

Latina/o Identity and Race

I. Method

How should we understand the group identity Latina/o? Should Latina/os embrace the identity or reject it? Should it be employed by those who seek social justice?

We must make a judgment about meaning, a judgment that will be underdetermined by usage, history, science, or phenomenological description of experience. And in making these judgments, we must look to the future and not just the past. In other words, given that we are participating in the *construction* of meaning in making such judgments, we must take responsibility for our actions, which will require carefully considering their likely real-world effects. (24)

Options:

- a) Consider Latina/os a race
- b) Consider Latina/os an ethnicity
- c) Reject group identities

II. The cultural significance of group identity

Group identities are not merely about culture. They are sometimes imposed by the dominant group. They are sometimes claimed/created by the subordinate group.

Obviously, it is the U.S. state and U.S. courts that initially insisted on the overwhelming salience of some racial and ethnic identities to the exclusion of rights to suffrage, education, property, marrying whomever one wanted, and so on. Denigrated groups **are trying to reverse this process**; they are not the initiators of it. It seems to me that they have two aims: (1) to valorize previously derided identities, and (2) to have their own hand at constructing the representation of identities. (27)

There are concerns that pan-ethnic identities are (28-9):

- i) a government imposition for illegitimate (controlling) purposes (and sometimes privilege the already privileged in the group);
- ii) a product of marketing strategies;
- iii) over-homogenizing, disruptive of ethnic allegiance;
- iv) untrue to the experience of those so-grouped.

Yet, for those in the US who come from complex lineages and have multiple identities, it can be “a welcome relief.” (29) And a contemporary Latina/o identity is being constructed through popular culture.

Ethnicity and race stand in a complex relationship. Alcoff argues that ‘Black’ is the only group that is consistently racialized, and ‘White’ is claimed in distancing oneself from ‘Black.’ ‘Ethnicity’ seems to carry an implication of choice that ‘race’ doesn’t, and potentially allows for heterogeneity. (32)

III. The Ethnicity Paradigm

What better unites Latinas/os both across and even within our specific national cultures is not race or phenotype but precisely those features associated with culture: language, religious traditions, cultural values, characteristics of comportment. Thus, another response to forced racialization that has existed for a long time among some Latina/o communities and which has enjoyed a recent resurgence is to deny that race applies in any way to Latinas/os and to argue for, and self-identify as, an ethnic group that encompasses different nationalities and races within it. (34)

In favor of this approach:

...the political arguments are that (1) the use of ethnicity will reduce racism because it refers to self-created features rather than merely physiological ones, and (2) this will also resist the imposition of U.S. forms of identifying people, thus disabusing North Americans of their tendency to naturalize and universalize the predominant categories used here in the United States. The metaphysical arguments are that (3) ethnicity more accurately identifies what really holds groups together and how they self-identify, and (4) ethnicity is simply closer to the truth of Latina/o identity, given its racial heterogeneity. (36)

IV. The Race Paradigm

Yet, there are reasons to think that the ethnic strategy is not going to work.

a) Race tends to trump culture, and “the racialization of Black Americans will overpower any ethnic or cultural market.” (37) “Thus it is questionable whether the strategy of using an ethnic term for a currently racialized group will have the effect of reducing racism...” (37)

b) The de-racialization (or not) of a group isn’t just about assimilation, or skin tone.

Race, unlike ethnicity, has historically worked through visible markers on the body that trump dress, speech, and cultural practices...race demarcates groups visually, which is why racist institutions have been so upset about nonvisible members of “races” and why they have taken such trouble in these cases to enforce racial identifications...in the implicit perceptual practices we use in everyday life to discern how to relate to each other—ethnicity does not replace race. When ethnic identities are used instead of racial ones, the perceptual practices of visual demarcation by which we slot people into racial categories continue to operate because ethnic categories offer no substituting perceptual practice. (38)

c) Solidarity amongst non-whites or any group solidarities provokes resistance among whites. (39)

Thus, the line between European ethnicities and people of color is not merely or perhaps even primarily about skin tone, but about history and power and the narratives by which currently existing power arrangements are justified.” (39)

V. Ethnorace

Can we understand race in a way that is not biological, that is not essentializing, that is connected to “historical experience, collective memory and forms of cultural expression”? (40) “...it may be easier to help “race” slowly evolve than to try to do away with it as a first step.” (41)

A concept that might be helpful here has been coined by David Theo Goldberg: ethnorace. Unlike race, ethnorace does not imply a common descent, which is precisely what tends to embroil race in notions of biological determinism and natural and heritable characteristics. Ethnorace might have the advantage of bringing into play the elements of both human agency and subjectivity involved in ethnicity—that is, an identity that is the product of self-creation-at the same time it acknowledges the uncontrolled racializing aspects associated with the visible body. And the term would remind us that there are at least two concepts, rather than one, that are vitally necessary to the understanding of Latina/o identity in the US: ethnicity and race. (42)

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.236 / 24.636 Topics in Social Theory and Practice: Race and Racism
Fall 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.