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Text of *Radio BC* audio commentary

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Radio BC: Are Hispanics an Ethnic Group?

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The U.S. Census Bureau does its big count every ten years, and updates the numbers in the middle of the decade. The 2005 figures show that the Hispanic population is pulling further ahead of African Americans. There are officially 2.1 million more self-identified Hispanics in the U.S. than self-identified Blacks, 41.3 million Hispanics compared to 39.2 million African Americans. And, with immigration and high Hispanic birth rates, there is no reason to believe the trend will not continue.

Among most marketers and political demographers, it has long been a done deal that Hispanics have replaced Blacks as the nation's biggest ethnic group. But that's only true if one believes that "Hispanic" is an ethnicity. And that is more than open to question.

There is no doubt that Black Americans are an ethnic group. Their ancestors, who came from many African nations, speaking many languages, worshipping different gods, were forced to become one people during slavery. Over the centuries, Blacks did become one people, and remained so after Emancipation, within the confines of Jim Crow. Indeed, even in that peculiar place called Louisiana, differentiations among the Black population were blurred by the heavy hand of segregation. Jim Crow further knitted Blacks together, as the freed men and women of the South, as in the North, built Black social, cultural and political infrastructures monuments to Black identity. The surrounding white nation relentlessly encouraged the flowering of a Black polity based on Black ethnicity. This policy was the other side of the coin of the American policy of assimilating "all the nations of Europe" into a big white "melting pot." The whites became "Americans." We remained African Americans. The Black polity, which is a kind of nation, already existed when the great waves of Europeans arrived after the Civil War. It is a multi-textured but amazingly unified cultural and political entity, now almost 40 million strong. We don't all agree, but we share the same social and historical reference points. Black Americans are an ethnicity and a polity.

Hispanic Americans come from many nations. In their ancestral countries, they often comprise many separate ethnicities. A Peruvian Indian is ethnically different than a member of the white elite of that country, and remains so when both groups of Peruvians emigrate to the United States, where both are ethnically different than Afro-Caribbean Hispanic immigrants. Calling all Hispanics in the U.S. one ethnic group in effect denies their actual, varied ethnicity. Hispanics in the U.S. are many people. Often, Hispanics in the U.S. who hail from the same country are ethnically different.

No, it is a stretch of social science to lump Hispanics together as one ethnicity, although it is certainly possible

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that at some time in the future a portion of the various Hispanic ethnicities will forge a common culture and worldview within the U.S., as have African Americans over the centuries. But that remains to be seen. For Radio BC, I'm Glen Ford.

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