The Politics of Ethnic Names." in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31 (4): 395-407.

[3] Gooding-Williams, Robert. "Hispanic Identity, Its Origin, And Hispanic Philosophers" in *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity*. Ed. Ivan Jaksic. (Columbia University Press, New York, 2015), 119.

[4] Bernstein, Richard. "The Boundaries of Hispanic Identity" in *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity*. Ed. Ivan Jaksic. (Columbia University Press, New York, 2015), 107.

[5] Gracia, Jorge J. E.. "Hispanic Latino Identity: A Response" in *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity*. Ed. Ivan Jaksic. (Columbia University Press, New York, 2015), 168-169.

[6] Ibid, 166.

[7] Bernstein, "Boundaries of Hispanic Identity", 110.

[8] Gracia, "Hispanic Latino Identity: A Response", 161.

[9] Davidson, Arnold. "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality" in *The Emergence of Sexuality* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2001), 30-65.

[10] Gracia, *Hispanic Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective*. (Blackwell Publishers, Malden, 2000), 48.

[11] Bernstein, "Boundaries of Hispanic Identity", 108.

[12] Tammelleo, Steve. "Continuity and Change in Hispanic Identity", *Ethnicities*, December 2011, 536-554.

[13] Galeano, Eduardo. *The Open Veins of Latin America*. (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1997), 173-200.

[14] Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith. *Modern Latin America*, Fifth Edition. (Oxford University Press, New York, 2001), 222.

[15] Gracia, *Hispanic Latino Identity*, 198.

[16] Skidmore and Smith, *Modern Latin America*, 20-26.

[17] Ibid, 25.

[18] Ibid, 20-26.