

## Ethnic-Group Terms

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Latin Americans and their descendants abroad have often thought about their identity as an ethnic group. In connection with this, a number of Latin American philosophers and social scientists working in the United States have independently questioned which term, if any, is adequate for reference (and self-reference) to that group. In their attempt to come up with correct answers, they have developed three clearly identifiable views. One is “nihilism,” a view sometimes favored by social scientists, according to which there is no good reason justifying the use of any ethnic-group term – not even those currently popular in the United States such as ‘Hispanic,’ and ‘Latino.’ But nihilism is not widely spread among Latin American philosophers, who have offered several arguments for one or the other of these common terms. As we shall see, proponents of this view have brought into the debate some political and moral arguments that will be discussed here. But there is also an alternative view according to which it doesn’t really matter which terms are used provided that they lack morally objectionable connotations.

Not surprisingly, the issues at stake in these debates are of interest not only to Latin Americans and their descendants abroad, but more generally to anyone concerned with semantic and pragmatic analyses of terms for groups of people, including ethnic-, racial-, nationality-, and religious-group terms. By raising the issues about ethnic-group terms that will concern us here, Latin American philosophers can be said to have made an important contribution to the understanding of a sort of term largely ignored in traditional philosophical semantics and political philosophy. We’ll first consider the issue of whether ethnic-group terms should be considered names or predicates. Next, we’ll turn to their semantic properties, reconstructing some of the theories on their meaning and denotation recently advanced by Latin American philosophers. Finally we’ll look closely at normative issues involving the use of ethnic-group terms, and a recent controversy about the use of ‘Hispanics’ and ‘Latinos’ that will bring into consideration the political and moral reasons mentioned above.

### Names or Predicates?

What’s the contribution an ethnic-group term makes to the proposition in which it occurs? Is it that of a name or of a predicate? These questions concern syntax and logical form.

Any attempt to answer them must examine both the prevalent view and evidence of the role of such terms in sentences ordinarily uttered by members of a speech community. It is possible that evidence points to their being always proper names (i.e., singular terms) or always predicates (i.e., general terms). But it could also point to their being sometimes proper names and other times predicates. The resulting logical form of the sentences containing those terms would therefore vary accordingly.

Let's first consider the most common view: viz., the assumption that ethnic-group terms are proper names. Is there any reason for this assumption? One such reason stems from ordinary parlance, where that's precisely what they are called – though sometimes they are also referred to as 'labels' (see, for example, Schmidt, 2003). Let's define a 'default position' as the view that takes literally the ordinary parlance of ethnic-group terms as "names." But note that it is not difficult to find this position beyond ordinary parlance, for it is also pervasive in the writings of academics, including some Latin American philosophers (e.g., Gracia, 2000, 2008; Alcoff, 2005) and social scientists (e.g., Gimenez, 1989; Oboler, 1992). Since regarding them as *names* is not the only option for this sort of term, we need reasons backing up the default position beyond a mere appeal to ordinary parlance. After all, as we show below, there are a number of objections facing that position.

But before turning to such objections, let's look closely at a philosophical reason for the default position that has been brought into the discussion by Susana Nuccetelli (2004): namely, that Gottlob Frege, one of the founders of contemporary philosophical semantics, held a view consistent with the default position (1952, p. 45). For, according to Frege, the logical form of the proposition expressed by the sentence, 'The Turk besieged Vienna,' stands in sharp contrast with the logical form of the proposition expressed by sentences such as, 'The horse is a four-legged animal.' Of the two, Frege contends, it is only the former that features a singular term. In fact, he claims that 'Turk' is the *name of a people*, not, as some might expect, a quantified predicate at all. Now, although it is true that 'Turk' is a nationality term, Frege's conclusion, if well supported, could easily be extended to apply to terms of the kind that concern us here.

Frege's argument, however, is far from unassailable. Nuccetelli argues that there are several reasons for thinking that ethnic-group terms should instead be treated as having the function of predicates or general terms. First, in the proposition expressed by 'The elephant crossed the Alps,' the term 'elephant' appears to have the logical function of a predicate, and the example is relevantly analogous to Frege's sentence containing 'Turk.' But if so, then there are grounds for maintaining that each of these terms should be understood as existentially quantified predicates. Furthermore, such a conclusion would also be supported by certain grammatical features of ethnic-group terms. For one thing, they are usually considered in the same category with count nouns (e.g., 'horse,' 'lemon,' 'elm') which, unlike other common nouns (mass terms such as 'water,' 'sodium,' and 'nicotine'), divide their reference. And unlike proper names, ethnic-group terms can be genuinely predicated of individuals. Finally, ethnic-group terms admit genuine singular/plural variations; they may occur in generalizations with 'all,' 'most,' 'a few,' and other quantifiers; they can form nouns phrases preceded by 'that,' 'these,' 'the,' and other determiners, and have adjectival forms. No singular term commonly shows such grammatical features. If these and other reasons offered by Nuccetelli are sound, then ethnic-group terms turn out to be predicates.

Given that it is controversial whether ethnic-group terms are names or predicates, to avoid begging the question here we have adopted for them the neutral expression “ethnic-group *terms*,” which does not commit us to their being either names or predicates. At the same time, since the question would be begged by anyone advocating a *literalist* construal of the default position, should we say that Jorge Gracia’s (2000) and Linda Alcoff’s (2005) talk of “ethnic names” commits this fallacy? Not necessarily, for charity in interpretation recommends that we interpret their talk as being non-technical. On our view, that talk is fine provided it is cashed out as metaphorical or figurative – parallel in this respect to saying that the sun rises and sets.

## The Semantics of Ethnic-Group Terms

Recent work in Latin American philosophy features two seemingly incompatible accounts of the semantic properties of ethnic-group terms. They illustrate one or the other of two well-known semantic theories of the building blocks of propositions: on the one hand, a broadly Fregean view, often referred to as “description theory,” which includes the so-called cluster theory; and on the other hand, a broadly Millian view, here called “referentialism,” which includes at least a causal account of the reference of proper names and natural-kind terms. Gracia (2000, 2008) represents what we regard as a description theory of ethnic-group terms, while Nuccetelli (2002, 2004) exemplifies referentialism about those terms. Before looking closely at the details of their views, the following clarification point is in order: Gracia and Nuccetelli both agree that, by contrast with empty terms such as ‘Lilliputian,’ ‘Atlantian,’ and ‘Hobbit,’ the sorts of word in need of an account are non-empty terms such as ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino.’ Of course, any correct account of the semantic properties of these, by extension, would be of help in accounting for the properties of other genuine ethnic-group terms. Besides this point, the offered accounts run along seemingly opposite lines. We shall now take up each of them in turn.

In Gracia’s work (2000, 2008), the semantic issues of concern arise in connection with a discussion of which, if any, should be the ethnic-group term used for reference (and self-reference) to Latin Americans, their descendants abroad, and the Iberians. Against those who reject the adoption of any ethnic-group term and those who favor ‘Latino’ (more on both views later), Gracia argues that adequate terms such as ‘Hispanic’ could in fact have some desirable consequences for the designated group of people: e.g., they could bring empowerment and pride to them, and even help them overcoming relations of dependence (2000, chapter 3). Claims of this sort are, of course, pragmatic since they bring into the discussion questions about the use of ethnic-group terms. We shall have more to say about them later. But in the course of substantiating those claims, Gracia outlines an account of the meaning and denotation of those terms that we regard as sympathetic to the description theory. In fact, it exemplifies one of its well-known versions, the so-called cluster theory. Any such theory holds two theses: (1) that ethnic-group terms have meanings, cashed out as conceptions of the denoted groups in the minds of competent users of those terms, and (2) that the denotation of any genuine ethnic-group terms depends on the meanings that speakers associate with the denoted groups.

It is not difficult to show that Gracia does hold that ethnic-group terms have meanings. For example, in some remarks about questions involving a controversy with Alcoff in the late 1990s (more on this later), he maintains,

[B]oth 'Latino' and 'Hispanic' are helpful when thinking about various dimensions of the Latino experience, because each brings out something the other misses and therefore helps to increase our understanding. 'Latino' connotes the marginal and colonial situation of Latinos, whereas 'Hispanic' brings out the historical and cultural connections between Iberia and Latin America. Both are helpful for understanding who we are. (Our emphasis, 2008, p. 73)

Other passages suggest, however, that Gracia holds thesis (1), that ethnic-group terms have meanings, in conjunction with thesis (2), that those meanings are what determine their denotations. In fact, Gracia takes the correct semantics for ethnic-group terms to run along lines parallel to a description theory of ordinary proper name such as 'Socrates': in both cases, the correct semantic account rest on theses (1) and (2). As a result, on this view success in communication by means of such terms must be contingent upon the availability of certain descriptions to those who use them. "We learn who is called 'Socrates,'" Gracia writes, "learning that he is the main speaker in the Symposium as well as Plato's teacher and that he was married to a scold. Thanks to these descriptions we are able to use the name 'Socrates' effectively in communication" (2008, p. 70).

A further motivation for the cluster theory of ethnic-group terms seems to stem from the observation that users of 'Hispanic' may have in mind different properties of the designated group. Gracia is committed to this claim, since according to him a virtue of his theory is that it avoids essentialism – for it denies the existence of a single property Hispanics have in common. (Note that sharing a past marked by certain historical events, something upheld by Gracia, may turn out to be an essential property of Hispanics after all.) In any case, a description theorist maintaining that there is no single property of members of this group must allow for more than one description or meaning that speakers associate with the denotation of an ethnic-group term. It must, then, be possible that different users of the term 'Hispanic' have in mind different conceptions of the denoted group. And this is consistent with Gracia's appeal to a family of resemblance in the context of discussing the identity of Hispanics as a group (for more on the topic, see Lawrence Blum's chapter in this volume).

The cluster theory of ethnic-group terms faces, however, a number of difficulties. For one thing, given this theory and the claim that those denoted by any term such as 'Hispanic' have no single property in common, ordinary communication by means of that term would often fail. This would be the case because the cluster theory requires for success in communication by means of any ethnic-group term that speakers have at least one description they all associate with the denoted ethnic group. But the evidence from ordinary communication by means of such terms points to success rather than failure even in cases where no common conception seems at work (for more on this objection, see Nuccetelli, 2001).

In addition, the description theory rests on the thesis that it is the speakers' conception of an ethnic group that determines the property picked out by their tokens of the corresponding ethnic-group term. This thesis has the implausible consequence that

whenever the speakers' only conception of the property denoted by an ethnic-group term is true, not of all and only the members of the intended group, but of the members of some other group, then the denotation of their tokens of the corresponding ethnic-group term would be the property of belonging to the other group. Consider Nuccetelli's (2001) thought experiment: First, imagine speakers whose only conception of Spaniards is that of being the first Europeans who arrived by sea to the New World. Now, when those speakers utter sentences containing the word, 'Spaniard,' given the description theory, they would be talking not about Spaniards but the Norsemen – which is implausible. Moreover, this line of Kripkean objection can also be run for cases involving speakers who have erroneous and even opposite ways of thinking about the property of belonging to certain ethnic groups. Yet none of these objections is conclusive, since each rests on intuitions about certain scenarios that description theorists like Gracia may deny.

On the other hand, in the absence of convincing counterarguments for dismissing such intuitions, the above objections appear to provide indirect support for a rival view of the semantic features of ethnic-group terms – the causal theory. In her 2004 work, Nuccetelli offers a causal theory of the reference of those terms that departs from the strong referentialism she proposed in 2001. She regards her new version of referentialism as falling short of maintaining that such terms are rigid designators or directly referential, and as holding instead that their semantic properties are in many respects similar to those of natural-kind terms. If so, a causal account of the latter that is weaker than, but broadly inspired by the accounts developed by Kripke and Putnam in the 1970s for natural-kind terms could be adapted to account for the semantic properties of ethnic-group terms.

By contrast with the description theory, the causal account of ethnic-group terms appears to face no problem in accommodating cases of successful communication involving speakers who have no common conception of the property picked out by their tokens of 'Hispanic,' 'Latino,' and the like. Referentialists could agree that descriptions or conceptions of the denotation of those terms in the speakers' minds play an initial role in the grounding of the extension of those terms, even when they would insist that such descriptions fall short of determining their denotation. Nuccetelli (2001) appeals to a historical case to illustrate the role of descriptions and misdescriptions in grounding the denotation of an ethnic-group term. History has it that in the sixteenth century some Spaniards exploring South America saw oversize footprints of a people and dubbed them 'Patagones,' which in the vernacular meant *people with giant feet*. That was, of course, a false conception of the so-called Tehuelches, since what the Spaniards saw were in fact footprints of their feet wrapped in fur. Yet arguably that description grounded the extension of 'Patagones,' a term that nonetheless caught on among other speakers to refer to the Tehuelches (and continued to do so centuries after the associated description was proven false). Nuccetelli argues that cases of this sort appear analogous to situations involving natural-kind terms that are successfully used in speech communities even when the speakers' conceptions of the properties denoted by their tokens is incomplete or seriously flawed. Consider, for example, 'water' or 'whale,' each successfully used in communication before the rise of modern chemistry and biology – that is, before anyone could have had what we now regard as an accurate conception of the nature of the substance or species denoted by tokens of those terms.

This causal theory is compatible with the fact that future speakers may come to have other descriptions associated with the denotation of those terms.

But how far can Nuccetelli take the analogy between ethnic general terms and natural kind terms? In contrast with natural-kind terms, speakers introducing ethnic-group terms seem to have *no* causal contact with anything “essential” about all and only the members of a certain ethnic group – as demonstrated by countless ethnic groups who include diverse peoples. If the causal account of ethnic-group terms is vulnerable to this objection, that would clearly count as an indirect reason for Gracia’s alternative theory of those terms. To meet this objection and to accommodate the fact that no essential property seems to underlie ethnic groups, Nuccetelli defends her causal theory by appealing to external factors involved in the original “baptismal” event. Recall that, for the causal theory, it is the causal contact with the denoted peoples during the introduction of those terms that grounds their denotation. The speakers’ deference to a referential usage going back to the interaction of initial users of the term with those people accounts for later uses of them with the same semantic features. This is compatible with an externalist view of those terms according to which: (1) members of ethnic groups share a complex external property determined by a certain *history* of relations within their own group, with others, and with the environment; (2) such shared relations are responsible for the distinguishing traits of the ethnic group; and (3) the content of sentences containing ethnic-group terms is in some ways dependent on those historical relations. Thus supplemented, the causal account concedes that descriptions may have the role in fixing the reference when an ethnic-group term is introduced. But the account is still incompatible with a description theory since it is only the latter theory that makes the reference of such terms contingent upon descriptions in the speakers’ minds. Note, however, the following consequence of the causal account: as far as semantics is concerned (as distinguished from, e.g., pragmatics), it doesn’t really matter which terms are used to secure reference for a certain ethnic group – though in order to reject the use of an established term, the theorist may include pragmatic considerations and invoke practical and moral grounds.

### Nihilism about Ethnic-Group Terms

Is there any good reason justifying the use of ‘Hispanic,’ ‘Latinos,’ and the like? Let us call ‘nihilism’ the view that there is no such reason. Nihilism of this sort makes two claims, one metaphysical and the other normative. The former amounts to a form of anti-realism about ethnic groups, the latter to the injunction that no ethnic-group terms should be used. In connection with the metaphysical claim, nihilists acknowledge the existence of nationality groups such as Venezuelans, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and so on, but they maintain that there is no mind- or language-independent group that could be the denotation of ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latino.’ In addition, since nihilists think that ethnic-group terms misclassify groups of people, and have been used for evil purposes such as control and stereotyping, therefore, it is not only practically but also morally wrong to use them. If so, then there are no good reasons justifying their use. As noted before, although nihilist positions are not common in Latin American philosophy, they are often held in Latin American studies and social science (Gimenez, 1989; Oboler, 1992;

Schmidt, 2003). By contrast, nihilism is not at all uncommon in other branches of philosophy, where it is sometimes called 'irrationalism.'

Thus construed, nihilism is often found among social scientists (e.g., Gimenez, 1989) and rests on a common extended argument. First, nihilists make the universal generalization that no good reason has yet been offered justifying the adoption of any term for Latin Americans and their descendants in other parts of the world. After all, available terms proposed to pick out all and only the members of these groups have so far been too broad, too narrow, or too broad and too narrow. Besides, ethnic-group terms have commonly been used for social manipulation and other evil purposes. Given these considerations, as far as nihilists are concerned, the use of any term for Latin Americans and their descendants in other parts of the world is unjustified.

It is not difficult to argue that no available ethnic-group term (i.e., neither 'Hispanics,' 'Latinos,' nor 'Latin Americans') has associated descriptive meanings that are true of all and only the members of the group thus designated. After all, there is nothing they all have in common such as a geographical location, political style, language, culture, or race (Oboler, 1992; Nuccetelli, 2001). Consider 'Hispanics': the associated description, if construed literally, picks out people related in some fundamental ways to Hispania, an Ancient Roman territory in what is now Spain and Portugal. This is clearly too narrow, since it excludes, for instance, indigenous peoples – and it is also too broad, since it includes Europeans (viz., the Spaniards and Portuguese). But the associated description of 'Latino,' being people related in some fundamental ways to Latin countries, is not better off since it is clearly too broad – so as to include, when taken literally, for instance, the Italians – and also too narrow – given that it leaves out not only the indigenous peoples but also Latin Americans of non-Latin descent. Finally, 'Latin Americans' presents similar problems: *literally* speaking, it picks out for example French Canadians, while obviously excluding actual members of the group – e.g., Latin Americans of African descent.

So nihilists might have a point here. Besides, there might be social and moral reasons for rejecting the use of such terms. For example, Latin Americans may resent being called 'Hispanics' or 'Ibero-Americans': why should the victims of colonialism agree with words for reference and self-reference that associate them with their former oppressors? Moreover, as noted by Gracia (2000), those terms are often associated with bad traits of character or impoverishment such as laziness, shiftlessness, lack of education, etc. And similar moral grounds would undermine the acceptance of any other ethnic term. Now nihilists are in a position to conclude that, in the absence of a reason outweighing these considerations (which again, are not difficult to find in the literature of the social sciences), their view is plausible.

Note that, if sound, the nihilist argument would undermine not only some proposals for the adoption of one term over another ('Hispanic' for Gracia and 'Latino' for Alcoff), but also the view that any term could be adopted as long as it is not a slur deemed offensive by the group to which the term is applied (Nuccetelli). But the nihilist argument is far from being sound. For one thing, it assumes descriptivism about ethnic-group terms, since it holds that it is the descriptions associated by speakers with the referent of any such term that fails constantly to be true of all and only those designated by the term (thus rendering it susceptible to the criticism that it is either too broad, too narrow, or too broad and narrow). But more importantly, as we saw, a crucial premise

in the nihilist argument is a universal generalization to the effect that no good reason has yet been offered justifying the adoption of any term for Latin Americans and their descendants in other parts of the world. None of the considerations so far adduced by nihilists could back up this premise. Descriptivism need not, after all, equate associated descriptions with literal meaning at the “baptismal” origin of words. Besides, even when it is true that some such terms have morally objectionable connotations, this fails to entail that *all* terms of that sort do have them.

Moreover, the use of ethnic-group terms is a common practice that, as we shall now see, may be well supported. Gracia (2000) has in fact pointed out that the adoption of an ethnic-group term could have some desirable consequences such as empowerment, pride, and liberation from relations of dependence (see, e.g., chapter 3). But here there is logical space for nihilists to reply that the practice of labeling groups of people has often been an essential tool in notorious cases of ethnic discrimination and racism. There are grounds for an open-ended discussion about whether adoption of those terms really help or hurt those denoted by them. On our view, questions of this sort cannot be settled by philosophical argument alone, since they are empirical. If we are right, philosophers can merely hope that a mature social science will at some point contribute to resolving those questions. In any case, the above argument against nihilism suggests that more reasons are needed to back up that position.

### The Political Pragmatics of Ethnic-Group Terms

Many of us grow up in communities with all sorts of traffic signs. Some are the thin rectangular green ones with white lettering on every street corner that tell us the name of some street. Others (especially the yellow triangular and red octagonal ones) are intended to constrain how, where, when, and in which direction we may drive or park. Most of us grow up accepting these differences in “signage” as a more or less reasonable way of finding our ways about town, one that minimizes the risks of collisions and maximizes our way-finding efficiency. But suppose that, as we grow up, we start to notice that this signage system is not quite the same in all neighborhoods. For example, we discover that, *historically*, traffic gets routed to and around various neighborhoods; or that only representatives of some neighborhoods get to decide which names to give the streets. Or, we come to see that, *historically*, decisions about “signage” are correlated with more basic *political* decisions about which neighborhoods get their streets repaired, widened, upgraded more frequently, and, further, how these decisions in turn are tied to decisions about sewage systems, the placement of local schools, and eventually to what sorts of stores we have available locally. When we ask about all these differences, we are told not to be impatient, that changing such complex systems takes time. Occasionally, we might even be encouraged by our city government to change the *name* of one of the main streets in our neighborhood to honor a beloved neighborhood activist. But we must still be patient about repairing the streets, sewers, and school buildings. Not unreasonably, some of us start to suspect that not all neighborhoods are equal here, and that our problematic signage system is just the tip of some iceberg.

The previous parable might serve as a way to begin to think about a recent and important debate between Gracia and Alcoff on the appropriateness of various ethnic-group



terms for the people of Latin America and their descendants abroad. Both of these philosophers take seriously the interplay of history and politics in how ethnic-group terms are used and come into being. Both of them think that with the proper account of such terms we can reveal problematic features of our social world that would otherwise be invisible and not receive their due attention.

Gracia (2001) argues for a “familial-historical” view of ethnicity and ethnic-group terms that attempts to avoid essentialism about such groups, to allow for naturally vague or indeterminate boundaries in defining them, and to reject any ideas of internal homogeneity and purity. (See also Lawrence Blum’s chapter in this volume for more analysis of Gracia’s position, especially as it is discussed in Gracia [2005] and Alcoff [2006].) It is also fair to say that Gracia adopts a realist view of ethnic groups themselves, thus rejecting any form of social constructivism, nominalism, and anti-realism (including nihilism). On the basis of a Wittgensteinian, “family-resemblance” model, Gracia then makes a case that the term ‘Hispanic,’ for now, is the more adequate descriptive and explanatory term for the new historical family that was formed as a result of the collision of cultures between (among others) Iberians, Africans, and New World indigenous peoples after 1492, an ethnic group whose constitution is still ongoing and open-ended. On Gracia’s view, members of the group Hispanics need share no single similarity (such as language, religion, race, class, ancestry, nationality) other than being part of such historical developments.

Note that given the familial account of ‘Hispanic,’ the term ranges at the very least over Hispanics/Latinos in Latin America, the United States, and the Iberian Peninsula. At the same time, the account aims to accommodate the fact that, like members of any actual family, one individual can have overlapping memberships in other groups: e.g., she could be Hispanic while also Catalan, Argentine, Mexican, *criolla* (person of Spanish ancestry born in Latin America), Mexican American, *indígena*, Pentecostal, an immigrant to Australia, a veteran of WWII, etc. Individuals reasonably *not* included in this historical web could include those who existed in Iberia, Africa, or the Western hemisphere *before* 1492, or Filipinos *after* the Spanish–American war. There can also be borderline cases: Gracia cites the cases of Angola and Mozambique in Africa and Goa in India, whose relationships to Portuguese colonial and postcolonial language and culture are more blurred. On this historical account, what matters first and foremost for preferring one ethnic-group term over another is the *web of historical relations* captured by the term. As fallible historians, we want terms that can function adequately in our explanations and descriptions of the denoted group (let’s keep in mind here that Gracia’s first academic training was as a historian). On this historical account, a consensus about such a term could put those denoted by it in a better position to address current issues of “identity politics” than rival views.

Indeed, Gracia (2000, chapter 3) takes on some of these political questions. He argues that using ethnic-group terms can be beneficial if three conditions are met: if the group in question does its own naming and defining (including acts of re-signifying as in the Black Power movement); if the resulting definitions are positive, e.g., by avoiding (historical) stereotypes; and if the definitions are not overly narrow or rigid (e.g., tied only to religion, language, class, culture, or ancestry). Given his familial-historical theory and these three conditions, Gracia argues against using ‘Latinos/as’ (2000, chapter 1) as the preferred ethnic-group term for the people he has in mind. First, often the use

of 'Latinos/as' is intended *politically* to mark off those who were the victims of Iberian oppressors. Gracia points out, however, that such a gesture would also exclude the descendants of Iberians (*criollos* and non-*criollos*) who have lived in Latin America for centuries and thus leave out people who need to be referred to in such a history. Second, why should the European origin of 'Latinos/as' (especially by French colonial administrators) continue to be privileged in our current acts of political naming over Amerindian or indigenous terms? Third, 'Latinos/as' can also be read as too broad a designation since one could just as well argue on historical grounds that it designates anyone whose origins go back to Rome and the people of Latium (which could conceivably include speakers of all Romance languages. See discussion above). Moreover, in the Middle Ages, those who used the Latin language were contrasted with the Muslims and Jews who did not. Depending on the historical web selected here, then, 'Latinos/as' could easily be attached to a history of oppressors. While no single group term will capture all possible historical webs and contexts, Gracia (2000) concludes that for now 'Hispanic' does the best overall job historically and politically for the "identity politics" that currently confronts a wide range of diverse people linked to the Americas today. More recently, Gracia (2008) has addressed again the "politics" of ethnic-group terms and argued against Alcoff's (2005) proposal of replacing 'Hispanic' with 'Latino' on the basis of political considerations (more below). On his latest view, "both 'Latino' and 'Hispanic' are helpful when thinking about various dimensions of the Latino experience, because each brings out something the other misses and therefore helps to increase our understanding. 'Latino' connotes the marginal and colonial situation of Latinos, whereas 'Hispanic' brings out the historical and cultural connections between Iberia and Latin America" (2008, p. 73).

In response to Gracia (2000), Alcoff (2005) advocates the use of 'Latino' on the basis of her close scrutiny of the relationship between historical context and politics when dealing with ethnicity in the Americas. First, Alcoff is concerned that Gracia's account is too metaphysical, in that it all too easily separates the *semantic-epistemic tasks* of securing the reference and descriptive adequacy of ethnic-group terms through careful historiography from the *political task* of establishing solidarity and identity in marginalized groups. Alcoff argues that because there is always more than one story that can be told that gels with the lived experiences of marginalized groups, any criteria of descriptive adequacy will under-determine the question of terms. For Alcoff, then, any historical account (no matter how neutral it tries to be as history) will end up privileging some political vision of group identity at the expense of some other vision. This includes Gracia's familial-historical account.

Building on this first point, Alcoff then argues that Gracia's particular historical account overemphasizes the original encounter between peoples in the New World and thereby pays insufficient attention to lived experiences of more recent colonial and post-colonial relations that have structured the Western hemisphere. If this is the case, then Gracia's account turns out to be not only descriptively and explanatorily incomplete, but politically too naïve. In contrast, then, to Gracia's proposal to take 1492 as the key historical marker, Alcoff argues that we should focus from 1898 to the present, when Spain left the hemisphere and the United States ascended as the new imperial and colonial power (Guantánamo Bay; Puerto Rico; Panama; the Phillipines; the CIA in Chile; etc.). In short, Gracia's proposal overemphasizes *more distant* historical, cultural, and

linguistic ties to the “historically impotent colonialism of Spain” at the expense of *more recent* lived experiences with the “all too potent” conditions of U.S. colonialism and racial and cultural supremacist ideology. Alcoff concludes, then, that ‘Latinos/as’ would better pick out the lived experiences of marginalized groups in this more recent historical context and thus foster the political solidarity that is needed today to resist U.S. hegemony.

In the set of replies that follow Alcoff (2005), four points merit mention here. First, both Gracia and Alcoff come to agree that ‘colonialism’ is probably an unhelpful and overused term to describe the historical relations with the North that Alcoff wants to highlight, since other than the colonies of St. Kitt and St. Martens, the United States has no traditional colonies in Latin America. Gracia suggests that it would be better to invoke here concepts such as cultural and economic imperialism. Second, while Alcoff gladly accepts this point, she replies that even ‘imperialism’ will not cover such relationships as the United States and Puerto Rico or the U.S. government’s overt and covert roles in Chile, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Guatemala, and El Salvador. For the latter cases, Alcoff finds ‘neo-colonial’ to be the more revealing term historically and politically. Third, both acknowledge the point that any big-tent model of ethnicity and its accompanying pan-ethnic “signs” run the political risks of eliding and erasing the internal heterogeneity of histories in Latin America. Finally, in the end it seems that both Gracia and Alcoff seem more than willing to admit that there are political advantages and disadvantages to the use of both ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latinos/as.’ To adapt an idea from Lawson (1992), we may say that both agree that there is an important “functional lexical gap” in social and political theory that needs filling here and that it will likely take more than one group term to do this. Indeed, as we have already noted, Gracia (2008) grants that both ‘Latino/a’ and ‘Hispanic’ bring out historical conditions the other term misses.

But, while both Gracia and Alcoff wish to avoid any “essentialism” about ethnic groups and their names, an important epistemological difference remains between them. Alcoff’s epistemic approach, which (inspired in part by Mignolo, 1995, 2000) she calls “pluritopic hermeneutics,” sees group identity as emerging from “multiple traditions [places or *topoi*] that are at play in the political contestation over meanings in a post-colonial world” (Alcoff, 2006, chapter 4, p. 125). On this sort of view, even the *ideal* of a politically neutral account or history of some social phenomenon (from *one* intellectual tradition at some ideal limit) likely keeps us from seeing the privileged assumptions that are at work in every actual, dominant conceptual framework. For Gracia, such a (postcolonial) “hermeneutics of suspicion” is overly pessimistic. In contrast, Gracia defends a (fallibilist) “framework approach” where politically neutral conceptual maps or frameworks are not given at the outset, but still may reasonably be assumed as a (regulative) *ideal* (Gracia, 2008, chapter 9). To put this difference in terms of the above parable: where Gracia sees fallible, historical grounds for distinguishing in principle a “semantic realism” about descriptive “green street signs,” Alcoff cautions us always to see the “semantics” of our descriptive signs against the likely pragmatic backdrop of hegemonic stop signs, one-way signs, and suspicious detours.

*Related chapters:* 16 Language and Colonization; 18 Identity and Philosophy; 19 Latinos on Race and Ethnicity; Alcoff, Corlett, and Gracia; 20 *Mestizaje* and Hispanic Identity.

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