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We Want Your Success! Hegemony, Materiality, and *Latino in America*

Susana Martínez Guillem & Marco Briziarelli

In this article we offer a detailed examination of CNN's documentary Latino in America and of the ways in which a particular group of viewers responded to it. Our goal is to show how we can explore the nature of hegemonic processes in a way that more fully incorporates the role of material reality in the reproduction of a particular social order. Thus, our analysis will shed light on how the material conditions of a specific segment of the Latino population interact with the dominant representations of this group in ways that need further exploration. As this analysis shows, a closer look at this interaction reveals that the embracement—or not—of the ideological messages embedded in a particular text is not only based on the rhetorical aspects of these messages, but also on the extent to which their implications are in consonance with the material needs, wants, and priorities of those interpellated by it.

Keywords: *Hegemony; Materiality; Gramsci; Latin@s; Latino in America*

On October 21 and 22, 2009, CNN aired a two-hour documentary across two days called *Latino in America*. As presented on the network's website, the producers of this show aimed to explore "how Latinos are reshaping our communities and culture and forcing a nation of immigrants to rediscover what it means to be an American" (*Latino in America*, 2009). This hopeful message arrived at millions of U.S. households at a crucial moment for minorities in this country: the first black president had just taken office, and the echoes of his "yes we can" still resonated in the minds of many white and non-white Americans, as well as throughout the rest of

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the world. At the same time, the worst economic recession since 1929 led to an unprecedented precariousness for many Americans that materialized in a renewed hostility towards those perceived as not having the right to benefit from shrinking resources.¹ Embedded in this scenario, the majority of the stories featured in *Latino in America* presented a two-way perspective on the assimilation² road. Thus, they emphasized how, on the one hand, maintaining a Latino identity could be an obstacle to the access to the privileges provided by mainstream society while also, at the same time, Latin@s³ contributed to the redefinition of the very idea of the mainstream.

Soledad O'Brien, the popular mixed-raced CNN anchor, was the correspondent/narrator who provided the connecting thread of the documentary and also conducted the different interviews. In her book on the documentary, O'Brien pointed to the challenges of including the diversity of experiences that come with the label "Latino" in only two one-hour episodes: "As we did our reporting, I realized quickly how challenging this was going to be. Latinos are an extremely diverse ethnicity that can be of any race and have many different origins, history and traditions. You can't easily group people who come from as far away as Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with people of Mayan, Incan and Taino descent who have mixed with Spaniards, Africans and Jews" (O'Brien, 2009).

In spite of these acknowledged difficulties, and from the network's standpoint, the goal of the project was largely met, and *Latino in America* was able to show a picture of Latin@s that complicated the too often simplistic images offered by mainstream media (O'Brien, 2009). However, and despite CNN's positive self-assessments, the responses of viewers participating in different internet fora told a different story: most of these viewers—who, for the most part, self-identified as Latin@s—vehemently condemned what they saw as a negative overemphasis on social problems in the show and, most importantly, the absence of what they referred to as "success stories."

In this article we want to offer a detailed examination of this text and of the ways in which a particular group of viewers responded to it. Our goal is to show how we can explore the nature of hegemonic processes in a way that more fully incorporates the role of material reality in the reproduction of a particular social order. Needless to say, we do not intend to speak for all Latin@s, nor to praise or condemn particular positionings within this group. Rather, our analysis aims to shed light on how the material conditions of a specific segment of the Latino population interact with the dominant representations of this group in ways that need further exploration. Moreover, and following Ono and Jackson (2011, p. 2), we would encourage readers to consider the "relevance beyond the case," and move towards the more general theoretical contribution we are trying to develop. In this sense, our analysis will highlight how the embracement—or not—of the ideological messages embedded in a particular text is not only based on the rhetorical dimensions of these messages, but also on the extent to which their material implications are in consonance with the needs, wants, and priorities of those interpellated by them.

The evaluations of *Latino in America* that we examined, embedded in a contemporary reality for Latin@s that is continuously changing in socio-economic

and cultural terms, offer an invaluable opportunity to explore why particular segments within potentially marginalized groups may position themselves within a dominant ideological message and question the alternative options that are presented to them. As a starting point in this exploration, our analysis will first expose the particular rhetoric of “Latino success” that runs through *Latino in America*, mainly constructed through stories of self-improvement, determination to overcome adverse circumstances, or achievement of specific goals that do not necessarily translate into an economically better social positioning. We will then concentrate on how, in spite of its potential to ring true,⁴ this rhetoric is consistently questioned by the Latino viewers whose responses we examined in favor of more “inspiring” stories that present, for example, educated Latin@s or those occupying influential positions in U.S. society—doctors, lawyers, university professors, etc. Our analysis of the documentary, together with an examination of exactly what it is that these viewers find problematic in it, reveals that the process of social reproduction in this example takes place, first and foremost, in the material realm that interacts with the rhetoric of *Latino in America*. In other words, the social position of these specific audience members informs their dissatisfaction with symbolic representations of success that are odds with what they see as a necessary and unquestionable access to a materially more comfortable living. Accordingly, when the “success” rhetoric does not incorporate concrete possibilities for Latin@s to enjoy or reach material comfort (i.e., higher income, social mobility) it is ultimately not embraced.

In order to better understand the processes just described, we believe that we need to revisit, once again, Gramsci’s contribution to social theory and, in particular, his notion of hegemony. In short, we will argue that we need to expand our understanding of the materialist components of hegemonic processes to incorporate the objective conditions of particular groups, not only as the *result* of ideological processes aimed at legitimating their disadvantaged position, but also as the one of the *reasons why* these processes are effective. In the end, we believe that this can constitute an important step towards understanding the tensions within elite factions of minority groups, and the different impetuses that guide their self-positionings in particular societal contexts. Accounting for how these motivations are part of a non-discursive materiality that interacts with ideological processes (Williams, 1977) will allow us to point to the ways in which a specific social order is successfully reproduced.

Enlarging the picture: Media Representations, Latino Identities, and Economic Capital

Our discussion aims to contribute to and expand a well-established body of literature that has critically engaged with the (re)productive dynamics between different media outlets and Latino identities. This kind of work has made significant contributions to our understanding of the systematic othering and homogenization embedded in mediated *Latinidad* (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Molina Guzmán, 2008), and the ways in which audiences make sense of these representations

(Báez, 2007; Mayer, 2003; Rios, 2003). Rooted in a general turn in the social sciences towards an emphasis on differentiation and heterogeneity (Johnson, 2000), Latino media studies have been especially successful in their interrogation of binaries such as black/white, native/foreign, or citizen/non-citizen (Mayer, 2004). The diversity of experiences among Latin@s has proven to be a major preoccupation for Latino-centered scholars, whether they emphasize issues of visibility, identity, and representation of *Latinidad* in the media (e.g. Davila, 2002; Flores, 2000; Halter, 2000; Levine, 2001; Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001; Valdivia, 2003), or the interpretative processes of Latino audiences at the intersections among race, ethnicity, gender, class, and/or sexual orientation (Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Cepeda, 2008; Johnson, 2000; Peñazola, 1994; Ramirez-Berg, 2002; Rivero, 2002; Rojas, 2004; Sebesta, 2007; Subervi-Vélez, 1999; Vargas, 2006).

As Rodriguez (1999) and Valdivia (2008) observe, the academic interest in Latino media representations and their reception is not limited to an exploration of under- or over-representations of this group, and the consequent problematization of an “essence” expressed in terms of a particular color, language, religion, and/or social status (Calafell, 2004; Habell-Pallan, 2005). Rather, and building on reception studies within the cultural studies tradition (Bobo, 1995; Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1980; Livingstone, 1998; Moores, 1993; Nightingale, 1996), many studies of Latino audiences highlight the capability of viewers to appropriate particular meanings for their own use (Moran, 2003; Noriega, 1992). They also acknowledge how Latino audiences may “talk back” to the different representations by producing their own counter-images (Báez, 2007; Ramirez-Berg, 2002) or re-negotiating media depictions (Cepeda, 2008). Moreover, studies on representation have drawn our attention to how certain images of Latin@s, even when they incorporate an element of diversity and progressiveness, are ultimately managed culturally in order to position Latino subjects as clearly defined “others” (Moreman, 2008; Shugart, 2007). In this sense, scholars have noticed that a diverse depiction of Latin@s disassociated from topical images may not be inherently positive, since it can serve a more subtle hegemonic function (see Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Holling, 2006; Valdivia, 2000).

The studies that address mediated *Latinidad* as a possible site of social (re)production are thus often embedded in a broader discussion of hegemonic processes. Along this line of research, there have been stimulating discussions of the extent to which, for example, hybridity can constitute a counter-hegemonic strategy or a hegemonic move (Henderson, 1999; Rodríguez, 1999; Sandoval-Sanchez, 1999), the ways audiences can challenge particular readings of *Latinidad*, and the role that Latino cultural capital—such as education attainment—may play in these processes (Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Del Rio, 2010).

To these important insights, we would add that, in order to get a fuller picture of how complex representations of *Latinidad* interact with specific audience members, it is crucial not only to examine different depictions and their assessments/uses, but also to develop an understanding of where these judgments originate and what they do, not only from the perspective of viewers’ preferred identities, or their cultural

capital, but also in terms of their (desired) social position and their economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Our goal is therefore to contribute to a more comprehensive approach to the relationship between media and audiences that incorporates the constraining material basis on which different representations are judged. In our particular case study, this can help us understand why some Latino viewers may question alternative representations of their group and align instead with a dominant position. As a first step in this direction, in the next section we offer a discussion of the economic aspects that inform the Gramscian concept of hegemony.

Hegemony: Incorporating Material Need

The word hegemony has become, in the last decades, one of those unavoidable terms in any analysis of societal processes that aims to contribute to a critical project in academic circles (Chase-Dunn et al., 1994). In spite of the current taken-for-grantedness of hegemonic processes, we believe it is important to reflect on the different understandings of hegemony that inform most critically oriented scholarship. In our view, what emerges from this review of literature is that scholars have rarely taken advantage of the full range of possibilities that the Gramscian notion of hegemony offers. In this sense, our goal is not to present an entirely novel approach to hegemony, but rather to recover its original heuristic potential as a dialectical concept that does not lend itself to binaries such as material/symbolic (Godelier, 1986) or real/epiphenomenal (Williams, 1977).

As some reviews have pointed out (e.g., Johnson, 2007), Gramsci's writings were ambiguous and incomplete enough to allow for a variety of interpretations when it comes to deciphering the possibilities he envisioned for the different actors in society. Despite the inherent fragmentary nature of Gramsci's work, there are some distinctive aspects of the notion of hegemony that must be noticed. One of these is its relationship with ideology. Certainly ideology cannot be considered as an unproblematic concept. However, in the general classic Marxist framework—following the conceptualization offered in Marx's *German Ideology* (in Tucker, 1979)—it accounts for a functional relationship between base and superstructures. Hegemony, though, represents a quality of the social whole. Thus, whereas ideology tends to be understood as concerning only ideas, hegemony encompasses social practices too. Moreover, ideology, as Eagleton notices (in Regan, 1998, p. 241) tends to be dissociated from the relations of production, from reality, from history, and ultimately from material existence, whereas hegemony is seen as encompassing the relationship between a world view and the sphere of material production (see, for example, the Gramscian concept of Fordism).

The conceptualization of hegemony as a dialectical process also implies a broader understanding of power which embraces its consensual and coercive, as well as material and ideological, aspects. This understanding of power has created an important point of contention among scholars. Thus, there have been significant differences of opinion with regards to how to better account for Gramsci's force + consent formula for hegemony, extrapolated from definitions such as the

following: “the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12).

Typically, authors have opted for prioritizing one of the two elements outlined in this formula. Thus, studies that emphasize leadership have tended to focus on the “consent” and “resistance” aspects of hegemonic processes and the ways these are achieved through rhetorical means (e.g., Burnham, 1991; Cox, 1983; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Martin-Barbero, 1983; Zompetti, 1997, 2008). Coercion-oriented scholars, on the other hand, have prioritized the “force” component of hegemony: that is, the ways both consensual and transformative actions are ultimately constrained by structural elements and the prevalence of these objective conditions in spite of possible rhetorical changes (e.g., Anderson, 1977; Arrighi, 1994; Aune, 2004; Taylor, 1996). Hall (1986) probably offers the most well-known discussion of hegemony within cultural studies, addressing the possibilities that Gramsci’s work opens for a theorization of the intersections between class and race. Drawing on Gramsci’s view that class unity is “never assumed a priori” (Hall, 1986, p. 15) but internally fragmented, Hall invites us to explore the conflicting interests that inform particular group identities, as well as the centrality of contradictory discursive formations in the (re)production of popular hegemony.

Dana Cloud (1994, 1996) and Celeste Condit (1994, 1996) present the most articulate examples of engagement with the notion of hegemony for the purposes of rhetorical analysis. Condit emphasizes the need for a kind of ideology criticism that attends to its contemporary historical context. For her, this inevitably calls for a re-conceptualization of hegemony that can account for a particular reality, and more specifically what she calls “social concord” (Condit, 1994). Cloud, on the other hand, (1996, 1997) has forcefully argued against this reframing of hegemony in harmonious terms. She emphasizes the need to pay attention to “the limits of compromises within the available conditions” (1996, p. 118), thus putting a strong emphasis on the ways in which rhetoric, backed up by the state’s force, serves the interests of those in power by guaranteeing that “voluntary” consent—understood in an ironic sense—will take place.

We definitely share Cloud’s concerns with a theorization of hegemony that over-celebrates the “diversity” of voices found in the public sphere and ultimately turns necessity into choice. However, we also recognize the soundness in Condit’s (1994) call to factor in consumers and mediators of rhetorical artifacts in contemporary examinations of hegemonic processes. The question, nevertheless, remains: to what extent are actors actually able to set their own interest agendas? How can we account for the existence of multiple voices without giving too much credit to the actual empowerment—beyond the discursive realm—that these allow?⁵

A possible way to start extending our discussion of hegemonic processes is to recover an understanding of hegemony that also embraces cultural materialism (Williams, 1961) and thus challenges the reduction of culture to an “immaterial”

phenomenon in contrast with real ‘activity’” (Jones, 2004, p. 47). In his view, economic, social processes and cultural symbolic ones are not mutually exclusive, and “we see language and signification as indissoluble elements of the material social process itself, involved all the time both in production and reproduction” (Williams, 1961, p. 99).

In the case of *Latino in America* and a portion of its audience, this view helps us address the tensions arising from the limitations that the symbolic *and* material dimensions of a dominant system force on Latin@s. The responses analyzed can thus be seen as stemming from the constraints imposed by the cultural/economic dimensions of Latino experiences. This reading contributes to our understanding of how the objective conditions within which this particular group operates play an important role in limiting their room for embracing alternative ideologies. We thus propose an analysis that retains, as Cloud suggests, the material aspects of hegemony, but that at the same time creates the space within materiality for those groups whose immediate interests contribute to the maintenance of a particular hegemonic order. With these goals in mind, we turn in the next section to the object of this analysis.

***Latino in America*: the “Latino Success”**

Latino in America is the most ambitious CNN project ever to concentrate specifically on the Latino population in the U.S.⁶ In spite of the specific focus of its content, the fact that the documentary was aired in prime-time evidences the network’s confidence in the ability of this particular product to reach a non-Latino audience,⁷ mainly due to the perceived universal character of the different stories told. Reflecting on her motivations to get this project started, O’Brien points to a particular understanding of what it means to be Latin@: “Latino is an American identity” that describes “a people who celebrate the new culture they’ve created in the United States while struggling each day with whether we need to assimilate or integrate into this new society” (*Latino in America*, 2009). In consonance with this understanding, the stories in the documentary can be seen as exemplifying the dual nature of this particular American identity, and more specifically the conflicts, both at the personal and at the societal level, that arise from the different efforts to reconcile its opposing aspects.

Given this potential step away from simplistic media representations of Latin@s, how is it that the documentary was still negatively evaluated by a consistent majority of the Latino viewers posting comments on the different online fora? A closer examination of exactly what kinds of redefinitions are accomplished by this show may place us in a better position to understand why the specific Latino audience we examined responded to it in the ways they did. As the following textual analysis will demonstrate, the diversity of representations in *Latino in America* is embedded in a predominant narrative of “Latino success” that undermines improvement of material conditions in favor of a rhetoric of self-empowerment.

“I turned my life around”: Uncovering the road to success

The first half of *Latino in America* is symbolically titled “the Garcias,” as it reminds the viewer, on the one hand, of the reality of the Latino presence in the U.S.—García is among the 10 most popular last names in America—and, on the other hand, of the diversity that lies underneath a common label. The second half of the show, “Chasing the dream,” focuses on “a journey as old as the nation—the pursuit of the American Dream” (Nelson, 2009) through the stories of those Latin@s who have achieved their personal goals, together with the experiences of those for whom the “dream” remains “elusive” or has even been “denied” by the force of hate crimes.

After a close examination of all the stories presented in the show, different patterns worthy of attention emerged. Thus, the show portrays the contradictory experiences of a class faction that struggles for a better composition of its capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in three distinct ways: first, *Latino in America* tells the stories of those who have embraced mainstream American values at the expense of their cultural heritage—and somehow regret this. The audience meets, for example, Bill and Betty Garcia, “New York City transplants now living in the suburbs of Charlotte, North Carolina,” who “made the move with their two sons 15 years ago to escape high prices and the big city grind,” and “are worried that by living in Charlotte their sons, Andrew and Brian, are not getting the same Latino experience they had.” The cameras follow Bill and Betty through their now materially comfortable lives, and we learn that they “have made a successful life in Charlotte. Bill has made a career working for non-profit organizations whereas Betty is a school teacher.” The interview conducted by O’Brien takes place at their rather spacious and nicely furnished house. Here, we also learn that, in spite of this material progress, this couple is far from satisfied with the sacrifices they have made in order to access their new life. They especially regret having abandoned the use of Spanish at home and worry about their sons’ reluctance to self-identify as Latinos. Asked by O’Brien how she thinks giving up on speaking Spanish has affected the boys’ identity, Betty states: “if I had the chance to start over, I would really make a conscientious effort to teach the boys Spanish.” Then, she adds: “Maybe, not even move to Charlotte and stay up in New York.” Thus, Bill and Betty’s nostalgia for their authentic Latino past emphasizes the painfulness of their cultural losses, thus showing how, in their case, success “has come at a price.”

Another path presented in the show is that of those Latin@s whose cultural heritage—seen, for example, in their native language or in their family responsibilities—stands in the way of their hopes to join mainstream America. Latino cultural capital is thus portrayed in these stories as not easily “capitalizable” in economic terms (Bourdieu, 1986). One of these Latin@s is Carlos Robles, a Puerto Rican in Orlando who “has a dream—to become a Florida sheriff—but his poor English and thick accent stand in the way.” In order to overcome this obstacle “he is taking English pronunciation classes, hoping to reduce the accent he acquired on U.S. soil.” Being fluent and accentless in English is presented as a condition for Carlos to “pass the Sherriff’s exam, which he already failed once due to his lack of English skills.” As O’Brien’s team follows Carlos’s steps, the audience witnesses him fail his

test for the second time. Although disappointed, he remains optimistic about a better future for him and his pregnant partner, and he makes this explicit in his final words: "I will try again; I need my future; that's my future; that's what I want; that's my goal." This emphasis on determination and willingness to overcome obstacles is also at the heart of O'Brien's conclusions, as she states: "failure doesn't dismiss Carlos's ambitions [...] Carlos is determined to have it all. This is Carlos Robles' American dream."

Last but not least, there is a third set of stories in *Latino in America*, in which the duality pointed out in the presentation of the show seems to have been reconciled by its protagonists. Thus, the experiences of these people show that they have managed to be upwardly mobile while maintaining their Latino cultural roots. Among these, the show introduces "Eva Longoria, [...] actress and prime example of a Latina star whose roles have transcended stereotypes." As she's interviewed, Longoria proudly asserts that she has "never played stereotypical parts." Recalling her different roles, and her current part in the show *Desperate Housewives*, she states: "I've never played a maid, I've never played a gardener, I've never felt like, you know, *Desperate Housewives* had an overtly ethnic line with me, I've never been like: 'come on over for tortillas'[laughter]." The same pattern can be found in the story of Chef Lorena Garcia, who is presented as "a Latina businesswoman driven by a passion to cook and communicate," who shocked her family "when she announced a career change to cooking" instead of becoming a lawyer as they expected. As proof of her right decision, the audience learns that "she now has her own product line, is a spokesperson for national brands and appears weekly on the Spanish-language television network Univision." Lorena's strong Spanish accent in this case is presented as a symbol of her commitment to her roots, as O'Brien continues to narrate her story: "fresh out of culinary school Lorena was told, to break through, she had to lose the accent." This, however, "didn't stop her," but gave her "more strength" to try. Her accent is even turned into an advantage in this context, as we learn that Lorena decided to "market herself as a national brand," and she claims that her way of speaking is unproblematically accepted: "our accent is cute now." The story's conclusion is that "Lorena is banking on a changing America, where she can be a crossover success, without losing her Latina identity."

As mentioned above, the majority of the stories told in the show fall into one of these three patterns. There were four stories with mixed components that did not clearly fit into one of the paths. Of the total number of narratives, four presented a narrative in which acculturation led to economic assimilation, seven emphasized the struggle to acculturate and its relation to material limitations, and eight presented maintenance of cultural roots and upward mobility as compatible. Even though this may suggest an important presence of narratives that present a possibility for Latin@s to enter the American mainstream and contribute to redefining it, two important qualifications need to be made before we can completely uncover the main components of success as proposed by *Latino in America*.

First, almost all of the narratives that reconcile the ideas of "mainstream" and "Latino" feature either a celebrity or someone in the entertainment business.

Moreover, stories such as Chef Lorena's do not seem to fit the classical pattern of immigrants who start at the bottom of the social ladder and then slowly climb up. The fact that her family wanted her to be a lawyer suggests that Lorena enjoyed an amount of economic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that is not typically available to most Latin@s within the U.S. One has to wonder then whether this story really constitutes an example of achievement of the American dream through one's personal efforts, or rather they exemplify how an already advantaged position has allowed some Latin@s to maintain their privilege.

The second important aspect of the different narratives developed in *Latino in America* relates to how the audience is invited to evaluate them. Whereas the stories of those immigrants who have acculturated and assimilated structurally have a sour undertone—seen in the nostalgia for their Latino past, or in the remorse for having abandoned their roots—the stories that portray the efforts of those immigrants who try to acculturate, even as they show how their inability to overcome certain obstacles results in personal or social punishment, systematically end on an optimistic note. The emphasis in these narratives is not on the lack of equality exemplified by these people's ultimate life chances, but on their ability to overcome particular obstacles—such as managing an unexpected pregnancy while still in school—or on their determination to “keep trying”—as in Carlos's case. In short, these stories convey a message of personal improvement that downplays the limits of mobility by reducing achievement and success to the ability to overcome challenging circumstances at the individual level, and where socioeconomic advancement remains at most a distant promise. Nevertheless, the struggle and determination of these people when confronting adverse circumstances and introducing limited or short term changes in their lives are constructed as “success,” and viewers are encouraged to interpret them as such.

As the detailed analysis of the contents of this show reveals, the ultimate possibility in the societal picture of *Latino in America* is not one where Latin@s enjoy the benefits of what Gordon (1964) labeled “structural assimilation,” meaning equal access to the benefits that mainstream society provides, but a place where what O'Brien proudly calls the “intangible cultural link” appears as ultimately an obstacle for most Latin@s whose ability to cope with different challenges, nonetheless, should be embraced and accepted by this community as a form of success. Thus, in the end, the show presents this (unprivileged) Latino social space as the best option for reconciling economic achievement and cultural fulfillment. In order to explore how some Latin@s positioned themselves with regards to this rhetoric of success, in the next section we conduct a close examination of different responses posted by viewers in online fora.

Viewers' Responses: We Want *Your* Success

Latino in America as a cultural artifact comprises much more than the actual documentary aired on CNN: the network also developed a website where viewers and fans could learn more about the different stories, read about related topics not

featured in the show, and even report on their own experiences of being a “García.” *Latino in America* also materialized into a Facebook group that periodically posts pieces of news considered relevant for Latin@s, and, right after it was aired, asked its members to voice their reactions to the documentary. The group currently has more than 10,000 followers who actively engage in the different discussions proposed.

Given the relevance of these other dimensions, uncovering *Latino in America*’s ideological message(s) becomes only one aspect of our inquiry into how a particular social system gets reproduced. In the end, one could argue, the fact that media elites would be interested in promoting dominant values should not come as a surprise, and some critics would say it is even unavoidable (see Altheide & Snow, 1979). However, as pointed out above, the theoretical starting point of this article is that, first, hegemony is as much about force as it is about consent, and, second, that the gaining of consent does not only take place in the realm of ideology, but also in the material worlds of specific groups, since what counts in the end are the specific social practices linked to a given worldview. Thus, from this perspective, it is crucial to assess the extent to which Latino viewers of *Latino in America* endorse its main ideological message, mainly represented in the show’s expanding of the notion of “success.” We also need to explore the different motivations that guide the evaluations of particular audience members, rather than assuming that the representations put forward by the text automatically reproduce hegemony by justifying the existing material conditions through rhetorical means. In order to understand better how hegemonic processes work in this particular instance, therefore, we should not only focus on whether *Latino in America* promotes a particular ideology, or on whether this ideology reflects reality more or less accurately, but also on understanding, through specific viewers’ responses, why particular representations are not satisfactory, and from where that dissatisfaction comes.

Online responses to Latino in America

We collected the text for our analysis from the CNN and Facebook websites where viewers, who overwhelmingly self-identified as Latin@s, posted their reactions to *Latino in America*. The responses took the shape of threads generated by a specific question: CNN asked its viewers, “What did you think about ‘Latino in America?’” (<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2009/latino.in.america/>); whereas, the Facebook group named “CNN Latino in America” posted the following question on its profile: “So what do you think? What did you like? What did we get, what did we miss?” (<http://www.facebook.com/CNNLatinoinAmerica>).

Altogether, more than 500 comments posted in these outlets make up the text that we treat as online responses to *Latino in America*. Needless to say, this number constitutes only a small portion of the total number of viewers of the documentary. Our goal, however, is not to draw conclusions about the Latino audience as a whole, but to explore how those Latin@s who aim to enjoy a comfortable economic position, or who possibly already enjoy it, negotiate the social reality that *Latino in America*

invites them to embrace. Accordingly, we chose to focus on those viewers who either implicitly or explicitly embody these characteristics. The first implicit indicator of comfortable economic position is internet access: slightly more than 40% of Latin@s have internet access at home (Fairlie, 2008; Pew Hispanic Center, 2010), and based on the general correspondence between yearly earnings and internet use (Fairlie, 2008) it is reasonable to assume that this 40% is largely made up of those Latin@s with higher incomes. A second marker is language use: the intersection between internet access and English fluency is a strong indicator that these respondents belong to a specific portion of the Latino population, most likely born in the United States, and with incomes and educational degrees above the Latino average (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). The demographic data provided by CNN with regards to the network audience also point to the fact that these viewers belong to a very specific economic stratum that challenges traditional associations between Latino ethnicity and economic marginalization.⁸

Challenging “success”

The majority of the comments reviewed for this project included some sort of reservation about the documentary as a whole. More specifically, viewers consistently referred to the absence of “success” or “positive” stories, and referred to the show’s “negative focus,” or its mostly “depressing” and “disappointing” message. In short, much of what CNN presented as “success” stories were interpreted by Latino viewers as narratives of “failure.” Viewers demanded a radically different approach that, according to them, would not just perpetuate Latino stereotypes. Statements such as “I think you needed to highlight more stories of triumph,” “where are the success stories?” (Vargas, 2009), or “are there any Latinas who aren’t pregnant?” (Becker, 2009) show a sense of discomfort with this particular aspect of the Latino experience presented by *Latino in America*. The following responses show how viewers articulated this feeling:

Your piece was too focused on Latino stereotypes (the typical story of the immigrant that struggles with the English language, works for minimum wage, struggles to assimilate). While this was true for many of us, especially our parents, you didn’t cover the other side of the spectrum. (Arriola, 2009)

What about stories about succes[s]ful Latino professionals . . . why focusing so much on the negative and stereotypes of [L]atinos. . . you should have shown more successful stories of [L]atino professionals . . . (Garcia, 2009)

This predominant expression of disappointment definitely contrasts with CNN producers’ statements on the diverse story about the Latino experience that this documentary was supposed to tell. Perhaps more interestingly, it is also at odds with the predominant optimistic tone with which many of the self-improvement stories—the ones the responses mostly challenge—actually ended. But how do we explain this? What could be leading to this dissatisfaction?

One possibility would be to argue that these viewers are just making use of their “common sense,” in the Gramscian sense, and dismissing any suggestion that personal effort does not always translate into material gains. This would lead them to ask for “successful” and “positive” representations which in reality work against their own interests because they legitimate the relegation of many Latin@s to unprivileged positions. We could definitely concede that the above description explains some of the responses to *Latino in America* found in the sites analyzed.⁹ However, we would argue that this clear dismissal is not only a result of the workings of “common sense.” It is also, importantly, taking place within very real material conditions that are influencing how viewers evaluate what the show presents as “success stories.” Thus, because endorsing the show’s version of achievement for Latin@s would translate into an acceptance that “success” is not necessarily achieved through social mobility—at least, as we saw, for the average Latin@—and because the respondents’ needs, wants, and, in some cases, actual social position *do* take account of upward mobility, the stories presented as “successful” cannot be considered as such from this perspective. In other words, the kinds of stories preferred by *Latino in America* do not show a concrete possibility for turning Latino cultural capital into a much needed economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, viewers make constant reference to how the different representations of “success” are leaving out this desired or real possibility of joining the economic mainstream, as we see in the following responses:

It was great to see stories that main stream Americans might not be aware of. However, I would have liked to see more regular upwardly mobile Latinos. Why not interview the Latino doctor too? [...] There are many of us who are making achievements, striving too thanks to the sacrifices our parents made. Tell our stories! (Palacio, 2009)

we were reduced down to teen age pregnancies, suicidal teens, people not wanting to learn English and young Latinos not accepting their heritage and culture and how Latinos are dividing the Catholic Church. There are so many positive Latino Americans, doctors, lawyers, small and large business people. [...] As a Latina American, I am saddened that this is not the voice of the Latino Community in America. What you portrayed were the other stereotypical Latinos in America that do not represent those of us that become productive members of society, that volunteer in our communities, that juggle work, families, faith, culture, traditions and are successful. (Hernandez-Mullin, 2009)

Although I agree that there are many sad and tragic stories among Latinos in the U.S. as a cultural researcher and L[a]tina myself, I also know that there are many stories of success, and I don’t mean Eva Longoria or Mel Garcia success, but the success of my neighbor who just got a scholarship to become the 1st in her family to go to college, success of Latina women who happen to be the biggest group of small biz owners in the country. There’s also a strong sense of pride in our Latino community that I didn’t see reflected in the interviews. (Lozano Longarini, 2009)

These remarks also point to another important trend in the responses, namely that the challenge of a particular ideology of success, even though it redefines specific

stories as “negative,” is not necessarily accompanied by the request to remove these portrayals altogether. In fact, many viewers refer to these stories as “part of reality,” an “important reality,” or “the sad reality for some.” This position usually leads to the claim that, even though this aspect of the Latino experience cannot be ignored, it has to be complemented with other, more “inspiring” narratives. Some viewers even recognize the dangers of putting too much emphasis on the happy and triumphant side of the Latino experience, since it could lead to loss of a legitimate base from which to demand social change:

I think if the show had shown nothing but positive stuff then the greater society would have wondered why “we minorities” are complaining. They would wonder why the Latino/African American etc. around the corner can[']t be like “all the ones on the show.” Both of these stereotypes are just as dangerous. (Rojas, 2009)

While I feel that there should have been more positive stories told, more stories of overcomers, I do feel that we should not shy away from telling a true, well balanced story. If part of that story is heart breaking, depressing, and even shameful, I think we need to tell it. So, I feel that the stories that showed negative issues were necessary and enlightening. With that being said, I do agree that there should have been some profiles done on some of the Latino lawyers, doctors, and CEO’s in this country. Perhaps in [Latino in America 2], CNN will play closer attention to the accomplishments that this great population has managed to achieve. (Braden, 2009)

Most of the viewers who posted comments in the different internet sites, then, do not completely reject the validity or usefulness of what they interpret as narratives of failure. What a significant part of these Latin@s asks for is a discussion of those stories *along with* what they consider “happy,” “successful,” or “positive” ones. This is a crucial aspect of these online responses, because it shows that, once again, the specific social position—this time in terms of group membership—these viewers may be speaking from does not allow them to deny completely that stories such as Carlos’s *are* a part of the Latino experience. However, their particular conditions lead them to ask for other kinds of representations that present upward mobility as both an unquestionable reality and an attainable goal.

A final aspect worthy of examination relates to whether the inclusion of Latino celebrities acts as an “ideological lesson” (Cloud, 1996) that presents the road to success as one of individual effort alone. As we saw before, these celebrities make up the majority of stories that presented a Latino identity and assimilation into mainstream society as compatible. The fact that many of these actors and actresses point to the low or complete absence of influence of their ethnic background in their professional chances is an indicator of the downplaying of racial inequality and negative Latino stereotypes in these portrayals. The extent to which viewers are successfully taught this ideological lesson, however, can and should be discussed by examining how respondents evaluate these celebrity stories. More specifically, we need to determine whether the narrative that the “dream” is possible for those Latin@s who try hard is perceived in this context as providing a positive “successful”

model, or as yet another damaging misrepresentation of “success.” A look at the responses reveals that many viewers condemn these portrayals as yet one more stereotype that, even though it may allow for a slight disassociation between Latin@ and failure, still does not open up the possibility of economic success for the “average” Latin@. Thus, the celebrities’ stories were criticized along with those stories considered “negative,” since they were perceived as not being “the norm” and leaving out “average successful stories”:

If you were trying to portray Latinos in a positive light, you mostly failed. Throwing in a few movie stars doesn’t quite do it. (Romay, 2009)

We do not all want to be famous movie and TV personalities, we are not all illegal immigrants, we do not all live in poverty stricken, gang infested neighborhoods, we do not all get pregnant as teenagers and drop out of school, and not all of us have identity crisis about being Latino in America. (Lebron Striker, 2009)

you don[']t need to be a celebrity or on the news to make a difference. [T]here are thousands of latinos that work in healthcare, business, the law, and other important jobs that make a huge difference and save lives. (Rodríguez, 2009)

As the online responses show, there is among some Latino viewers a consistent discomfort with *Latino in America*’s rhetoric of success that they address by proposing the inclusion of upward mobility as a condition for success. This, in some ways, entails a redefinition of the concept of Latin@ that can systematically and unproblematically incorporate material gain. We would argue that these reactions point to a series of interesting dynamics taking place in the interaction between media representations and particular audiences, which cannot be fully captured by focusing on either the ideological or the economic aspects of hegemonic processes. Thus, on the one hand, the different comments question the usefulness of broadening dominant understandings of success in order to re-evaluate Latino experiences. Instead, viewers focus on the need to blur the more important and persistent boundary that separates many Latin@s from a materially comfortable life. On the other hand, a redefinition of success, with its accompanying location of struggle mainly in the realm of cultural identity, is perceived as damaging even by those Latin@s who claim to enjoy a privileged economic situation. The fact that middle-class Latin@s worry about the absence of a consistent representation of their experiences points to the inevitable ethnic bond that intersects with class divisions. Thus, the responses reveal that these viewers identify a danger in the absence of average upwardly mobile Latin@s and interpret this absence as damaging for the group as a whole. This points to their awareness that they cannot afford to see themselves as separate from working class Latin@s, or newly-arrived immigrants. Hence, these viewers reject a redefinition of “success” that supposedly acknowledges and validates a wider variety of Latino experiences, but in the end normalizes the location of these experiences outside of the economic mainstream.

Conclusions: Hegemony, Intellectuals, and the Rising Faction of the Multitude

Latino in America provides a portrait of the Latino experience that, at a first glance, could be described as diverse: the documentary offers a wide array of representations that cut across race, class, gender, and degree of assimilation into mainstream American society. It also presents a mixture of stories in terms of the extent to which their protagonists are able to achieve their goals. How is it then that this show failed, for the most part, to gain the approval of many Latino viewers who strive for or enjoy upward mobility? In this article we have offered an explanation based on an understanding of hegemonic processes that recognizes particular groups' social position as a key element in explaining how they interact with different representations. In the specific case addressed here, we can interpret the dynamics identified as emerging from the inherent tensions within what we would call a rising faction of the multitude. Hardt and Negri (2005) theorize the multitude as a new kind of "working class"—comprising both blue and white collars—with a revolutionary potential. However, for our particular purposes, we are not drawing on the latter—and normative—part of this definition, but rather on its descriptive value in identifying an increasingly multifarious collective with regards to demographics such as race/ethnicity, gender, or employment status. We believe the notion of a rising faction of the multitude captures the structural constraints some groups face in their efforts to join the cultural/economic mainstream. It also, importantly, helps us account for the willingness and the objective potential—as seen in the responses we analyzed—to transcend those constraints.

Our analysis of CNN's documentary *Latino in America* and particular evaluations of it revealed a general discomfort with the show's endorsement of a rhetoric of "Latino success" that (1) precluded upward mobility for those for whom ethnicity is a salient aspect of their identities; (2) presented this absence of material improvement in a positive light; (3) portrayed those upwardly mobile Latin@s as regretful for having lost their cultural roots on the way; and (4) only allowed for a reconciliation of Latino identity and assimilation into the mainstream in the case of celebrities or entertainment figures. This dissatisfaction, importantly, was not solved with the complete removal of what these viewers interpret as "negative" stories, nor with the inclusion of mythical stories of Latino celebrities who "have it all." Instead, viewers' constant grounding of their evaluation on their and others' concrete conditions—which, for example, incorporate a disparity of occupational positions¹⁰—led to a consistent skepticism with regards to what Cloud (1996) has labeled the rhetoric of tokenism, together with a recognition of the value of representations that show the pervasiveness of inequality, and the claim for a more consistent presence of middle class Latin@s.

The possibility that those traditionally identified as minorities would want to enjoy the benefits of mainstream society, or that factions of these groups who have made it to more comfortable positions would want to cease to be social "suspects" should not come as a surprise. However, it is too often not taken into account. From a perspective that unleashes the full potential of an amazingly rich concept such as

hegemony, we can better focus on how consciousness and material social conditions go hand in hand. Seeing hegemony as “a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living” (Williams, 1977, p. 110) is a necessary first step in this direction. Otherwise, as Gramsci (1971) warned us, we will be intellectuals who know but *do not feel*, since our theorizing will be detached from the elementary passions of people. We then may find ourselves advocating a “passive revolution,”¹¹ instead of helping to create a new hegemonic order that can guarantee equal chances to those who are now consistently pushed towards the margins of society. Academics have already shown that ideology is incredibly effective. Now it is time to focus on discussing why this is so, and to suggest starting points that can help us identify and challenge the conditions that make these ideologies possible in the first place.

Notes

- [1] The first Tea Party protest, for example, took place in early 2009.
- [2] Throughout this article we understand “assimilation” as a multidimensional process which may include, but is not limited to, acculturation. Our emphasis will be on what Gordon (1964) labeled “structural assimilation,” which implies “the entrance of immigrants into primary-group relationships with the host society” (Jimenez, 2010, p. 10). In this sense, assimilation may be seen as a desirable goal for immigrants.
- [3] Throughout this article, we use the masculine singular “Latino” when it functions as a qualifying adjective, and introduce the terms Latin@ and Latin@s when they function as nouns. The @ is meant to be read as both “o” and “a”, and thus it refers to Latinos *and* Latinas. When quoting from other sources, however, we maintained the original words used in the different texts.
- [4] According to the U.S. Bureau of Census 2006, the Hispanic origin household had an average income of \$37,781, whereas the average for whites is \$50,673.
- [5] This is obviously a question that has driven “media effects” research since its origins, and that has been—and continues to be—answered in ways that push the different positions into one of two irreconcilable extremes: one emphasizing the manipulative power of media *à la* Frankfurt school, the other one placing power in the hands of viewers, as in uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) or the “active audience” approach (Fiske, 1989). Again, Cloud and Condit exemplify the transposition of this divide into rhetorical approaches, with Condit (1989, 1990) arguing for the different possibilities in audiences’ reactions to a given denotative meaning in a message, and Cloud (1992) emphasizing the transformational limits of these different interpretations.
- [6] *Latino in America* can be seen as paralleling the 2008 CNN’s production, *Black in America*. Even though it is the first documentary on this topic aired on CNN, it is not the only media product based on Latino life. In 2001, HBO produced a documentary titled *Americanos*, which also centers on Latino culture in North America.
- [7] According to demographic data provided by CNN, Latino viewers constitute on average 6% of the total viewership of this network.
- [8] According to CNN, Latino viewers are likely to have median incomes per household of around \$63,000 and above, compared to the income median for Latino households as a whole, which is around \$37,000. Most of the Latino viewers of CNN also hold a college degree.
- [9] See, for example, one viewer’s comment: “Ruth Ponce *****CNN: SEEMS LIKE YOU ONLY FOCUSED ON THE NEGATIVE. WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL THE MILLIONAIRE LATINO STORIES?????????***** I KNOW MANY LATINOS THAT HAVE CASH

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