Do I look Mexican? The Reification of a National Face

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Abstract

About a century ago, Bertillon proposed methodologies based on facial features for identifying criminal suspects. The *portrait parlé* and the mug shot techniques were extensively popularized. They had a strong influence in the procedure to establish individual identity. 20 years ago, three anthropologists from the Institute of Anthropological Research at UNAM in Mexico City started developing a computerized system for personal identification through facial features. This system is now widely used by the Mexican Police Department and represents a landmark for similar systems in Latin America. Stemming from Bertillon's legacy, "Caramex" aims to construct more accurate portraits using a photographic database; a record of pictures obtained by sampling representative regions in the Mexican territory. Assuming a tri-hybrid origin of Mexicans (Indigenous, European and African), researchers looked at the current population to find "the typical physical traits"; in other words, to construct the Mexican face. In this presentation, I will show how this system of identification imposes a new grid of interpretation on human variation. In the process of defining what a *mestizo* phenotype is, the system reifies a typical biological and national face. In generating a limited set of ears, eyes, mouths, eyebrows, etc., to represent all facial variation found in the country, the system inscribes into the human body notions of common origin and nationality.

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