

The appropriation of the words “America” and “American” to refer to the nation and people of the United States of America is more and more obviously resented by other people of the Americas. Simple, straightforward modifications of usage are proposed that can respond to these criticisms without totally abandoning historical terminology.

A Rose by Any Other Name A Modest Yet Radical Proposal about “America”

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Juliet: “Romeo, doff thy name; and for that name,
which is no part of thee, take all myself.”

Shakespeare

For 200 years a name dilemma has added its weight to antagonisms that exist between various brands of Americans. To cite a recent expression of unhappiness from a Mexican sociologist:

It was not fortuitous therefore that American policy makers tended to use the name of the continent (“America”) as their own, providing us with a clue to the U.S. ideology of expansionism that was to become a major geopolitical project. If the Americans considered it their right to appropriate the term, it was not for semantic reasons. Perhaps they thought it their right because theirs was the first

successful independent process in the region.¹

Notable in this quote is the author’s use of “American” in precisely the way that he wishes to condemn; this raises the very issue that he wishes to lay to rest—namely, that there were, and are, semantic reasons for the use of the term. Other scholars have confused the issue even more in attempting to justify current usage of the terms “America” and “American.” For example, “The United States is *in* the Americas, but America is *of* the Americas.”² I must confess that Langley’s distinction is lost on me and I would guess on most average citizens. Let us be straightforward and suggest that there are both linguistic and historical reasons for the

adoption of “America” to refer to the U.S. of A., just as there are similar reasons for referring to the United States of Mexico as “Mexico.” If so, then it is understandable that in the early days, once the name of the country had been chosen, citizens of the United States of America came to be known as “Americans” just as citizens of the United States of Mexico became “Mexicans.”

However, the question remains as to why the founding mothers and fathers deemed it appropriate to refer to the United States as being of “America” and not of “North America” only? Or, why not the “United States of the Western Atlantic?” As Valdés-Ugalde suggests, this usage may harbor the idea that these first 13 states would spread their newly independent and

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democratic system throughout the Americas. Did they think that it would spread by imitation or by force of arms? These are important historical questions the answers to which I can only sketch in lightly here. Mainly I will argue that it is now possible to modify current usage.

It seems most likely that simple ethnocentrism and a certain amount of linguistic inertia are at the heart of the failure to change usage in recent decades. During the nineteenth century, Manifest Destiny and an imperialist mentality expressed themselves in a more virulent form of ethnocentrism. Few U.S.-Americans concerned themselves with how

even Canadians have long resented the confiscation of a name that also belongs to them, but none has come up with an alternate terminology acceptable to all. William Stokes, in *Cultural Anti-Americanism in Latin America*, documents Latin American resentment in the expression “nuestra América,” used to distinguish their America from the United States.³ Another writes that due to the imbalance of economic power, “it is not surprising that relations between Latin America and *Anglo-Saxon America* have been colored by frustration and resentment.”⁴ (Emphasis added.)

It is not hard to understand these resentments when one recognizes both the

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Americans of other nations felt about our appropriation of their name. More recently, most U.S.-Americans have probably not felt a need to change their language because, though imperialist and ethnocentric attitudes have declined, most U.S.-Americans rarely came into sustained contact with people from other nations of the Americas until the last few decades. This terminology question becomes an issue most often when people marry, or work constantly with, Americans who are not U.S.-Americans and who bring it to their attention. The social sciences and creative literature are replete with evidence, however, that Latin Americans, other South Americans and

history of U.S. imperialism and the lack of respect in the North for Latin cultures. In fact, there is still a rather abysmal ignorance on the part of most U.S.-Americans about the history of the nations to the south beginning with Mexico, and about the history of U.S. involvement there. The historian Rippey reminds us, for example, how at the time of the U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1847, an event that led to the annexation of one-half of Mexico's territory, “Men celebrated the Fourth of July by discussing such questions as the advisability of annexing Canada, Newfoundland, Cuba and Hawaii, and ‘Will Uncle Sam eventually rule the American continent?’”⁵ How many

U.S.-Americans know that Latin Americans fought with the Thirteen Colonies against the British in the struggle for U.S. independence? The case of Francisco de Miranda who fought alongside the colonial revolutionaries in Florida is noteworthy.⁶ Herrera reminds us that while in 1789 the United States had less than 4 million inhabitants, Latin America already had over 20 million; New York had a population of 12,000 but Mexico City had 90,000 and Havana 76,000.⁷ How many recognize that U.S.-Americans, not Mexican-Americans, were the first illegal immigrants to Texas in the 1820s? For that matter, do we remember that these illegals and Mexicans fought together against General Santa Anna for Texan independence or that the first vice president of Texas was Lorenzo de Zavala, a Mexican writer.⁸

But there are other aspects of this history that also need emphasizing: Ulysses S. Grant, Abraham Lincoln and H.D. Thoreau all opposed the 1847 war. Lincoln attacked Polk saying, “The war with Mexico was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally started by the President.” Thoreau was jailed for his protests.⁹ One may find most clearly an early proponent of a thesis parallel to that of the present article in the writings of Domingo Sarmiento, an Argentinian exile in Boston in 1847 and a friend of Horace Mann. In the conclusion of his *Conflicto y Armonía de las Razas en América* (Conflict and Harmony of the Races in the Americas), he wrote:

Let us not hamper, as many in effect propose, the forward march of the United States, but rather let us try to catch up with it. As all seas are “the ocean,” let the

whole hemisphere become “America.” Let us all be “United States.”¹⁰

While Sarmiento may be dated by his racist attitudes towards non-Euro-Americans, I do not believe he meant to promote U.S. imperialist domination, and he seems modern in advocating a pan-American and pluralistic unity beyond the narrow nationalistic and ethnocentric prejudices of his day—and ours. Another expression of solidarity worth remembering comes from the pen of Eduardo Frei, former president of Chile. He writes, “to our friends, the people of the United States, likewise a part of our Great America, with whom we wish a real association based on genuine equality.”¹¹ Recent events such as the signing of NAFTA mark, one may hope, a turn towards these sentiments and away from the policy of military interventionism that has characterized much of twentieth-century U.S. policy. Of course, implementing NAFTA in a spirit of equality, mutual respect and a concern for the prosperity of all classes is the key to continued progress.

Although new vocabulary by itself will not overturn ethnocentric and domineering attitudes, one may hope that as such attitudes do begin to change, modifications in terminology will support the process. U.S.-American sociologists have made reference at least since the 1950s to this general area of concern—though without proposing adequate solutions. In fact, the problem of national names is a favorite example in a number of basic U.S. sociology texts for illustrating the concept of ethnocentrism. Broom and Selznick, in the third edition of their popular textbook, define ethnocentrism as “the feeling that one’s own culture is

the best in all respects.”¹² They continue with the notion that “in its less virulent form ethnocentrism appears as a cultural nearsightedness,” something akin to nationalism or chauvinism of which almost everyone is somewhat guilty. They specifically recognize that Latin Americans resent our proprietary use of “America,” “a word that belongs to them as much as to us.” They note that this contributes to the creation of a repertoire of unflattering terms that Latins use for us, including Yankee and Gringo and some unprintable others. Finally, they admit that their own book, while trying to be sensitive to these problems, also “falls into ethnocen-

little change has occurred since Broom and Selznick’s invitation was made.

The Americans of these other nations refer to us as, and wish we would call ourselves, North Americans. Because we have been using the word Americans for over 200 years and there is no identifiable, easily used alternative, this form of self-identification will no doubt remain.¹⁴

But this statement needs some correction. “North American” is not a good replacement term since Mexico and Canada are also in North America. But is it so impossible to find a convenient alternative? Before making a proposal, it is important to remark that changing names

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tric terminology” in the use of “Americans” to refer to nationals of the U.S.A. They conclude with the following challenge:

From the standpoint of the “America” there is no convenient, neutral, all-purpose word that is the natural and readily understood private property of citizens of the United States of America. The reader is invited to think of one, and to think of another country in the same predicament.¹³

A statement discussing this same example in relation to ethnocentrism in a current sociology textbook demonstrates that

of nations to fit the shifts in political and cultural realities is hardly a problem unique to the Americas. Furthermore, new terminology is constantly needed in order to remain up-to-date and correct, politically or otherwise. In the U.S. a corporate executive was recently reported to have said something like, “I’m just getting used to Hanukkah and now I have to deal with Kwaanza.” This might seem somewhat humorous from the U.S.-Euro point of view, but not so much from the U.S.-Afro or the U.S.-Jewish perspective considering the ethnocentrism that it implies. Many nations of the ex-Soviet Union have just been through the throes of wrenching name changes and identity crises. There

was the question about whether the correct name of an ex-Soviet state should be "Ukraine" or "The Ukraine." This was settled in favor of "Ukraine" because the other usage suggests its old subordinate and provincial status.

The concept of ethnocentrism is very useful because it allows us to separate the vocabulary problem we are analyzing from the problem of U.S. imperialism. To condemn all U.S.-Americans as imperialists and racists for using the term "American" only serves to make many people angry and defensive; they feel this is unreasonable and exaggerated. This is understandable. What is more reasonable is to identify such usage as ethnocentric, but rather excusable from a linguistic point of view. Then one can cite with more conviction the truly imperialist military incursions and true racism that have characterized much of U.S. and, for that matter, world history. Mark Twain was a leading opponent of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. Should he be condemned for using the expression "Spanish-American War?" One might as well condemn Mexicans for calling their country Mexico, since it imposes a name of Aztec origin on people of Mayan and other ancestry.

The major point that needs to be made, however, is that there are viable alternatives that can be adopted in response to Broom and Selznick's challenge and charge of ethnocentrism. It is time to do so to demonstrate rejection of both imperialism and ethnocentric language. The term "America" should be used to refer to North and South America together; a replacement for "America" of current usage is simply "U.S.-America." An alternative for "American" is no more difficult; United Statesian is a pos-

sibility, but probably less palatable than "U.S.-American." I have found these terms very easy to adopt, as I believe I have already illustrated in this article. These changes, however, make it necessary to also consider new terms for ethnic groups within the United States just at a time when we are moving away from race-based terms like "black, white, red and yellow." A full treatment of this issue would require another paper, but I will summarize quickly a few recommendations. I believe, it would be well to substitute U.S.-Euro for Euro-American, to substitute U.S.-Afro for African-American, U.S.-Asian for Asian-American, etc. It requires only a little more effort to say, "She's U.S.-Afro" (or when the context is clear, she's Afro) than "she's black" and less effort than to say "she's African-American." We've already dropped "he's a red man" or "she's yellow;" it's time to bid farewell to all these color terms. The term "Native American" is still valid in a generic sense applied to the Americas, but to refer specifically to "Native Americans" from the United States of America "U.S.-Native" seems preferable or even "U.S.-Indian," since some U.S.-Natives still prefer the old name. "Indian" continues to be ambiguous, however, and is becoming more problematic since there are now significant numbers of Asian Indians who are also "U.S.-Indians." Most U.S.-Natives, U.S.-Asians and U.S.-Latins still identify themselves by tribe or nation and can thus be best referred to more specifically as, for example, U.S.-Cheyenne, or U.S.-Chinese or U.S.-Cuban.

In a song like "God Bless America", or "America, the Beautiful," there is no need for change. Future generations may

happily think America refers to all nations of the Americas when they sing that, or they may simply recognize it as an archaic usage. Other historically imprinted terms will no doubt remain. The Spanish-American War of 1898 should be called the U.S.-Spanish War in the future, but such change is difficult to implement quickly. A current example of a name that has so far been kept for historical reasons and despite change in usage is "N.A.A.C.P." (for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in the U.S. Although most U.S.-Afros have dropped the use of the term "colored" in most contexts (and I believe "people of color" is also a term that should be on the way out), it remains in titles such as this. It seems advisable, however, to immediately change the name "Mexican-American War" of 1847 to the "U.S.-Mexican War."

The modification of names generally reflects a change in concepts, attitudes and even ideology. Adoption of new terms is one way to promote a new way of thinking, and, of course, that is what is being proposed here. Whether we U.S.-Americans like it or not, South, North and Central Americans will continue to resent our use of the term America in its old, restricted sense and will continue to remind us of how they feel, either overtly or covertly. Future generations will no doubt more readily adopt the changes; this essay is offered as encouragement to them. But no one can impose language changes of this type nor create them by decree. The French have tried desperately for years to counter the gradual infiltration of English terms into their language but this appears to be a losing battle. On the other hand, there is little danger of the French losing

the war. Without more drastic sociopolitical change, English is unlikely to conquer French the way French conquered the Germanic and Celtic dialects spoken in the British Isles before 1066. Is modern English not the bastard offspring of Norman/French and Anglo/Saxon come back to haunt its grandparent? What one may quickly conclude from reflections about the evolution of English and French is that whether or not the proposed changes in contemporary U.S. English are eventually adopted will depend on little understood forces, among which, of course, are relationships of power and dominance or equality and respect.

The larger question is whether these proposed linguistic changes will be reflected in changes in attitude, behavior and policy toward our neighbors. The twenty-first century is upon us and no longer can the United States pretend to dictate what kinds of government will prevail in the

Americas. It seems unlikely that the U.S. Marines will invade either Mexico, Cuba or Nicaragua again anytime soon. Neither will it be *a la mode* to foment coups d'états again in Guatemala or Chile. It is not even outside the realm of the possible that Mexicans would seek to get back the territory taken by the U.S. in the last century (witness the recreation of the state of Israel after two millennia). But if we in the U.S. cannot give back so readily land that was seized, at least we can give back names that have been expropriated.

Though one must avoid carrying the Shakespearean metaphor too far, and while certainly many other Americans will not agree with Juliet that "tis but thy name, that is my enemy," still, we U.S.-Americans need not continue to refer to ourselves as the only "Americans." Our country, by less ethnocentric names may still smell about the same, but maybe to some neighbors it will smell a little less offensive. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ José Luis Valdés-Ugalde, "Racism and Early U.S. Foreign Policy," *Voices of Mexico* 36 (Mexico City: July-September 1996), pp. 23-27.
- ² L.D. Langley, *America and the Americas* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. xvi.
- ³ W.S. Stokes, "Cultural Anti-Americanism in Latin America," in G.L. Anderson, ed., *Issues and Conflicts: Studies in 20th Century American Diplomacy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1959), p. 322.
- ⁴ Felipe Herrera, "Inter-American Economic Relations" in William Manger, ed., *The Two Americas* (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1965).
- ⁵ Quoted in William Manger, "1175 Years of Progress and Problems," in William Manger, ed., op. cit., p. 9.
- ⁶ J.A. Balseiro, *The Americas Look at Each Other*, Muna Muñoz Lee, trans. (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 41.
- ⁷ Herrera, op. cit., p. 96.
- ⁸ Balseiro, op. cit., pp. 50-51.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- ¹¹ Eduardo Frei Montalva, "Foreward," in William Manger, op. cit., p. x.
- ¹² L. Broom and P. Selznick, *Principles of Sociology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 57.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- ¹⁴ G.J. Bryjak and M.P. Soroka, *Sociology: Cultural Diversity in a Changing World*, 2nd ed. (Needham, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), p. 57.

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