

The Making of Latino Providence

José Itzigsohn

Associate Professor of Sociology

Brown University

This is a rough draft containing the key points for a future paper analyzing the emergence of Latino communities in Providence. It is prepared for presentation at the “ “ . Please do not cite or quote without permission.

Introduction

This paper investigates the formation of Latino communities, social practices, and identities in the city of Providence, Rhode Island. As in much of urban New England, during the last two decades immigration has changed the population composition and urban life in Providence. According to the 2000 Census, Latinos constitute 30 percent of the Providence population. This population has been growing in number and complexity. Latinos are leaving a mark in all areas of Providence life, from the urban space, to urban culture, to urban politics. In this paper I focus on the transformation of urban space, on the process of formation of ethnonational communities and social spaces, and on the emergence of panethnic identities and social practices.

Latino Providence

While by national measures the Latino population in Rhode Island is very small, it has a very strong presence in the cities of the state. Table 1 presents Census data on the composition of Latino population in the state of Rhode Island, in Providence, and the neighboring municipalities of Pawtucket and Central Falls. The Latino population in Providence is a mostly urban population and it is heavily concentrated in these three cities.¹ The table shows the impressive growth of the Latino population during the last decade. In the state in general, in Providence, and in Pawtucket the Latino population

¹ I have chosen these three municipalities because they constitute a common urban area and together concentrate 78.5 percent of the Latino population of the state. Two other places of concentration of the Latino population are the cities of Woonsocket and Newport.

more than doubled its size and almost double its proportion in the population. In Central Falls, a small town with very high population density, where the proportion of Latinos was high already in the 1990s, the growth of the Latino population constituted 61.3 percent of the population growth in the decade.

The table also shows the change in the composition of the Latino population. The decade saw the absolute rise in the number of the populations of the main Latino groups, but also a change in their proportions within the population. The two largest groups, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans lost relative weight, Guatemalans doubled their numbers and maintained their relative proportions and Mexicans more than doubled their numbers and increased their weight in the population. It is notable that the number of Colombians remained almost identical in the two Census years, although the number of people from this country is probably growing with the constant arrival of people who seek refuge from the internal political conflict. The table shows a large number of Latinos who did not indicate nationality. We don't know the national origin of this group although we can be confident that they are not Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, or Cubans. The proportion of people who did not indicate nationality is similar in Rhode Island to the national numbers and poses a problem in trying to evaluate the size of the different immigrant populations.²

The table also provides some indications concerning the spatial concentration of the Latino populations. Dominicans and Guatemalans are highly concentrated within the boundaries of Providence, as opposed to Puerto Ricans and Mexicans who seem to be more spread out in the urban space. Colombians who used to be concentrated in Central Falls have been moving away from this city, particularly to Pawtucket. Territorial

² For example, according to the 2000 Census in Rhode Island there are more people born

concentration or dispersion is very important in the constitution of communities, symbolic urban spaces, and the mobilization of political power.

In terms of the spatial distribution of Latinos within Providence the 1990s saw a growing Latino presence in new parts of the city and a general movement from the southern neighborhoods of the city towards the west. According to the data provided by Providence Plan (www.provplan.org), in 1990, 59.4 percent of the Latino population was concentrated in the southern neighborhoods of the city while in 2000 the proportion of Latinos in the same neighborhoods was 44.7 percent. This was not due to a reduction of the absolute numbers but to a faster growth of the Latino population in the western neighborhoods that encompassed 13.7 percent of the Latino population in 1990 and 23.1 in 2000. At the same time, in 1990 Latinos did not consist of more than half of the population in any neighborhood and they were only more than 40 percent only in one neighborhood in the southern part of the city. In 2000 on the other hand, Latinos were more than half of the population in four neighborhoods—three in the south and one in the western part of the city—and they comprised more than 40 percent of the population in four neighborhoods—three of them in the west part of the city and one of them in the south.

The Formation of Ethnic Urban Spaces

The spatial and social processes of formation of community formation show two parallel processes. The first one is the emergence of ethnonational communities that are associated with particular parts of town. The second one is the creation of panethnic Latino identities, practices and organizations. The production is Latino spaces and

in Guatemala than people that indicated Guatemala as their nationality.

identities reflect these two processes. In this section I look at the first of these processes. Dominicans and Puerto Ricans are associated with the Southside, Mexicans and Guatemalans with the Western neighborhoods, Colombians are historically associated with Central Falls and the northern parts of the metropolitan area. These are the areas where the concentration of businesses are found, where ethnonational organizations are located, where festivals and celebrations take place.

Dominicans have been perhaps the most visible and outspoken group in Providence and their urban presence is associated with the southern neighborhoods of the city. Dominicans organize their festival since the late 1980s in Roger Williams Park in the South of the city. They are engaged in the construction of a statue to Juan Pablo Duarte in the park and in changing the name of parts of Broad St.—the main artery of the Southern neighborhoods—to Juan Pablo Duarte Boulevard. Also Broad St. and to lesser extent Elmwood St. and Cranston St. have become the main location of Dominican small businesses. Dominican small businesses have indeed revitalized Broad St.. The South side is also the base for the emerging Dominican/Latino elected officials. Similarly, St. Michael the main catholic church of the Southside organizes every year a parade for the Virgen de la Altagracia, the virgin patron of the Dominican Republic.

The western neighborhoods have seen the fast emergence of Mexican and Guatemalan businesses and the presence of Guatemalan and Mexican festivals and parades. St. Theresa, the main catholic church in the West part of town, hosts the Committee of Immigrants in Action, a committee that works in favor of an amnesty for undocumented immigrants. The members of the committee come from all groups, but there is a majority of Guatemalans and Mexicans. Also St. Theresa is the location for the

celebration of Central American rituals such as the drawing of wood chip carpets for Easter week.

The Colombian associations celebrate the carnivals and Colombian independence day in Central Falls. Central Falls also has a number of Colombian businesses and has elected a Colombian councilperson (although in the past a Guatemalan and a Puerto Rican candidate have also run unsuccessfully for City council). This small town, however, is the most diverse town of the state. For example, one of the main landmarks for giving directions is a big store called Dominican Supermarket. Also, the Colombian presence, as we saw before, has dwindled in the last decade.

Different Latino groups, hence, have appropriated different parts of the urban space. This appropriation is seen in the rise of businesses, celebrations, and rituals associated with the different groups. The high visibility of small businesses, however, should not hide the fact that the neighborhoods in which Latino immigrants settled are the neighborhoods with the lowest income in the city. There are numerous common problems to all the immigrant population—e.g., access to health, education, employment, etc.—that are common to all immigrant groups and form one of the bases for the emergence of broader forms of identity, organization, and action.

The Emergence of Latino Panethnic Identities

The second process we can observe in Providence and neighboring cities is one of dispersal and mixing. As we previously saw, the composition of the population is uneven, but there is no one group that has absolute supremacy, such as Mexicans in California or Cubans in Miami (although the latter dominance is increasingly challenge). Furthermore, as mentioned above, there is considerable mixing of the populations, and the issues faced

by all of them are similar. Although there are certain areas of town identified with certain national groups, the neighborhoods are not exclusive and presence of all national groups can be found in all neighborhoods. This implies that the groups interact in space and in everyday life and these interactions possibilitates the emergence of Latino panethnic identities and practices. The emergence of panethnic identities is rooted in the presence of institutions that sustain and mobilize them and in these section I focus on some of the key institutions that serve and construct Latino social practices and identities, namely social services organizations, media, churches, and politics.

There are two main social service organizations, Progreso Latino and Chispa, that are organized on the premise of serving and advocating for Latino populations. Progreso Latino operates in Central Falls and was created primarily as a social service organization. Chispa operates in the Southern part of Providence and was though originally as an advocacy organization. Over time both organizations became a combination of service and advocacy organization. Although Progreso Latino was organized by people who were mainly from Colonial origin, it adopted from the beginning a panethnic language, as did Chispa. They were constructed from the beginning to address the need of a Latino population, and not of any particular national constituency. They have considerable presence and voice and the participation in their services and the discourses that they promote lead to the identification of Latino urban spaces and identities.

There are 3 Latino radio stations in town, and although all of them are owned and managed by Dominicans, their own presentation is broadcasting for a Latino population. They all have non-Dominican broadcasters and transmit music from all Latin American

countries as well as Latino music from the U.S. They all have mobilized in the past in favor of Latino community causes. The radio station most associated with Dominicanness is Poder 1110, but paradoxically, this radio has undertaken the organization of a Latino Multicultural festival every summer in Central Falls (in partnership with the Central Falls Police Department). This was done in part as a strategy to bolster the presence of this radio station, which is the bigger of the three, through the organization of a festival associated with the station and in part as a result of a conflict with the organizers of the Dominican festival over the rights of broadcasting of the festival.

Churches are an important space of socialization and building of friendships and solidarities. Religion, mainly Catholicism but also other Christian sects, play an important role in the everyday life and identity construction of Latinos in the U.S. Although I argued that there are two important catholic churches associated with national groups, the language of the church is a panethnic language. This makes sense because the people who attend come from all countries. Also there are numerous smaller catholic and other Christian churches that serve a panethnic population.

One of the main bases for Panethnic identity is the mobilization of people in the political arena. There are right now five Latino elected officials in the state. Two city councilors (a Puerto Rican and a Dominican), two state representatives (a Panamanian and a Dominican), and a state senator (a Dominican). The geographical base for the rise of Latino political power in Providence is the Southside. There is where the most established Latino populations in the city are located, meaning that there is the highest concentration of Latinos who are citizens and can vote. Most of these voters are Dominican and so are three out of the five elected officials, yet their discourse is that they

represent the Latino community—as well as the neighborhood population as a whole—and they appeal to the Latino vote. As mentioned above, Central Falls elected a Colombian councilperson, but this person also ran as a Latino candidate. The discourse use to mobilize the immigrant vote then is one of Latino politics and organization, but the content of these discourses and the alliances created on its base are widely diverse.

Three of the elected officials were elected pursuing broad coalition politics while two of these elected officials were elected mobilizing mostly the Latino vote and unseating two African American elected officials. Moreover, the emergence of a Latino voting block is not a smooth process. In fact, in the last Democratic primary cycle, a Dominican state representative and then the Latino elected official in the highest position created an alliance with an African American state senator and a white city councilor against their respective Latino opponents. In fact, the Latino state representative was the only one to survive the primaries, withstanding the challenge of a Nigerian immigrant candidate (another rising immigrant community), showing the importance of the Latino vote in the southern part of the city. Furthermore, the Latino winners of the primaries for City Council and the State Senate went on to confront independent Latino candidates in the general elections.

The rise in the number of elected officials is not the only form of Latino political participation in the city. Latinos in South Providence were very important in the election of David Cicilline, the new mayor. Most of the activists involved were Dominicans, but they used a discourse of Latino support. There is also a Latino Political Action Committee (RILPAC) organized to influence state politics. There are also numerous issues, such as immigrant rights, health care, education, in which the different national

organizations and activists come together to mobilize the Latino population. Case in point is the mobilization for amnesty for undocumented workers where several national and panethnic organizations collaborate in mobilizing the immigrant population in favor of legislation that would give residence to undocumented immigrants. Another issue is the opposition to legislation that would require having a social security number in order to obtain a driver license.

Conclusion

The city of Providence does not bring forward associations to Latino life in the U.S., yet this paper shows how the city has been affected by Latino migration in the last two decades. Numerous neighborhoods have seen the signposts of a growing Latino presence in the form of small business, community associations, and festivals and rituals. Different national groups have created their own community life and appropriated symbolically different parts of the urban space. Yet, in a place such as Providence, where no particular national group dominates numerically or can mobilize alone to improve its own position, we see the rise of panethnic identities and organizations. Panethnic social service, advocacy, and political organizations have made great strides in influencing the life of the city. Yet, many challenges remain to provide the new immigrant populations access to opportunities and rights. How these challenges are solved will indicate the future position of the new immigrant populations in New England cities and U.S. society.

Table 1. Latino population in Rhode Island, 1990 and 2000.

	Rhode Island 1990	Rhode Island 2000	Providence 1990	Providence 2000	Central Falls 1990	Central Falls 2000	Pawtucket 1990	Pawtucket 2000
Total	959,532	1,048,319	136,984	173,618	12,522	18,928	67,705	72,958
Latinos/as	43,905 (4.6)*	90,820 (8.6)*	23,744 (17.3)*	52,146 (30.0)*	5,115 (40.8)*	9,041 (47.7)*	4,930 (7.3)*	10,141 (13.9)*
Puerto Rican	12,494 (28.4)**	25,422 (27.8)**	6,479 (27.3)**	12,712 (24.4)**	1,509 (29.5)**	2,249 (24.8)**	1,343 (27.2)**	3,298 (32.5)**
Dominican	9,374 (21.3)**	17,894 (19.7)**	7,973 (33.6)**	14,683 (28.1)**	248 (4.8)**	734 (8.1)**	181 (3.7)**	804 (7.9)**
Guatemalan	4,083 (9.3)**	8,949 (9.8)**	2,991 (12.6)**	6,396 (12.3)**	543 (10.6)**	1,202 (13.3)**	336 (6.8)**	618 (6.1)**
Colombian	5,161 (11.7)**	5,706 (6.3)**	601 (2.5)**	693 (1.3)**	2,241 (43.8)**	1,882 (20.8)**	1,684 (34.1)**	2,143 (21.1)**
Mexican	2,267 (5.2)**	5,881 (6.5)**	783 (3.3)**	2,237 (4.3)**	91 (1.8)**	185 (2.0)**	254 (5.1)**	581 (5.7)**
Salvadoran	902 (2.0)**	1,206 (1.3)**	830 (3.5)**	871 (1.7)**	30 (0.6)**	156 (1.7)**	9 (0.2)**	51 (0.5)**
Other Latino/a³	6,184 (14.1)**	20,509 (22.6)**	2,177 (9.2)**	11,839 (22.7)**	358 (6.9)**	957 (10.6)**	989 (20.0)**	2,237 (22.0)**

Source: Census of 1990 and 2000.

* Percent of the total population.

** Percent of the Latino population

³ Other Latino/a refers to Latinos that have not provided a national identification in the Census. This proved to be a problematic issue particularly in the 2000 Census, where about six million people who identified themselves as Latinos (about 20 percent of the population) did not provide a national identification. The same proportions are present in the Rhode Island Census data.