

Phil 318: Linda Alcoff, "Is Latina/o a Racial Identity?"

Background: we need to distinguish 4 different things that often get confused with one another:

1. *ethnicity*: an identity involving culture linked to an ancestral national origin (Mexico, Peru, etc.)
2. *pan-ethnicity*: a grouping of ethnic groups seen as having something in common, e.g. "Latinx," "Asian American" (Blum 149)
3. *race*: a fundamental biological division of the human species, differing from other races in their inherent natures
4. *racialized group*: a group that is not a race but is or was thought to be a race and so was treated as if it was, basically by inferiorizing the group in question (or, in the case of whites, superiorizing the group) (Blum 149ff)

Alcoff addresses the question how Latinx's, both as members of individual ethnic groups (e.g. Mexican, Peruvian, Dominican, Brazilian) and as members of the pan-ethnic group "Latinx" or "Hispanic," should think of themselves with respect to ethnicity and race. One option she considers is to embrace ethnicity and refuse race. She mentions several considerations in favor of this option:

1. Latinx's are of many different phenotypes and so do not see themselves as part of a distinct racial group (either 3 or 4 above)
2. Many, perhaps most, Latinx's see their cultural or ethnic identity as more important than any racial identity they might recognize, and so do not want race to be their identity
3. The ethnic option will reduce racism because ethnicity and culture signify agency and self-expression, while race is simply a physical characteristic or a category imposed by others (32, 35, 36).
4. It will challenge the US tendency to "naturalize" racial categories as the primary way to identify people (34).

Despite these considerations, Alcoff thinks that it is unwise for Latinx's to totally deny the significance of race for them and their group identity. She is not advocating giving up ethnic or pan-ethnic identities, but she thinks race has to be brought into that mix, into an understanding, and self-understanding, of Latinx's. She gives several different reasons for thinking this:

1. In the US, people are treated differently because of their race (example of Cuban immigrants, p. 36). Can't wish this away. Have to deal with it.
 - a. Some Latino ethnic groups tend to be *more* racialized than others—e.g. Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, more than Argentinians
2. Even when groups try to assert and foreground their ethnicity, their race will generally be seen by others and taken as more primary—example of African Americans (37). Only *white* ethnics were/are allowed to have their ethnicity in the forefront (38). Have to recognize this and work with it.
3. Because race deals with visible "markers" on the body, it visually trumps dress, speech, and cultural practices (38), no matter what terminology is used.
4. It will not be possible to have full and equal incorporation of Latinx's into American life without coming to terms with the historical mistreatment of Latino groups. So have to be aware of this racial history so we can deal with it forthrightly (39).

Basically Alcoff is saying we have to "be real" about the racialized history of the United States. Can't just wish it away or get rid of it by terminological change.

But at same time, she does not want the acknowledgment of race to turn into a negative racialization. So she suggests some ways of thinking about race that preserve an “agentic” and cultural focus:

1. Black theorists of “diaspora” (e.g. Paul Gilroy) use “black” to signify shared historical experience, collective memory, cultural expression across different black groups in different nations, involving a “de-essentializing” of blackness (cf. distinction between 3 and 4 under “background,” above). (Gilroy’s influential “black Atlantic” diasporic idea omits Latin American blacks, e.g. Brazilians.)
2. Will this move work for Latinx’s, who have greater diversity in history and culture?
3. Although it is difficult to change words like “race” that have a settled meaning, meanings are capable of change over time, if slowly
4. Latinx’s have to give up thinking that their somatic and cultural diversity will somehow undermine the US racial history and racial “binary” (black/white) thinking.
5. Latinx experience has very much been affected by racialization, and this should prompt Latinx’s to join in solidarity with other groups who have also been racialized.
6. The concept of “mestizo” could to some extent shape racial discourse in the US, but have to beware of marginalizing Latinx’s of primarily African, Indian (indigenous), or Asian descent.
7. Goldberg’s concept of “ethnorace” is helpful for expressing agency connected with ethnicity while acknowledging the role and power of race in Latinx experience.

[all these points are on pp 40-42]

[If time: Blum’s criticism of Alcoff]