

# Five minutes with Felipe Fernandez-Armesto: “Hispanic America is resuming its history after what has been an interval of white, Anglo-Saxon supremacy”

Many have credited President Obama’s election 2012 election victory with his capturing of the vast majority of the Hispanic vote. But do America’s changing demographics mark an entirely new trend, or simply the return of its own Spanish history? USApp Editor, Chris Gilson talks to **Felipe Fernandez-Armesto** about his new book, *Our America: A Hispanic history of the United States*, which argues that after two centuries of relative Anglo-Saxon dominance, the U.S. is beginning a return towards being a more typical Hispanic-American country. He says by acknowledging its Hispanic parts and history, Americans will be better able to adjust to having a more equal relationship with their Latin American neighbors.



## 1. You’ve talked about the resumption of what you’ve called “America’s Hispanic story”. Can you talk a bit about how it went away and how it’s now returning?

The white Anglo-Saxon Protestant preponderance has been a brief blip in a much longer Hispanic story, which pre-dates the Anglo history of the United States. People who were Hispanic, who spoke Spanish, who were subjects of the Spanish monarchy, preceded Anglo centers in the territory of what is now the United States. Now the country is reverting to the normal state of most North America, because the Hispanic population is becoming increasingly demographically buoyant and significant. It’s the biggest minority in a huge swathe of the United States. Spanish is, in effect, the second language and Hispanic America is resuming its history after what has been an interval of white, Anglo-Saxon supremacy. But this supremacy has only been a couple of hundred years and, as a historian, you like to look at the long run. That’s really quite a brief period, and we could be in for a much longer period of seeing the United States as more of a typical Hispanic-American country.

## 2. What does it mean to be Hispanic in the U.S. in 2014?

Well in a sense it means nothing, because Hispanic is one of those words people had imposed on them. I don’t think anybody in the United States thought of himself or herself as Hispanic until the 1960s when the U.S. government began telling people that’s what they were. It became a category, one of those boxes which you have to tick when you’re describing your ethnic identity for the Census or, probably more significantly, for employment purposes because institutions get brownie points if they respect the norms of diversity, and that means having as many people who don’t tick the ‘white Anglo-Saxon’ box as possible. So this idea, that you’re Hispanic, is kind of an official contrivance. Academics have substituted a label of their own invention, which is Latino, which is equally



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meaningless. I think that Hispanic is as Hispanic does and Hispanic *thinks*. If you actually ask most of the people my book is about, most of the people whom the official census classifies as Hispanics, “what are you?” They’ll probably say “I’m Mexican” or “I’m Colombian” or “I’m Cuban”. They’ll go to the national tradition from which their ancestors came.

But, on the other hand, I can answer your question from another angle by referring to my personal experience. I speak the English of England, my mother was English, I went to school, I was educated, in England. As a result, people in the United States don’t understand me – mine is a very foreign form of English to them, whereas when I speak Spanish, everybody understands me, even though my Spanish is a bit of a rare form of Spanish, not the Spanish of any of these Latin American linguistic communities. People make the effort to try to understand you, and I think that is evidence, that if you are a Spanish speaker in the United States, that you want to reach out to fellow Spanish speakers, and understand and communicate with them, even if the form of the language is very different from yours. That’s not the case with speakers of English in the United States, who often don’t have the ear or the patience or the will to make the effort to understand, for example, a foreigner like me.

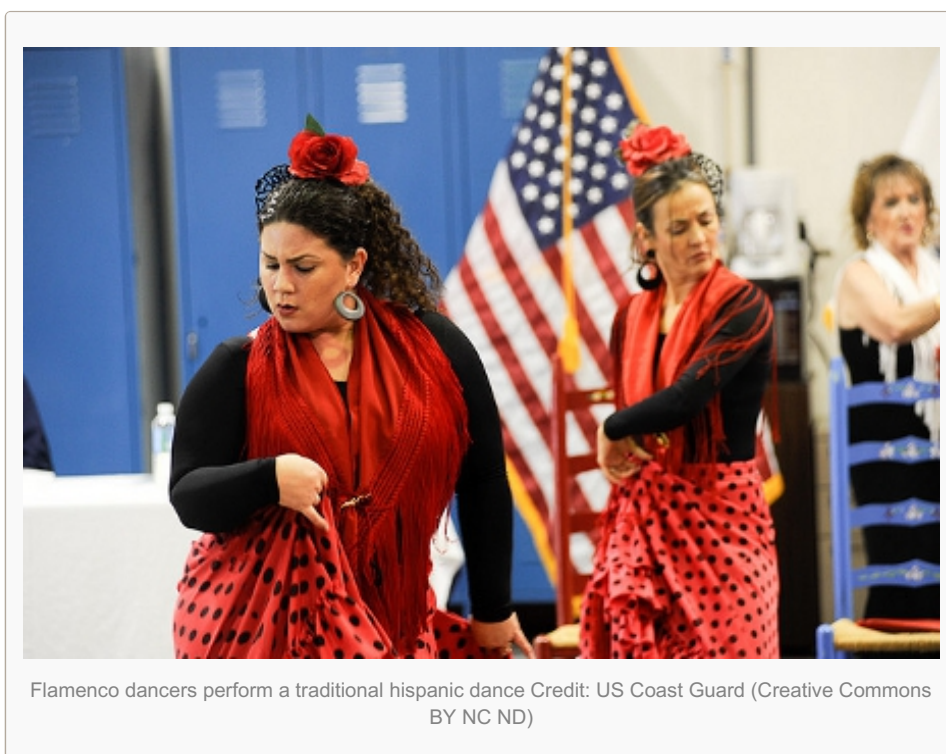
I think that’s a sign that being Hispanic is taking on a reality in the United States and that is being reinforced, of course, by politics because pollsters and parties are also telling people that they are Hispanic because that has become a convenient constituency for whose votes to bid and for psephological accounting purposes it is also a very convenient category. So I do expect this Hispanic identity, although it’s not arisen from the bosom of the people, to take on increasing reality in the future.

### **3. Do you think the US’ growing Hispanic population remoulding the idea of ‘the American Dream’ as it currently is or as it has been known?**

No, I don’t think so, I think that on the whole, most people in the United States, especially if they are poor or disadvantaged, buy into the American Dream, this myth that it’s a land of unrestricted opportunity where anything can happen, where a few make it, where it can turn you from rags to riches. Paradoxically, I think that the poorer you are in the United States, the more you are invested in that dream because it’s your only hope, and it’s your only way out of the gutter. The United States isn’t a great country for doing well in if you are poor and these consoling myths are almost your only avenue of escape. The rich, of course, don’t believe in it, they know that it is all baloney, but while I don’t think Hispanics are really moulding the American dream, I think they are part of an expectation that the country, the nature of the country, the character of the country, is going to change.

You can see this in the huge amount that corporations spend on advertising specifically, directly, to the Hispanic market—the amount of advertising that is done in the Spanish language, the increasing willingness of local authorities to adopt bilingual signage and in this conviction that you find amongst political commentators and gurus and indeed amongst the leading elites of the parties that Hispanics constitute a, kind of, voting bloc who have to be addressed and, to some extent, appeased.

Since President Obama created what I think is the illusion that he was elected by the Hispanic vote, the Republican Party has been



bending over backwards to contrive policies that specifically appeal to Hispanic voters, or they believe or suspect

that they might specifically appeal to such voters. Some of them have even revised their irrational anti-immigration policies, not because they welcome immigrants or believe in the usefulness of a plural society but because they know there are votes in changing such a policy. So there is a huge impact that Hispanics are having for change in the United States in spite of the fact that actually they subscribe to the American dream and to most of the other conservative values in which the United States is mired.

#### **4. How do you think Hispanics as a voting bloc will impact the politics of the U.S. as their numbers grow?**

I never really believed that Hispanics would constitute a bloc or a cohesive market or anything else because like everybody else they are very diverse and they are very varied. On the whole, they voted consistently for the Democrats under Obama on a single issue, immigration, and Obama probably got out 70 percent of the Hispanic vote. That is an incredible and an unrepeatable degree of cohesion in the Hispanic community, and that is simply because the Republicans' rhetoric was of hostility and even hatred towards immigrants, especially towards those who are imperfectly documented. All this impacts on people even if they're people of Hispanic origin, or if their documentation is perfect, and this is easily perceived as ethnically or even racially prejudiced.

But I don't think that is going to be repeated because I don't think the Republicans are as stupid as to indulge in that kind of rhetoric again. In any case, the immigration issue is kind of going away because, relatively speaking, the United States economy isn't that attractive to immigrants anymore. A rational, irresistible truth, is that imperfectly documented immigrants who are working in the country and contributing their taxes have got to be legalized and their position regularized; so the whole issue is going to go away and the sorts of things which matter to very substantial portions of the Hispanic population will make them, I think drift more towards the Republican Party in the future.

One of the paradoxes that I find about the United States is that the people really do vote for values rather than economic agendas. We think it's a land of hustle and greed and material values, but actually it's not. People really will make sacrifices for their values— I was working a few months ago with a Hispanic film crew and all of these guys had all their interests vested in Democratic Party policies – creating something like a welfare state in the United States, and a slightly more equal tax distribution. While they had no interest in tax breaks for fat cats and the kind of corporatist policies that are popular with Republicans, they said “our values are family values”, and “we want the sanctity of marriage, we don't want gay marriage, we don't want abortion”. All those things would be driving them in significant numbers, increasingly towards the Republicans, and I don't expect there to be a bloc Hispanic vote again.

#### **5. Thinking about the growing Hispanic population, especially in places like California and Texas; do you foresee the U.S. or parts of it ever being considered to be Latin American nation or a Latin American nation?**

Well I've argued that the United States IS a typical Latin American country, if you do what my fellow historians have been doing for well over a generation and look at the United States regionally instead of pretending that it is one consistent nation. If you are in Europe, you could easily make this mistake – you look across the United States and you see all those straight lines on the map and you think all the states are purely, fictional confections



and that the whole country has a single culture, which is represented by hamburgers and trash music. It's not like that. It's a very culturally variegated country, and when you see it from the inside, you can appreciate that for example, California has more in common with Sonora or Chihuahua than say Minnesota has in common with Alabama. You can see that there is more in common between Chicago and Chile, not at least in their adhesion to Chicago economics, than there is in common between Florida and Oregon. So are you going to allow for the fact that great swathes of the United States, for environmental and historic reasons, more resemble parts of what we conventionally call "Latin America" than they resemble other parts of the United States? I think once you break the categories down and begin to see these other similarities, then you see the whole hemisphere in a new and, to me, a more realistic and helpful light, which helps you to understand it better.

The predominant myth of U.S. history is that it was an Anglo country forged by expansion from the Eastern seaboard, which was settled primarily by British and other Western and Northwestern European settlers, who gradually extended the country westwards to sea from shining sea. And while that's true, it's only part of the truth of the United States. There is another story, which I tell in my book, of the making of the United States from South to North by people who came from Spain and other parts of the Spanish monarchy. And who spoke Spanish, and who were Catholic, and who formed these two strands in U.S. history. The Hispanic and the Anglo formed a kind of warp and weft out of which the fabric of the country has been woven. And that is without even mentioning the Native Americans, Blacks, Jews, Italians, Poles, Germans, and the other immigrant communities, such as the Asians, who have contributed to the making of the United States in more recent times.

I don't think that you can privilege any one of these elements in the making of a country which is so diverse and I don't think you can draw the line and say that, if you were here before 1776 or 1865 for example, then you are a real American, and everybody else is an immigrant. That doesn't reflect the reality of the country – lots of communities have contributed an enormous amount and, the country would just be unthinkable without that.

**6. Anglo-History is currently seen as premier in American contemporary life. Do you see that the Spanish, Hispanic aspect of history at least taking an equal place or a bigger place in education and in the public sphere in the American narrative in the near future?**

I don't know if this is just a sort of historian's fantasy but I just cherish this fond notion that if people know the truth about their past, they are just better equipped to confront their present and face their future. I don't think you can construct a realistic image of what's going to happen in the future if you don't start from a realistic image of what's happened in the past.

The only way the United States is going to remain wealthy, successful, buoyant, progressive, is by collaborating with other countries in its own hemisphere. There are lots of opinions about why the United States became a great power, and the really critical thing that many people overlook is that in the 19th century, the United States had access to enormous under-exploited resources. Above all, it had the Midwest; it had the American prairie, which was a desert until industrial products made it possible to farm it and to turn it into the breadbasket of the world. The United States doesn't have any under-exploited resources now; it's running out of oil, it's even running out of underground water.



Napa Hispanic Mural Credit: Jay Galvin (Creative Commons BY)

The great unexploited resources of the hemisphere are in in Canada, and in the Chilean and Argentinian Antarctic and in Amazonia. If the United States is going to go on profiting from unexploited resources, it's got to collaborate with those neighbors. I think that it is going to be a future in which acknowledging the Hispanic parts helps Americans adjust to having a more equal relationship with their neighbors in Latin America, and to some extent in Canada as well. Although Canada isn't a Hispanic country, its relationship to the United States is analogous in some ways to those Latin American countries, as it's Uncle Sam's backyard; the lesser neighbor living under the shadow of the giant. U.S. people have got to adjust to a new world in which they see their neighbors as equals and partners and in order to do that, I think it will help them if they realize that their country has this past in common with those neighbors, and particularly a past in common with the Hispanic republics of the United States.

*Felipe Fernandez-Armesto will be speaking at the LSE event, A typical Latin American Country: The United States on April 30th. [Click here](#) for more information and tickets.*

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## About the author

### **Felipe Fernandez-Armesto** – *University of Notre Dame*

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto is the William P. Reynolds Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. His teaching interests include: Spanish history and the history of late medieval and early modern colonial societies, with some special attention to cartography, maritime subjects, exploration, and cultural exchanges. In recent years, he has made contributions to global history, understood as the study of genuinely global experiences, and to environmental history, especially on a global scale. He has had visiting appointments at many universities and research institutes in Europe and the Americas, and has honorary doctorates from la Trobe University and the Universidad de los Andes. Among other distinctions, he has won the John Carter Brown Medal, the Caird Medal of the National Maritime Museum (UK), the Premio Nacional a Investigacion of the Sociedad Geografica Espanola, Soain's Premio Nacional de Grastonomia for his history of food, and the Tercentenary Medal of the Society of Antiquaries of London. His most recent book is [Our America: A Hispanic history of the United States](#) (W.W Norton, 2014).



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