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SEARCHING FOR A DREAM FROM TAMPA TO NEW YORK*

by Jose Yglesias
translated by Ana Varela-Lago

I was born and raised in Tampa, or rather, in a section of the city called Ybor City, where only Spanish was spoken. My father, a peasant from Galicia, immigrated to Havana as an adolescent to work as an apprentice in a cigar factory. When he became a cigarmaker, he moved to Tampa to search for work in the cigar factories of Ybor City. Ybor City was a Latin island in the South of the United States, and I did not speak a word of English when I entered public school. There, we students spoke Spanish among ourselves and broken English with the teachers. Ybor City had its own Spanish press, theaters, and mutual aid societies, with dance halls, libraries, gyms and medical services. It was a self-sufficient world, a wonderful community that I left behind when I headed for New York, at seventeen, to discover the great American world, feeling as American as any other white adolescent. Why?

I would not have asked myself that question then. I do it now because the past twenty years have seen the rise on the national scene of the “Hispanic” minority, a group with such a strong separatist culture that it can use the word “Hispanic” without irony, something still impossible for my generation.

The playwright George Bernard Shaw said that Englishmen and Americans were a people divided by a common language. He said it jokingly but to make us think. His irony, it seems to me now, is even more appropriate for our new Hispanic family. We Latins are sometimes as much Mayas, Incas and Africans of various nations as we are Iberians. And our Spanish language reflects this variety. In classifying our new immigrants as Hispanics we take for granted that their countries and cultures are cut from the same cloth. And it is forgotten that we Latins have a long historical presence in what is today the United States and that we are already part of its history.

We do not even have to turn to the West, where Mexicans preceded everyone else, except for the indigenous nations. In my own town of New York the Hispanic tradition existed before I arrived in 1937. Castelao, the father of “galleguismo” [Galician nationalism], lived and wrote in the neighborhood of Chelsea. José Martí, the Cuban nationalist hero, organized from New York the Cuban movement for independence in the 1880s. And Arthur Schomburg, who gave his name to the noted African-American cultural center in Harlem, was of Puerto Rican origin.

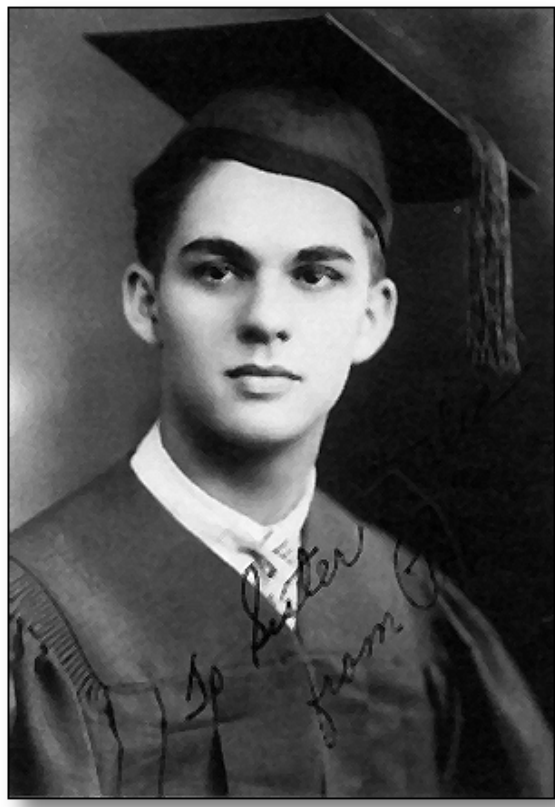
In separating ourselves from the American world we become accomplices to the American historians who, with their prejudices, have ignored this history. How many Latins will there be in the United States who are bothered by this new separatist label of “Hispanic”? It bothers me so much that I forget the most important question: Why do the New Latin immigrants feel this way?

The answer is known to other ethnic groups in the United States, because almost without exception, we have not been welcomed. When I came to New York in 1937, I walked along

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Sixth Avenue where the employment agencies were located and went into one where for five dollars I could buy a job as a waiter. The man who took my money and gave me a piece of paper with the name and address of a popular coffee shop exclaimed, upon seeing my name, that I would not get work. If I wanted the job, I would have to make up an American name. "You can give them any name as long as you use the same social security number."

I was so shocked that I did not object. I thought of the name of a Tampa neighbor that sounded more or less Irish: Moran. When I got to the job, I was so angry for what I had been asked to do that I immediately gave my real name to the person who was interviewing me. I said with rage: "They told me I would have to change it to..." The man did not let me finish. "I don't care what your name is." And he hired me. I will never forget his name: Peck. He was Jewish. He had probably changed his name and knew how I felt. He was my first ally in the defense of my "americanismo."



Yglesias's high school graduation picture.

Well, not exactly. In Tampa, Ybor City Latins did not go to school with the "americanos" until we got to high school. My third grade teacher was a beautiful non-Latin young woman and I, of course, was in love with her. One day, when I was turning in a test, she said to me: "You have a beautiful name. Never change it." I have been loyal to her all my life.

I had – and still have – to pay for this loyalty. For years, my name filled with anxiety potential landlords. They only calmed down when they spoke with my wife, who was not Latin.

I will never forget the time when I returned to Tampa from New York, on leave from my ship in the Navy during World War II. I stayed talking in the club car with two other servicemen. Believing that I was a New Yorker, they praised the virtues of Tampa. The only warning they gave me was about Ybor City: "Don't go, it's a dangerous place, full of 'spics.'" Those prejudices were nothing new to me. I had always known that was what the "americanos" in Tampa thought of us.

Then, why did I feel as American as anyone else when I left Tampa at seventeen? The prejudices were then even stronger than they are now, but a light shined like a halo – the American dream of equality. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the nation's president. Fiorello La Guardia was New York City's mayor. In Europe, Fascism was on the rise or already in power, but we were excited with the fervor of the labor movement, and crossed ethnic boundaries to fight against the elite who held power at that time.

Nowadays, perhaps immigrants from all over the world may be well received. But, more than anything, what they are offered is the opportunity to earn money, fill our shopping centers, and with time, get that little piece of plastic that has become more important than the citizenship papers. If that is all the United States has to offer, then it is right for us to cling to our Spanish language and our customs, and to resist accepting the lifestyle prevalent here. The United States has to convince us if we are to abandon all we brought with us.

Other immigrants resisted too. In the 1930s, when I first came to the north, the city of New York was full of ethnic neighborhoods. They were the ones who would not surrender. Almost all those neighborhoods have disappeared. Latins do not surrender either, and sometimes it seems that our neighborhoods grow instead of them being abandoned. It is not our fault, it is the stars', and the northern star has lost its shine, I believe. However, the star shines from time to time, offering equality. In the past, other immigrants used this egalitarian ideal as a wedge to get ahead, and even today it is a useful tool.

I believe that for those of us who live in the United States, assimilation does not mean abandoning our past, but enriching an already very rich mix. Hispanics (whatever we may choose to call them) newly arrived to this country are like the proverbial father of the bride: they do not lose Bolívar or Martí, but gain Jefferson and Lincoln. To me, assimilation has meant that in all my work as a writer I had tried to make American readers aware of the existence of Ybor City and its Latin cigarmakers. It is a fact that Ybor City is already part of America's own history.

And my assimilation does not mean that I do not take pleasure hearing how Andy Garcia (in the film *Internal Affairs*), playing the role of a policeman, the prototypical American hero, speaks in Spanish to another Latin unexpectedly, without preparing the public. Here we are, that is what assimilation means: We are American. I like when jazz and salsa mix, and every time they mix more and more.