Critical Theory and Policy in an Era of Ethnic Diversity: Economic Interdependence and Growing Inequality

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The economic and social reversals of the last two decades have, paradoxically, left Latinos in strategic positions, both as key protagonists in global, regional, and local restructuring and as informed critics of the intellectual and policy discourse elicited by these new realities. For Latinos, objective placement at the active frontiers and shifting boundaries of key social processes has imposed heavy costs but has also given impetus to a thoughtful questioning of prevailing orthodoxy, academic and political. As Latino voices challenged reigning theory and depictions of changes under way, glaring omissions, costly simplifications, and tacit concessions to things as they are in the main body of research and policy debate have been exposed (H. D. Romo, 1990).

Latinos, for example, have been quick to grasp the renewed pertinence of transnational economic and political processes in fixing new parameters for U.S. as well as Latin American economic development. With this appreciation of the centrality of cooperation along with competitive capability in assuring a constructive role for the United States in promoting its own economic growth along with that of its neighbors. The idea of interdependence, which for many in the United States connotes loss of hegemony and privilege, enters more readily into a Latino worldview searching for greater reciprocity and more balanced power over decisions that necessarily transcend national boundaries and capabilities.

As prototypical immigrants and mobile labor reserves, Latinos also have a very practical fix on the crucial significance of access to jobs and adequate incomes as the foundations of a sense of community and social cohesiveness. Whether as a consequence of the narrowness of alternative social supports, more modest wage expectations, or the survival of traditional values, Latinos, especially recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America, manifest a readiness to work for wages at and below U.S. poverty standards that has been invoked by some in questioning the applicability to them of the underclass concept (Moore, 1988). Logically, and as our results confirm, the structure of labor demand and associated wage scales weigh heavily on social outcomes for this population. In fact, policy issues bearing on job generation and job quality, the regulation of rights in work and access to employment for all workers, citizens or not, work-related language rights, and protection against job hazards—all loom large in the Latino research and advocacy agenda (National Council of La Raza, 1990a). “Mainstream” research on Latinos and work, especially immigrants, has by contrast focused almost exclusively on whether Latinos compete unfairly with native, chiefly black workers, or depress working conditions and wage scales simply by their presence (Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development, 1990).

Latinos have long been painfully conscious of the ways in which the complex forces shaping U.S. stratification lock them out of the more rewarding job sectors. Having become in recent decades an overwhelmingly urban population, Latinos now also stand at the epicenter of social transformations that dramatize the social pathologies of big city decline. Beyond the misuse and underuse of human resources, urban fiscal distress, and the deterioration of physical and social infrastructures, lie more subjective concerns about social polarization, fragmentation, and the quality of city life (Berkman et al., 1992). For Latinos the bad news continues to come in. They are now reported to be the most discriminated against group in housing markets across the country (Lucek, 1991). Latino workers are also the most exposed to the severest job hazards (Kilborn, 1992). Yet, we begin to hear as well that newness to
the society and social isolation may temporarily shield some Latinos, especially those freshly arrived, from the pernicious effects of extreme poverty in postindustrial U.S. cities (Hayes-Bautista et al., 1988). Despite more modest human capital endowments, for example, Mexican immigrants in major cities are perceived by employers as more willing and disciplined low-wage workers than African Americans. Their stronger attachment to family and community are also said to protect the poverty areas in which they are clustered from the more destructive patterns of “underclass” behavior (Taub, 1991). New immigrants have been hailed not only for their willingness to fill the demand for low-wage service workers, but for their entrepreneurial energies in the informal economy and small enterprise (Waldinger, 1991). Recent immigrants, in contrast to settled blacks and Puerto Ricans, are now credited with producing for New York City “a low cost equivalent of gentrification” (Sassen, 1991).

There are complexities as well on the racial front. U.S. Census publications now routinely note that “Hispanic people can be of any race.” This is, of course, chiefly a statistical signal that some double counting has been done. The statement nevertheless points to some challenging intricacies in the interaction of race and class in Latino communities and among those in the society at large who, at least by U.S. standards, are judged as less ambiguously defined racially. With the main body of social research and policy inquiry deeply immersed in untangling the balance of tensions between class interests as against race as sources of social polarization and conflict, the impulse to bypass or treat mechanically how Latinos fit into U.S. racist norms has been pervasive, even among Latinos themselves. Yet the “Latinization” of major regions and cities has brought fresh dimensions into the “American dilemma” that will endure into coming decades, both drawing into alliance and pitting against one another elements of new and old minorities as well as former majorities (Bell, 1987; F. Bonilla, 1988; White, 1984). Contrasting patterns in this interplay, especially between Latinos and African Americans, make headlines around the country in places beyond those treated in this volume as well as in the nation’s capital. Indifference or active opposition among African-American leaders and organizations is seen by some Latinos as contributing to persisting imbalances in Latino political representation, access to jobs and social services, and civil rights enforcement. Nevertheless, the urgency of the need to rise above divisive tendencies is acknowledged on both sides, and concrete initiatives to forestall potential ruptures figure in most public statements on the issue (Kamasaki & Yzaguirre, 1996).

In addition, although the 1980s proved to be a decade of significant reversals and sluggish advance in economic and social conditions for Latinos, modest but encouraging gains were registered in political representation at city, state, and federal levels. Though still less than 1% of all in the nation, the number of Latino elected officials doubled in the 1980s, reaching over 4,200 in 1990 (National Association of Latino Elected Officials, 1991). Advocacy groups gained in effectiveness and established a recognized presence at the national and regional levels. Litigation over civil rights—especially with regard to voting, immigration, and language issues—contributed to a clearer articulation and validation of Latino claims that foreshadow major adjustments of social relations, especially in our largest cities. All of these advances were undergirded by a substantial outpouring of fresh research drawing in large part on newly institutionalized public and private data keeping and research programs now staffed principally by Latinos themselves (Inter-University Program for Latino Research, 1992). As the constitutionally mandated redistricting processes for the 1990s got underway, Latinos are better situated than ever to play a meaningful role in these operations all around the country, both in those states where their growing numbers provide a base for larger congressional delegations (California, Arizona, Texas, Florida) and in those, such as New York, that have lost population despite a growing Latino presence (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund [MALDEF], 1992; Vidueira, 1992).

This account of ongoing changes that inform and provide a growing political thrust for Latino critical policy perspectives could be extended (e.g., Latino strides in the world of business, the community’s growth as a consumer market, the proliferation of Spanish-language print and visual media). The point here is that these emergent capabilities, institutional resources, and political orientations have an immediate and objective grounding in the direct experience of ongoing major transformations in U.S. society in which Latinos are central actors. Theory building or policy formulation on any national concern that is not attentive to these emergent realities will inevitably fall short of intellectual and political objectives.

Social research, along with science in general, must satisfy cognitive, logical, historical, and social demands. U.S. social science now needs, perhaps more than ever, accounts of disciplined inquiry that highlight
the positive contribution to reasoned knowledge of the social component, including distinctive motivations and insights linked to ethnicity and identities in multicultural national formations (Goody, Pinck, & Shaffer, 1989). Informed consensus and active participation on a broad scale are perhaps even more fundamental to effective policy than the social legitimation of scientific results. Few aspects of human activity are more demanding in this respect than the organization of productive activity and the fixing of appropriate rewards for human effort. If our research sets out to highlight structures and policies with respect to jobs and wages, it must penetrate both to the active agents keeping these in place. In this and other matters, policies not convincingly sensitized to the needs and social contexts of targeted populations will continue to be experienced as externally imposed subordination (F. Bonilla, 1991).

THE POLICY CONTEXT

This volume set out to document the particulars of the dynamic of recent economic restructuring within the diverse regional contexts in which Latinos figure prominently. Taken together, however, the chapters reveal as well an unexpectedly clear convergence in the course of the eighties, the forces at work and main tendencies shaping labor market outcomes in every region. With market and state on a downward course on many fronts, the 1990s thus open as an acutely problematic conjuncture for the framing of economic and social policy. The capacities of the very individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions that need to mobilize themselves or be mobilized in support of viable policy solutions seem to be those most directly undercut and rendered impotent or self-defeating by recent change (Goldsmith & Blakely, 1991).

Although contention over the competitive standing of the United States vis-à-vis such countries as Germany and Japan continued to divide economists, 1991 forced acknowledgment that the United States was by then a regime depressed rather than in state that could any longer usefully be tagged as some intermediate state on the way to recovery (Silk, 1991). Official unemployment figures, widely regarded as underestimates, pushed to 7.1% nationally and closer to 10% in several key states: Illinois, 9.3%; Michigan, 9.1%; Massachusetts, 8.4%; New York, 8.1%; California, 7.7%; Florida, 7.3% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1992). A sharp increase in permanent layoffs between 1989 and 1991 shook white-collar and service sectors as widely publicized programmed dismissals in manufacturing and construction renewed anxieties on those fronts. According to official projections, levels of job growth attained between 1975 and 1990 are not expected to be matched between 1990 and 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1991). The volatility of the new service economy also partly explains successive shortfalls around the country in projected tax collections of each sort (business, property, sales, and personal income). In many cities and states, debt and deficits have ballooned, further compromising public sector jobs, basic services, and infrastructure maintenance.

Parallel processes and conditions in the countries of origin of Latinos, now irreversibly intertwined with the forces generating economic crisis and social polarization in the United States, also converge to cast a distinctive stamp on the 1980s and the decade ahead. The UN Secretary General's 1988 report on the socioeconomic outlook for the world economy to the year 2000 provides a somber reading of the recent past and immediate future of trends in the hemisphere. Slow growth, stagnation, and further economic polarization are the dominant features of prospective development. Falling per capita incomes and standards of living are tied directly to the dynamic of an oppressive debt (then put at $1.2 trillion), the volatility of money markets, growing protectionism, and creditor-imposed austerity in public spending. Long neglect and waste of human resources and social infrastructures means that the situation has built-in, long-term effects that it will take decades to overcome (F. Bonilla, 1990, p. 82). Though the political relationships between the countries of origin of the three Latino peoples we have highlighted and the United States could hardly be more different, the underlying economic dynamic of North-South relations is essentially that described immediately above.

In the United States the stubborn resistance of White House officials, the political parties, and policy specialists to acknowledge the depth of the economic and social crisis at home and abroad, as well as its roots in structural changes shaped by deliberate policy and the privileging of corporate interests, have given unprecedented scope to a sense of gridlock and impotence beyond the economic arena. From early in the 1980s, a sense of impasse and ideological polarization in U.S. academic and policy circles has been routinely projected in the reports of technical and advisory bodies whose competence, probity, and political disinterest had rarely been challenged in earlier economically straitened or uncertain periods. The 1960s Kerner, Eisenhower, and Katzenbach
commission reports are perhaps landmarks in this connection. Yet by 1984, Herbert Stein, probably the most thorough chronicler of the advice economists have provided to presidents since World War II, had this to say:

Economists do not know enough even to say with much confidence and precision what the effects of different economic policies would be. Even if one is able to describe what effects are desired, he cannot be sure of the prescription or policy that would yield those effects. . . . Even if it were possible to identify the policy that would be best, or probably best, from the standpoint of most of the persons concerned, it might not be possible to get that policy adopted. (p. 323)

Nor do those speaking more recently from more global and technological perspectives seem better prepared to approach the issues of the moment more confidently. A key element of any post-Cold War “peace dividend” might have been a shift of scientific concern from production for military defense and command of space toward a focus on productivity to meet social needs within a global framework of interdependence and pluralism. Yet the Harvard economist Raymond Vernon, addressing a 1986 forum on world technologies and national sovereignty sponsored by the National Academy of Engineering, conveyed early on the reigning skepticism in this regard among scientists themselves:

Upon identifying the main issues, one is propelled to a basic conclusion: Given the nature of the issues, better data and closer analysis are unlikely to have more than a marginal effect on the behavior of the U.S. government and other governments. The problems are too large and too conjunctural, and the domestic and international mechanisms too feeble to generate more than a marginal impact [italics added]. (Guile & Brooks, 1987, p. 170)

In short, despite passing allusions to the growing problems of inequality within and among nations and the urgency of arresting a decline in the real incomes of U.S. workers, there is little ethical or substantively reformist content in the ongoing debate within official circles about productivity, competitiveness, and the place of the United States in the world economy. Grave doubts about the shortness of vision, the efficacy of proposed remedies, and the political will to implement them dominate this discourse. Moreover, as we move more directly into the 1990s, the assertion, unheard in earlier crises, that the nation’s wealthy and successful no longer feel genuine responsibility for the poor and marginalized, especially minorities and newcomers, is voiced from more diverse and respected quarters. Individuals in a position to know point to secessionist impulses among business elites now thoroughly cosmopolitan and rejecting the burden of any taxation or other claims on them by U.S. workers (A. Ehrenhalt, 1991; R. Reich, 1991). White working-class voters are said to have operationalized “capital’s agenda of restructuring the U.S. economy at the expense of the working class, including the white working class,” by falling in with a white ruling-class strategy of appearing to be “hard on race and soft on class” (Kushnick, 1992; Roediger, 1991). “A politics purposively permeated by race has consolidated enough white Americans as a self-conscious racial majority,” writes one sympathetic liberal observer. This white middle- and working-class voting bloc stands directly in the way of any racially or ethnically targeted social reform or services, even though, as the same observer notes, “This is not to say that they are bigots or reactionaries. It is rather that they are threatened, not always in ways they understand” (Hacker, 1992).

Heightened racial tensions directly implicate Latinos in forms of racial contention that are both familiar and alien. As in all cultures dominated by Europeans, Latinos have been schooled to experience blackness as a misfortune. Social pressures in the United States encourage at once both a distancing from African Americans and a merging of identities as “minorities” and “nonwhites.” How these long-standing ambivalences are resolved in the coming decade will decisively mark the course of U.S. social relations.

Latinos thus enter the economic and political arenas in growing numbers, better informed and better organized to strive for a place and a voice in policy at a moment perhaps unique in this century. The challenges to market and state, the disjunctions between the political and the economic, the weight of external forces on the national economy, and the depth of class and racial polarization seem to have peaked at the very moment that the triumph of capitalism is hailed around the world (Heilbroner, 1989).

LATINO POLICY PERSPECTIVES

Context and conjuncture thus combine to place Latinos in a unique position that demands that they think and act creatively in the necessary bringing into being of both a national and hemispheric economic order
that is at once more productive and more equitable. That is, of course, not the path on which current, presidential free trade designs are moving nor that favored by the Latin American governments in the forefront of these initiatives, notably Mexico. In that discourse, interdependence and integration now mean the privileged rather than the simply unchallenged movement of capital and commodities, privatization of state enterprises, and further deregulation of the economy. They also mean, as has been noted, limited adjustments of a draining debt service, continued austerity in public spending, further volatility in money markets, and extended stagnation of incomes and living standards. In much of Latin America, development in this mode in the 1980s has come to symbolize capitalism at its most brutal and irrational (Branford & Kucinski, 1988; J. Brecher & Costello, 1991; George, 1988).

The present redeployment of development strategies in the fresh guise of free trade compacts occurs, thus, against the background of some somber and no longer much disputed realities at home and abroad. These are not the heady decades of Operation Bootstrap or the Alliance for Progress. Whatever the short-run outcome of the present economic downturn, the United States must itself still negotiate a range of unprecedented economic and political hurdles. These include, as has been seen, stagnant productivity and savings levels, massive indebtedness and deficits, a fiscal disarticulation among the several levels of government that has major cities on the verge of bankruptcy, increasing social inequality and absolute poverty, and rising racial and ethnic tensions permeating the entire society. These internal setbacks and failures of market and state necessarily raise serious doubts about the U.S. capacity to contribute to the development of productive forces in friendly countries and external dependencies. The overarching contraposition of social promise and denial in market systems figures profoundly in the recent historical experience of Latinos and in the long-term relations between their countries of origin and the United States.

The political scientist Frances Fox Piven has recently suggested that the 1930s depression paved the way for the partial emancipation and social advance of white, European immigrant workers, and the 1960s war on poverty served an equivalent function for many African Americans. The 1990s recession, in her view, should spark another surge of economic and social reforms more directly targeted on Latinos along with African Americans. Of course, as she notes, in those earlier crises reforms were substantially driven by the tumultuous demands of those most affected (Berkman et al., 1992, p. 53).

Lest the emphasis here on the potential transnational capacities and interests of Latinos overshadow their role within the United States, it is worth stressing once more the centrality, permanence, and assured growth of the Latino presence in the United States. Two thirds of the more than 12 million persons of Mexican origin in the United States are U.S.-born citizens, many with several generations of local forebears. Although these percentages are reversed for Puerto Ricans (that is, about two thirds of those on the mainland are island-born), the 2.5 million in the United States as well as the 3.5 million in Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens. The half million or so Cuban-origin persons in the country have one of the highest rates of naturalization among recent entrants. Poll evidence suggests that both Mexican- and Cuban-origin citizens are firmly rooted here and that even a regime change in Cuba would draw only a small proportion of the latter back to the island. In fact, in one view,

When Castro falls, Miami will become the second city of Cuba, much closer to Havana and more densely settled by a variety of Cubans than Santiago or Camaguey and with commercial flows twenty times more intense. That future Cuba will have to do all within its reach (dual nationality, academic reciprocity, genuine hospitality and human warmth) so that Miami Cubans (machados) may strengthen their ties to their country of origin. (Montaner, 1992)

Puerto Ricans seem more disposed than other Latinos to move freely between island and mainland locales, but these remain technically internal changes of residence within U.S. territories (de la Garza & Falcon, 1992).

In short, internationalization is setting in motion new flows of worker circulation that start out as temporary but generate conditions in which families and whole communities are compelled to anchor economic survival simultaneously in more than one national space. The outlook for the hemispheric economy suggests that the forces driving migration toward the United States will persist and probably intensify in the coming decade. The present pace and diversification of Latino demographic growth (10 times that of non-Hispanic whites and 4 times that of African Americans) means in the long run a substantial expansion of Latinos permanently settled here and in a position to act politically on individual and group interests.

Two features of that political affirmation are worth emphasizing here. As reported by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational
Fund's Leadership Program, 1991 proved to be a pivotal turning point in the affirmation of Latino political rights:

Equipped with the latest technological hardware, the practical understanding of the complex redistricting process, and an understanding of their voting rights, Latinos waged their most important battle for equal representation at all levels of government. (MALDEF, 1992)

Second, all stocktaking of political advances in the 1980s threw into sharp relief the vanguard role of Latinas in the gains achieved in both elected and appointive positions. Women were prominent not only in traditional fields such as education and social work but in the legal and medical professions, in fiscal and economic development posts, in city and state legislative bodies, and in the full gamut of advocacy and community-based organizations promoting Latino concerns and their projection in the mass media, cultural production, and academic research.

A LATINO POLICY AND RESEARCH AGENDA

The reach and thrust of the decisive entry of Latinos into the U.S. policy arena in the 1990s is well exemplified by the recent activities of the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (NHLA). This coalition of Hispanic organizations and individuals undertook an ambitious project in 1991 aimed at producing a national agenda for Hispanics building on public hearings in 14 U.S. cities between September 1991 and March 1992 (National Hispanic Leadership Agenda, 1992). Calling on Latino community leaders, elected officials, scholars, and policy specialists to unite around a program providing Latinos “a clearer vision and stronger voice” in national policy, NHLA invited testimony in five issue areas. Timed for an election year in which the Latino vote might plausibly prove a swing factor in several locales, this exercise promises to mark a historical benchmark (NALEO Educational Fund, 1992). The NHLA hearing themes, identified through an extensive review of earlier Latino policy initiatives, provide a useful reference point for a summary of some research and policy implications of the work presented in this volume. Though our findings bear unevenly on NHLA’s announced agenda, they may help to pinpoint the magnitude and complexity of the challenges and opportunities facing Latinos and the United States as a whole in the coming decade. NHLA themes include: economic opportunity, education, empowerment and civil rights, health, and housing.

Economic Opportunity. A considerable body of research and policy analysis concurrent with that in this volume confirms the substantial weight of structural changes in shaping labor market outcomes for U.S. Latinos. Macro shifts in labor demand are now shown to have had negative impacts during economic upturns as well as periods of decline (De Freitas, 1991, pp. 125, 161; Meléndez, 1993; Tienda, Cordero, & Donato, 1991). Most such work also confirms the continuing significance of human capital attributes as well as discrimination in the contemporary treatment of distinctively marked pools of labor. The historical sketches provided here of successive episodes in the incorporation of Latino workers, especially in San Antonio and Chicago, add some depth and sense of continuity concerning the operation of these processes.

More elusive in this body of work is a pressing beyond the vague abstraction of “structures” to the practices and policies as well as social agents that transform these structures and channel their effects. As the Miami instance demonstrates, when the political demand and will are in place, the necessary supports can be provided to accommodate newcomers and partially shield them from the shocks of displacement and risks of unequal exploitation. More important, as the sense of economic crisis has deepened and reaches more directly into middle America, ideological-and policy postures prevailing during the 1980s are coming into question. The Family Support Act of 1988 and some polls taken around the time of its enactment showed a public more open to support for the poor. Yet according to numerous key analyses, a combination of factors—budget deficits, distrust of government, and rage at the “underclass”—stood in the way of any national program based on targeting and an enlarged role for government in job creation or social services (Weir, Orloff, & Skepcul, 1988). However apparent it might be that without targeting, sustained economic growth and liberalized social supports will still leave social groups aligned pretty much in keeping with their present endowments, these observers argued that the only viable strategy for aiding the minority poor was for very low profile targeting under an ideological cloak of universalism. These considerations, of course, bore chiefly on racial targeting and did not even address the barriers to targeting for Latinos.

By 1992, however, white rage seemed to be shifting toward government and party inaction as well as the technocratic and authoritarian...
groups failed to close the gaps in educational attainment between them and non-Hispanic whites. Evidence of unequal returns in earnings for roughly equivalent levels of education also suggest perceived or objective differences in the quality of schooling or school performance. Fiscal crises across the country heighten the pressures toward unequal outcomes reflected in dropout rates and difficulties in school to job transitions, especially for those not going beyond high school. Compensatory programs of all kinds become the first targets of rationalizers of austerity measures, with the most powerful backlash probably directed now at bilingual education and diversification of curricula. Despite the legal sanctions supporting the former, English Firsters rail against instruction in any other language. Tribalism, separatist designs, a naïve inflation of foreign cultural accomplishments are among the milder misdemeanors imputed to the self-serving professionals said to have burdened their communities with unwanted obstacles to quick assimilation (Gutmann, 1992). Moralizing liberals and conservatives, assuming the mantle of national unity, true universalism, and cultural cosmopolitanism propagandize on a massive scale against any effort to preserve native language skills or cultural traditions within the framework of the school system. Ironically, the most extensive survey data recently gathered on the subject show that Latinos of all national origins are (a) predominantly bilingual; (b) commonly use both English- and Spanish-language media, with a moderate tilting toward the former; (c) overwhelmingly support bilingual education, which they see as a path to bilinguality that contributes to cognitive skills valuable to the United States (De la Garza & Falcon, 1992). Next to the generation of jobs worth having, access to effective, high-quality schooling remains the most indispensable resource for individual and collective negotiation of place within an increasingly complex and volatile economy.

Empowerment and Civil Rights. Latino strides on the political front in the course of the 1980s have already been noted. A surge in the number of elected officials, a strengthening of advocacy groups, successful litigation around civil rights, and effective participation in redistricting processes on the heels of the 1990 Census evidence new capabilities. Effective empowerment will require much more by way of self-study and policy analysis. Efforts toward voter mobilization and coalition building, leadership and candidate development and monitoring, efficient generation and deployment of research at every level of national and international government all remain in an embryonic state. If as some allege, voters are fed up with laissez-faire, it is now time on this as on other fronts to move from solidly grounded critiques to concrete steps and designs for change.

Education. As the national data in Chapter 2 show, modest and uneven gains in schooling among the several national-origin Latino
Health and Housing. Detailed examination of these issues was not central to the research undertaken here. Still, their importance has been brought home at various points—with respect to the spatial deployment of jobs and residential patterns, and in the revealing chapter by Ong and Blumenberg on the place of environmental hazards in social inequality (Chapter 9). In the course of this research federal studies have established that Latinos are among the most discriminated against groups in housing markets and the most poorly served by the health service system. In the latter instance as in others, concern has now shifted from "folk illness models," concerned with cultural barriers to health care utilization, to a generalized awareness that the nation's health care system as a whole is in deep trouble. Fortunately, Latino health care providers are among the best organized and capable professional sectors in our communities and well poised to advance research and enter into movements for reform in the field.

At its 20th anniversary conference in 1992, the National Association for Chicano Studies reaffirmed its research mission in terms that should resonate for all those engaged in disciplined inquiry with emancipatory social objectives:

We recognize that mainstream research, based on an integrationist perspective which emphasized consensus, assimilation, and the legitimacy of societal institutions, has obscured and distorted the significant historical role which class conflict and group interests have taken in shaping our existence as a people to the present moment. Our research efforts are aimed at directly confronting the structures of inequality based on class, racial, and sexist privileges in this society. Dominant theories, ideologies and perspectives play a significant part in maintaining structures of inequality. It is imperative that Chicano scholars struggle against these structures on a theoretical as well as on a policy level. Since ideas can point to possible directions for our people, they are of fundamental importance in defining and shaping our future. (Cordova, 1992)

Latinos thus enter the 1990s positioned to talk to one another as well as to natural allies in both more scientifically informed and politically conscious ways. To prove effective, the critical perspectives and organized research infrastructure developed over the past 20 years must remain as demandingly focused on our own work as on that we would like to redirect or complement. There is no point in replacing a system of knowledge production that has served us so poorly with a second-rate clone.

References