

**Hispanic Miami:
Diversity and Inequality
In the Global City***

by

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The population classified as Hispanic in the Miami metropolitan area represents about two-thirds of the total, having grown steadily over the years. It is now the “mainstream” of the Metro area since the component classified as “native White” has declined rapidly and now represents less than fifteen percent of the total. The Afro-American population of the County has held steady at about twenty percent. The Hispanic population of Miami is quite different from that of other metropolitan areas in that it is simultaneously part of the economic and political elite of the Miami-Dade County, and it is also a major component of its working class.

This paradox is explained by two facts: first, the heterogeneity of the so-called Hispanic population, and second, the unique position of Miami in relation to Latin American countries to its south. Under the label “Hispanic”, one finds people of multiple nationalities, races, socio-economic classes and political origins. The social pages of the Miami newspapers are full of Latin names and faces—an integral part of the local elite—while it is also Latin migrants, mostly undocumented, who pick up the fruit and winter vegetable crops in the rural southern quadrant of the County for export to the rest of the nation.

Most of the Hispanic population of the United States is composed of working class immigrants and their descendants who came here in quest of a better economic situation for themselves and their families. The vast Mexican- origin population—the largest among all Latin American groups—is mostly of that origin. Miami is quite different: a large proportion of South Florida-bound migration has been composed of refugees escaping political oppression at home. That situation has been brought about by populist revolutions or coups in the home countries that targeted their upper and middle classes for persecution and expelled large numbers of them. These educated, skilled and formerly well-to-do persons did not disperse all over the world, nor went to multiple cities in the United States; instead they concentrated at the tip of South Florida.

For reasons of geography and history, Miami has been historically linked to the Caribbean and Latin America since its foundation. Before the Cuban middle and upper-classes arrived here as penniless refugees, they had, for decades, come to spend their vacations in Miami Beach and shop at Lincoln Road. Havana was so close that, in the nineteen fifties, it was not uncommon for the well-to-do in the Island to grab a plane in the morning, spend the day shopping or sightseeing in Miami, and return to Havana in the evening. At a greater distance, wealthy Venezuelans and Nicaraguans did the same.

Miami has been the place of refuge for the losing side in populist revolutions throughout Latin America who come here to regroup, re-organize, and often try to re-conquer their nations. Sometimes they succeeded, as in the case of Nicaraguans, other times, they utterly failed, as in the case of Cubans during the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 and the following U.S.—Soviet accord that ended the Missile Crisis in 1962. When that happens, former elites have had to transform what was to be a temporary sojourn into permanent settlement. However, these groups possessed the necessary skills and cohesiveness to avoid being relegated to the bottom of the American class-ethnic hierarchy, as is the routinely case with manual labor migrants. Instead, they first concentrated in creating and growing their own enterprises and eventually transformed their newly-acquired economic wealth into political power. The current U.S. Senator from Florida, Marco Rubio, is a product of that process but, arguably, no one represents it better than José Oliva, founder and owner of a cigar-making enterprise in Miami and the newly-elected Speaker of the Florida Legislature in Tallahassee.

Miami's Latin Mosaic

The Miami-Dade metropolitan population is classified as 78 percent white, 19 percent black, and 3 percent Asian or other. The white population is, however, largely Hispanic, as native whites comprise only 15 percent of the total. Hispanics, of any, race represent 66 percent and effectively make up the core population of the city. In the interest of time, I will concentrate my remarks exclusively on this population. Miami's Hispanic mosaic may be represented by a six-pointed star, as depicted in Figure 1. Cubans, Colombians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans occupy each one of the points, the rest being composed of Mexicans, Central American, Caribbeans, and other South American nationalities. I will describe briefly each of those groups as a way of highlighting the diversity of this population and the reasons for the uniqueness of Miami in the nation's ethno-racial make-up.

Figure about here

Cubans

Miami today would be incomprehensible without the Cuban Revolution. That historical event expelled the entire upper and middle- classes of pre-revolutionary Cuba. As just seen, their attempts to defeat the Castro regime failed repeatedly and confined them to permanent exile in South Florida. With support from the U.S. Federal government, they proceeded to build a vibrant economic enclave that, by 1967, numbered close to one thousand firms. Ten years later, the U.S. Census counted 30,366 Cuban-owned enterprises in the United States, most of them concentrated in the Miami Metro area. Many were small single-person ventures, but they also included half of the largest Hispanic-owned firms in the nation and the largest bank. At that time, there was one firm per twenty-seven Cuban-born persons in the country.

Cubans then proceeded to translate these economic resources into political power, especially when the old Southern-style Anglo leadership of Miami attempted to re-assert its hegemony by confining the exiles to a subordinate population in the local ethnic queue. Cubans responded by naturalizing in record numbers, voting massively, and employing the wealth accumulated by their businesses in numerous political campaigns. In a few years, Anglo hegemony was a thing of the past. The so-called Non-group, a tiny conclave of Anglo executives led by the editor of the *Miami Herald* who had called the shots in Miami for many years, ceased to exist. The newspaper itself appointed a new editor of Cuban origin and its parent company, Knight-Ridder News moved its headquarters away from the city.

By the end of the twentieth century, the mayors of the City of Miami, Miami-Dade County and most of its main municipalities were Cuban or Cuban-American, as were two-thirds of the state legislators and two Federal congresspersons. The advent of a new century, added another Congressman and two U.S. senators—first, Mel Martinez and then Marco Rubio. The latter even saw fit to run for U.S. president in 2016.

These developments go a long way to explain the peculiarity of Miami as an American city. It is not only immigrant-populated, but immigrant-ruled. In areas of Latin concentration, it is scarcely worthwhile to run for public office if one is not Cuban or Cuban-American. In Miami, Spanish is at par with English as a language of business and public discourse. It is not exclusively the language of maids and construction workers, but, also that of business owners and managers of multinational corporations. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are at the core of the city's economic success. By 2015, the Cuban-origin population of the metropolitan area numbered 928,394, 35 percent of the total.

Colombians

Nothing as dramatic as the Cuban Revolution preceded mass migration from Colombia to South Florida. It was driven instead by political instability and a civil war at home plus the pervasive influence of the drug trade. Close proximity to the north coast of Colombia turned Miami, for a time, into the capital of the cocaine trade, both as a reception point for drug shipments and as the center of money laundering. During a good part of the 1980's, Miami's financial machine "kicked on cocaine", with Colombian drug lords ruling the trade and "cocaine cowboys" ruling the streets. The intervention of a Federal task force, led by then vice-president George Bush, plus a concerted effort by the FBI and local law enforcement was necessary to bring the situation under control. By and large, the Florida route was subsequently abandoned by the cocaine gangs in favor of the more hospitable and less guarded lands of Central America and Mexico.

Most Colombians came and settled in South Florida as legal immigrants. Many came from urban areas and were better educated than the average immigrant from Latin America. By 2015, 123,978 Colombian lived in Miami, representing almost 5 percent of the metropolitan population. Despite their numbers, the Colombian political presence is nil. This can be explained by two factors. First, the association with the drug trade tainted the community. While the vast majority of Colombians are legitimate, hard-working immigrants, they still live and work under a pall of suspicion. As several Colombian-American scholars have noted, this generalized suspicion does not come exclusively from the outside world, but from within the Colombian community itself. Mutual suspicion generates lack of trust and this, in turn, makes it hard to create and sustain strong ethnic organizations or project a cohesive political presence.

While many charitable and civic Colombian associations exist, their presence does not translate into political power. Few Colombian or Colombian-American candidates have been elected to public office in South Florida and those who succeeded did so mostly by allying themselves with Cuban-American politicians and tapping into the Cuban electorate. Spatially, the Colombian immigrant population is dispersed throughout the metropolitan area, living in Coral Gables, Kendall and other middle class areas, as well as in working-class Hialeah and other low income areas of the city.

Lack of a strong social and political presence is also due to a second characteristic of Colombian immigration, namely its lack of finality. Unlike the earlier waves of Cuban exiles who could not or would not go back to Cuba, Colombian immigrants can easily return home. Bogotá is only a short two-hour hop from Miami by air. Since Colombia is a democratic country, its citizens can move back and forth unhindered across its borders. Colombians in Miami travel back home frequently, make investments there, own property, and participate in national festivities and politics.

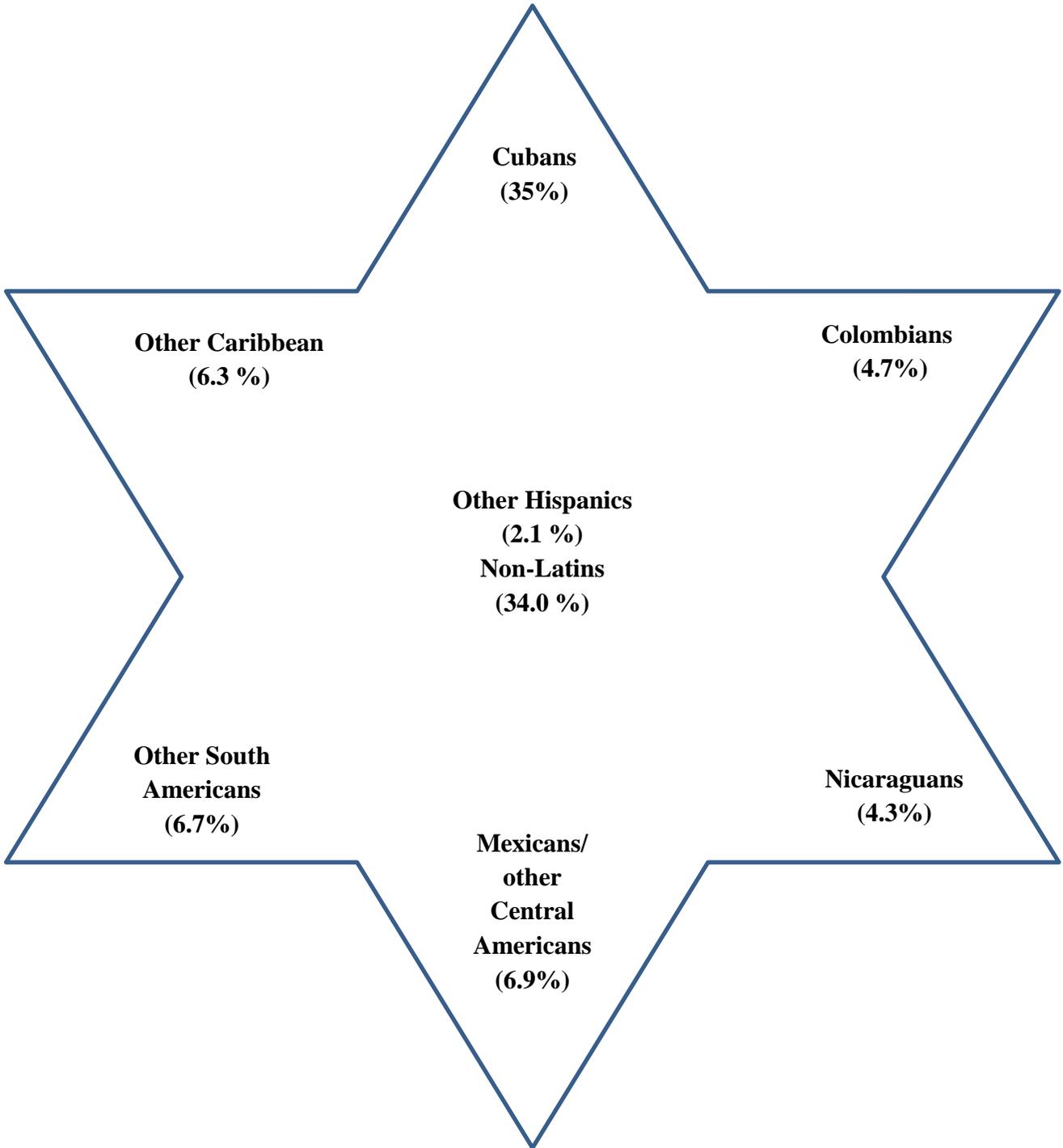
They often pay greater attention to Colombian elections, sport matches, and events than to those in their adopted city. This lack of a definite commitment to their American lives weakens, in turn, their political voice. Unlike Cubans, who had to make a long-term choice for their adopted city by dint of historical circumstances, Colombians can always go back, and often lead transnational lives between their places of origin and Miami.

Nicaraguans

The advent of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua triggered an exodus of the upper and middle-classes toward South Florida that resembled closely the earlier Cuban flow. It would

Figure 1

The Latin Ethnic Mosaic of Miami



appear that a repeat performance would take place, complete with the emergence of a “Little Managua” in Miami and the rise of a second powerful Latin group in local politics. It did not happen that way and the reasons why are instructive. Unlike the reception accorded to earlier Cuban exiles, the Reagan Administration in the 1980’s was much less inclined to welcome Nicaraguan refugees to South Florida. It preferred to keep anti-Sandinista discontent bottled up in Nicaragua and encouraged men of fighting age to join the Contra army being organized in Honduras. Many Nicaraguans, seeking to escape their country and make it to American shores were summarily deported.

Under such circumstances, the only firm ally of these would-be refugees was the by-now well-established Cuban community of Miami. Seeing the Nicaraguans as allies in their own struggle against the Castro regime and as brothers-in-arms in the anti-communist crusade, the Cuban establishment of Miami closed rank in defense of the newcomers. This stance gave rise to a singular situation in which the same people whom the federal government was trying to expel from the country, were welcomed and protected by the local government in Miami. In the end, the South Florida congressional delegation, comprised largely of Cuban-Americans, succeeded in obtaining temporary protected status for the Nicaraguans. The relevant bill, known by its acronym NACARA, was written by Cuban-American Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart.

The stage was then set for the rise of a Nicaraguan enclave—a Little Managua akin to Little Havana—and indeed Nicaraguan businesses and organizations of all kinds proliferated during the 1980’s. However, a new turn of events stopped the development of this community on its tracks. As it happened, the Contra War was successful, forcing the Sandinista regime to call national elections that it lost. The advent of a new democratic government under president Violeta Chamorro opened the door for a massive return of Nicaraguan refugees to their country.

The U.S. federal government encouraged this return flow, as did the new Chamorro administration that offered a number of positions to prominent Nicaraguans in Miami. Air traffic from Miami International Airport to Managua expanded rapidly, as did trade between the two cities. Seeing no reason to continue assisting the former refugees, Cuban exile organizations withdrew their political and social support.

Thereafter, Nicaraguans became just another immigrant group in South Florida. Like Colombians, their settlement pattern lacked finality, with continuous back-and-forth movements to their home country. Some Nicaraguan ethnic organizations survived, but they were just a shadow of what they had been in the 1980's. By 2015, there were still 114,000 Nicaraguans living in the Miami Metro Area, representing almost 5 percent of its population. Politically and socially, they had become nearly invisible. A few busts of national poet, Ruben Dario, still exist here and there and St. John Bosco Parish in East Little Havana rose up to become the spiritual center of the former refugees. Yet, no single prominent Nicaraguan figure can be found in elite political circles today. Electorally, Nicaraguans who acquired U. S. citizenships have loyally supported Cuban candidates for office, a payback of sorts for the support received from the Cuban leaders in past decades.

Mexicans, Central and South Americans

Approximately 22 percent of the Miami metropolitan population is composed of immigrants from elsewhere in Latin America. This population is not homogeneous either but features at least three strands: refugees, professional and white-collar migrants, and agricultural and other manual workers. The principal source of would-be refugees at present is Venezuela, afflicted by yet another populist regime under the “Bolivarian” revolution. Following a time-

honored pattern, the upper- and middle-classes of that country have emigrated in large numbers, their principal area of destination being again Miami. In 2015, the U.S. Census counted over 56,000 Venezuelans living in the metropolitan area. Since then, their numbers have surely increased

In South Florida, well-to-do Venezuelans have concentrated in the municipality of Doral, close to the Miami International Airport. The location itself is telling. Venezuelans still travel frequently back to attend to businesses, visit families, or bring consumer goods in short supply. Their settlement pattern so far is similar to that of Colombians and Nicaraguans, characterized by multiple transnational linkages and close monitoring of political and economic events back home. So far, Venezuelans have not given up hope that the Bolivarian regime will be defeated, in one form or another, allowing them to return permanently.

A second flow from Latin America is made up of entrepreneurs and professionals who come to Miami to invest capital or pursue their careers. Much of this migration is preventive, that is, people transfer their capital or themselves as a calculated move against another possible populist uprising at home. As an Argentine businessman now living in Miami Beach puts it:

Every morning when I open the newspaper, I give thanks to God that it does not say that the dollar has been devaluated by 50 percent; that properties of the rich will be confiscated; or that taxes on them will be doubled.

Miami is not the city where the politically victorious come to claim their prize, but the place where those defeated by left-wing uprisings come for refuge or where those anticipating a similar fate come preventively. Out of these desperate flows, the city by Biscayne Bay has built itself. Its ascent to global city status has been due, to a large extent, to the continuous political

instability in its Latin background yielding, over time, significant contributions of capital, entrepreneurial energy, and talent.

Lastly, the area also receives manual labor flows similar to those going to California, the Midwest, and elsewhere and composed primarily of Mexicans, Central Americans, and West Indians. The economy of the southern quadrant of Dade County, centered around the towns of Homestead and Florida City, is agricultural producing fruits and winter vegetables for export to the rest of the nation. The “Latin Flavor” in that part of the County is entirely different from Miami proper. It is overwhelming Mexican. The fruit pickers and agricultural laborers in the region are mostly undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants. The food markets and other stores serving their consumer needs are similar to those found in other areas of large Mexican concentration in California, Texas and the Midwest.

Mexican migrant workers are almost never seen in Downtown Miami. A gulf separates the daily lives and future prospects of Cuban and South American immigrants and their children living in Coral Gables, Coconut Grove and other affluent areas of the County and those of Mexicans and Central Americans in Homestead. The gap also extends to Central Americans, Nicaraguans, and even to the more recently arrived refugees from Cuba who settle in working class areas, such as Hialeah. These migrants provide the core of the work force for the hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions, and other service industries at the center of the metropolitan economy, but they seldom live near their workplaces. Instead, they must fight traffic congestion, morning and night, to and from their modest places of residence.

Miami thus shares with other global cities the dubious distinction of being one of the most unequal places in the world. The glittering skyline by Biscayne Bay and the line of luxury condominium buildings in Miami Beach contrast sharply with widespread and often desperate poverty to the west, north, and south of the County. Poverty and high crime affect not only Latin areas, but vast parts of the black population in Overtown, Liberty City, and other northern cities. The challenge faced by Miami elites -- which now include a good number of Cuban businessmen and politicians, as well as South American investors and professionals -- is how to extend the benefits of a rapidly growing globalized economy to its most deprived sectors.

At \$30,375, the City of Miami median household income is about \$15,000 below the State of Florida. That it is such a poor city in the midst of glittering wealth reflects the challenge to be overcome. City and County political and civil leaders are well aware of these disparities. Hopefully, future years will witness effective action against this situation and its lamentable results for the city as a whole and for the majority of its population.