

Racism, Identity, and Latinos: A Comment on Alcoff

Tommie Shelby
Harvard University

There are in fact *three* binaries that Alcoff suggests that we need to transcend if we are to develop more accurate descriptions of current social realities and more productive analyses to inform political practice.¹ There is the familiar black/white binary, which she argues misleads us into thinking that color-coded racism is the model for all forms of racism. There is a race/ethnicity binary, which she says cannot do justice to the lived experience and social identity of Latinos living in the United States. And there is the promise/threat binary, which she maintains offers us a distorted depiction of the political situation of Latinos.

Alcoff sketches three proposals for getting beyond these problematic binaries. *Anti-Latino racism*, she argues, is a type of racism that is distinct from antiblack racism and cannot be modeled on it. *Ethnorace* is a hybridized identity category that more accurately represents the Latino situation than does the categories of race and ethnicity. *Identity proliferation* is the forthright acknowledgement and embrace of differentiation—along the lines of class, national origin, language, color, and so on—*within* social groups defined by race, ethnicity, or ethnorace.

I accept Alcoff's compelling arguments in favor of "identity proliferation" (though I am not entirely happy with the somewhat misleading term she has chosen to designate her proposal). Recognizing the internal differences and potential sources of conflict between the members of a marginalized group is imperative, on both theoretical and practical grounds. In fact, this is, fortunately, the trend of recent scholarly research on racial and ethnic politics. So I will not say more about this aspect of Alcoff's proposal. The focus of my remarks, then, will be on the ideas of anti-Latino racism and ethnorace.

1. Racism and Ideology

I certainly believe that Latinos face racism, along with many other forms of prejudice and hostility. I have doubts, however, about whether the idea of anti-Latino racism, at least as Alcoff conceives of it, is a necessary or useful addition to our stock of analytical concepts for describing or diagnosing the mistreatment that Latinos confront in the United States.

I want to begin by noting that, because of decades of valuable social-scientific research, we already have several analytical categories for group-based prejudice and hostility. *Racism*, at least on one standard characterization, is prejudice toward or discrimination against someone because of that person's putative *race*—where “race” denotes groups defined by inherited somatic characteristics, descent relations, and continental origins. *Ethnocentrism* (or ethnic chauvinism), by contrast, is the belief or implicit assumption that one's own culture is superior to that of others. *Xenophobia* is prejudice or hostility toward those regarded as foreign. *Nativism* is prejudice against immigrants or favoritism toward the native-born inhabitants of a polity. *Nationalism*, in its romantic and reactionary forms, is the belief that only those who have the same ethnic or racial identity should share equal citizenship within a polity. *Cultural intolerance* is hostility toward a group because its members refuse to conform to the established beliefs and practices of a society.² And, drawing on split-labor market theory, there is the hostility of better-paid workers from advanced capitalist societies toward poor workers from the developing world who are willing to work at lower wages.³

All of these modes of group-based prejudice can operate through negative and misleading stereotypes about the relevant out-group.⁴ Given these well-established categories of social analysis, the question is whether we also need the notion of anti-Latino racism to grasp current forms of group-based prejudice and hostility, particularly those directly affecting Latinos in the United States.

Alcoff departs from the widely held view that racism presupposes or makes essential use of the concept of race. Instead, she defines racism as follows: “a negative value or set of values projected as an essential or noncontingent attribute onto a group whose members are defined through genealogical connection—that is, as sharing some origin—and who are demarcated on the basis of some visible phenotypic features” (Alcoff, 114–15). She claims that racism can operate on at least four distinct axes: (i) skin color; (ii) visible, physical features other than skin color; (iii) cultural attributes; and (iv) native origin. Several points are in order.

I entirely agree with Alcoff that antiblack racism is not the only form of racism; nor is it an appropriate model for all forms of racism. But if her aim is to explain how anti-Latino racism is different from antiblack racism, I fail to see how emphasizing the four axes she outlines is supposed to distinguish the two forms of racism. Antiblack racism does not operate solely along the axis of color; it also denigrates other inherited, visible physical traits—for example, lips, noses, hair, and butts. Not only are blacks defined by more than color, but dark skin is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being black. There are black people who look white but are considered black because

they are believed to have a black ancestor who was dark skinned.⁵ If dark skin were a sufficient condition for being black, many South Asians would be considered black. Being black, as with all *racial* designations, depends on inherited physical characteristics, descent relations, and, importantly, continental origins. In other words, to be black not only must one look black or be descended from someone who looks black, but one must have African ancestry. Thus, geographic origin is also an important axis for understanding antiblack racism.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that an inherited, visible, physical trait can be a common characteristic in an ethnic group without it being regarded as a “racial” marker. We need to distinguish between a group being *defined* by its physical traits and its members being *identifiable* by their physical traits. If the members of an ethnic group are of common descent, share geographic origins, and practice endogamy, then many members of the group will likely be recognizable by their common physical traits. Yet the group may be *defined*, both by its own members and by outsiders, solely by common descent and culture, the physical characteristics being inessential to their identity. (For example, consider the dark skin and straight hair of some people from India. One does not have to have dark skin or straight hair to be a bona fide Indian, but one can often identify an Indian by these and other physical traits. An analogous point could be made about Indians who speak English with an identifiable accent.)

Moving now to the axis of culture, I would not deny that there can be racism that is *ostensibly* based on culture—when, for example, the alleged cultural difference is just a proxy or excuse for hostility based on race. Today in the United States, it is not generally acceptable to publicly express racist beliefs and sentiments. So racism is typically expressed through more respectable talk of culture, religion, or patriotism. Such coded language is a prophylactic against the charge of being labeled “racist”—though we may have reason to doubt its effectiveness.

However, some group-based prejudice is sincerely directed toward meaningful cultural differences (e.g., language or religion). Sometimes this prejudice is rooted in a demand that the cultural Other assimilate. But this is cultural intolerance, not racism. When assimilation is a real avenue to full acceptance, we are not dealing with racism. Calling cultural intolerance “racism” stretches the meaning of the term beyond its usefulness for social analysis or political practice.⁶ I hasten to add that, in making this general conceptual point, I am not suggesting that such demands for assimilation are reasonable or just.

Alcoff also claims that there can be race-based (or racially inflected) nativism, where immigrants from non-European countries face greater hostility than European immigrants. This is no doubt true. However, again, I do not see why we should think that this type of racism is fundamentally different from

antiblack racism. Surely, immigrants from Haiti, Jamaica, and Nigeria (all things being equal) confront more hostility in the United States than do immigrants from Germany, Italy, and Scandinavia.

Furthermore, some of what Alcoff describes as racist nativism is, I believe, more properly described as ethnocentrism, xenophobia, cultural intolerance, or reactionary nationalism, as when she points to prejudice directed toward (i) those thought to be from inferior or backward cultures, (ii) those who seek to preserve their languages and religions in the face of pressure to assimilate, or (iii) those who do not share “our” national identity or heritage. So why collapse these distinctions by filing them all under the category of racism?

Let’s revisit the following passage from Alcoff’s essay:

Thus, the color axis is only one of the axes that need to be understood as pivotal in racist ideologies. Racism can and has operated through a variety of physical features, cultural characteristics and origins, and status as “native” or “nonnative” to exclude groups from engendering empathic identification, or from deserving social inclusion and political representation. These multiple axes produce a mechanism for the classification and delimitation of subsets of people that then justifies discrimination and exclusion. (117)

I agree with Alcoff that racism is, at least in part, an ideology.⁷ Ideologies are systems of belief that distort social realities and that function, through this distortion, to help bring about or reinforce oppressive social relations. But not every ideology is a form of racism. It is true that most, if not all, ideologies operate to exclude, denigrate, and marginalize. But they accomplish this task in different ways. Racist ideologies, for instance, make use of the concept of race to mark off the oppressed group and to legitimize their unjust treatment. Ideologies play their legitimizing role by highlighting characteristics such as race, culture, ethnicity, gender, national origin, sexuality, citizenship, class, and religion, imbuing them with social meanings that enable or buttress group-based dominance. If we identify particular ideologies by their *propositional content*, rather than their generally oppressive function, then we can better make important distinctions between things like racism, nationalism, and cultural intolerance. If we demarcate particular ideologies in terms of their oppressive function, then we may be tempted to collapse these distinctions. I therefore recommend a content-based criterion of demarcation.

2. Ethnorace and Racism

I now turn to the idea of ethnorace. As I understand her, Alcoff is not rejecting the usefulness of the distinction between race and

ethnicity. She is adding a third category, ethnorace, that she believes will help us better describe and understand current social realities. But is there really something about Latino identity that we cannot understand through the categories of race and ethnicity? I am skeptical.

Much of Alcoff's argument convincingly shows that, both in ordinary usage and in scholarly discourse, "race" and "ethnicity" are conflated or used interchangeably and that there is not much agreement on the precise meaning of the two terms. But I do not see how this establishes that we cannot make an analytically useful and precise distinction between the two or that, once the distinction is made, we cannot understand Latino identity using it.

Here is one way of making the distinction. Racial groups ("race" here understood as a *social* classification, not a natural division of human types) are collectivities defined by their purported common inherited, physical characteristics, descent relations, and continental origin. Specific criteria for racial groupings will of course vary with time and place. The members of a racial group need *not* (though they may) have an affinity for one another, a shared self-conception or identity, or a common cultural heritage. Ethnic groups, by contrast, are social groups defined by their purported common descent, culture, and geographic origin. The members of an ethnic group need *not* (though, again, they may) share visible physical characteristics. Such groups typically have some measure of cohesion, such that it is meaningful to speak of them as sharing an identity and in-group affinity.

Given this way of making the distinction, "Latino" is an ethnic category. Within this broad Latino category, there are smaller, distinct ethnic groups defined by their greater cultural similarity and national origin. Latinos can be of any race or of mixed-race. In this way, Latino is analogous, not to being Italian-American, but to being, say, Slavic (an ethnic group of Indo-European descent that includes Russians, Czechs, and Croats).

Now Alcoff, I suspect, would argue that this is not sufficient, that such a distinction is too simplistic and relies on a misleading race/ethnicity binary that cannot fully or accurately capture what it is to be Latino. Thus she introduces the idea of ethnorace as a "bridge concept." What does "ethnorace" denote? According to Alcoff, an ethnorace is a social group defined by culture, descent, and visible physical characteristics, some of whose members are believed to be unassimilable.

Alcoff says that one of the features of anti-Latino racism is that Latinos are viewed as unwilling to assimilate and incapable of assimilating. However, there is a big difference between viewing a group as unassimilable because one believes its members to be *unwilling* to assimilate and viewing a group as unassimilable because one believes they are *incapable* of assimila-

lating. In the first case, one may think that the members of the group do not assimilate out of pride in their heritage or attachment to their own cultural ways. In the second case, the assumption is that even if they made their best effort, the group would fail to lose their ethnic traits or to acquire the traits of the dominant culture. I take it that only the latter case can plausibly be regarded as “racializing” an ethnic group, because only it treats the distinctive traits of the group as permanent and ineradicable. The former belief—that the group is unwilling to assimilate—at least when the belief is sincere, is often the basis for cultural intolerance.

In fact, one might argue that racialization depends on the particular purported *explanation* for this alleged incapacity. That is, whether we are dealing with a case of racialization of cultural difference depends on *why* the prejudiced person takes the difference to be indelible. Perhaps it is racialization only if the alleged incapacity is attributed to facts of *reproduction*, that is, because of something in the “blood” or genes of the group. So, if the explanation were theological (e.g., that God had condemned the group to permanent inferiority or cultural backwardness), then we might hesitate to call this racialization. Again, ideologies do their dirty work in different ways.

Consider the case of anti-Semitism. Jews have faced cultural intolerance for centuries, with pressure from both Christians and Muslims to renounce their religion and its associated rituals and practices. And some Jews have successfully assimilated and thereby gained acceptance into the societies of which they are a part. Jews have also been viewed as cursed by God because of their alleged role in the murder of Jesus Christ. Both forms of religious persecution differ from racism. Nevertheless, certain forms of anti-Semitism have rightly been regarded as racist. The Nazis believed that even assimilated Jews were corrupt and inferior, and they attributed this to inherent, biological differences between Aryans and Jews, regarding the two groups as distinct races and spawning a eugenics movement. This is racism in its classic form.

Does prejudice toward Latinos sometimes take this last form? Yes. Must we posit a distinct type of ethnoracism to account for it? I don’t think we do. There are Latinos who have European ancestry, African ancestry, Native American ancestry, Asian ancestry, or some mix of these. It is not surprising, then, that many experience racism, either because of their lack of “racial purity” or because they are descended from a denigrated race or because they are regarded as “white” and thus part of the oppressor group.

Of course, as with the Jews in Nazi Germany, some people may *believe*, wrongly, that Latinos constitute a distinct and inferior race. Thus, there can be anti-Latino racism, in the sense of prejudice or hostility toward Latinos because of their “race.”

Ideologies do their work through myths, half-truths, or misleading beliefs. So the fact that Latinos are not “actually” members of the same race is no obstacle to their being the target of racism, provided others think of them as a race. However, Alcoff does not seem to have this kind of case in mind when she proposes the concept of anti-Latino racism.

When the hostility or prejudice that Latinos face is not premised on or rationalized in terms of the idea that they belong to a single race or a degraded mixed race, I contend that, though some members may be experiencing racism, they are not experiencing racism *qua* Latinos. They do, of course, experience various familiar forms of racism that are directed against non-whites or those deemed not white enough. For example, a Puerto Rican might be the target of racism because she looks black, a Mexican American might face racial discrimination because he is indigenous-looking, or a Filipina might be excluded on racial grounds because she looks Asian. And some Latinos are mistreated because of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, nativism, reactionary nationalism, cultural intolerance, and hostility toward poor workers from the developing world. These group-based prejudices can obviously work in tandem, mutually supporting one another. I therefore fail to see what talk of anti-Latino racism or ethno-race adds to our understanding of the forms of prejudice and injustice that Latinos face.

I want to close by briefly considering two possible responses to my concerns and criticisms. The first points out that it is common for the propositional content of one ideology to bleed or morph into another and so there is no point in pretending that ideologies have precise boundaries, such that one is *really* racism and another not. I certainly agree that ideologies do not have clear boundaries. But I would insist that the analytical concepts that we use to understand and critique ideologies should rest on clear and pertinent distinctions. The best we can do in this domain is construct useful ideal types that capture the core contours of an ideology, while recognizing that the world is much messier than the concepts that we use to describe and understand it.

The second response says that since all these ideological “isms” are simply rationalizations for group-based dominance and thus perform essentially the same oppressive function, there is no point to all these fine distinctions or to insisting that we refrain from calling all these isms “racism.” However, each ideological constellation makes its own set of factual or moral errors. Those of us concerned to fight against injustice need to *expose* the confusions, factual mistakes, mystifications, and moral misjudgments of those who put forward or are in the grip of particular ideologies. This can be accomplished only through careful analyses of these ideas, beliefs, and assumptions. In this ongoing war of position, intellectuals—and philosophers in

particular—can play a role to which we are uniquely suited. I would urge us to play it.

Notes

¹ See Linda Martín Alcoff, “Latinos beyond the Binary,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* [this issue]. Quotes from her paper will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² For discussion, see Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race* (New York: Monthly Review, 1970), ch. 18.

³ This theory is developed in Edna Bonacich, “A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market,” *American Sociological Review* 37 (October 1972): 547–59.

⁴ See, for example, John T. Jost and Mahzarin R. Banaji, “The Role of Stereotyping in System-Justification and the Production of False Consciousness,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* (1994): 1–27; and Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 4.

⁵ For discussion of this and related matters, see Lionel K. McPherson and Tommie Shelby, “Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 32 (March 2004): 171–92.

⁶ For more on this problem of conceptual inflation, see Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989); and Lawrence Blum, *‘I’m Not a Racist, But...’: The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

⁷ I offer my own defense of this point of view in “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” *Philosophical Forum* 34 (Summer 2003): 153–88.

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