

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND LATINOS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:
POINTS OF UNITY, POINTS OF DISCORD

by

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At the onset of the twenty-first century, Latinos became the largest minority group in the United States. Given the variety of their national origins and even the uncertainty about what to label them (i.e., “Latinos,” “Hispanics,” or, in the case of Mexicans, “Chicanos”), some (e.g., Etzioni 2002) have argued that the very group is an American invention. After all, up until 1980, the U.S. census counted the various nationalities as separate entities, and newcomers also tended to identify themselves (and many still do) with their countries of origin.

The attempt to lump all peoples of Central, South American, and (some of) Caribbean descent appears to be at least in part related to the racialized structure of the United States. American society thinks of itself in “either/or” terms: one is either White or not. “White,” as the dominant group and thus the norm, demands standards of racial purity and permanence, spoken in biologically erroneous terms. In other words, one drop of non-White “blood” automatically makes a person non-White, but one drop of White “blood” cannot turn one into a White person. Put it another way, in the United States a White woman is believed to be able to give birth to a non-White baby, but a non-White woman cannot possibly give birth to a White child (cite).

Sociologically speaking, categories of people who are defined in terms of national origin and language, such as Latinos, constitute ethnic groups, not races. In the United States, however,

Latinos are increasingly treated as a separate race, notwithstanding the considerable racial variation that characterizes them or the census contention that “Hispanics may be of any race.” In day-to-day life, it is common to hear people refer to “Whites, Blacks, and Latinos.” I contend that such way of thinking is a direct result of the one-drop rule. As we all know, historically, the sharpest and most acrimonious racial dichotomy has been between Whites and Blacks--with Black “blood” as that almost magical substance which, though regarded as inferior, has the power to “taint” and transform all that it touches. According to this reasoning, above all, White must remain unchanged and absolute. It so follows that, while most Latinos are not thought of as Black, because of their numerous hues, they are not considered “really White” either.

But does the dominant group really see Hispanics as a race onto themselves? Consider this: on the one hand, Cuban Americans and Mexican Americans--who tend to be lighter skinned--have been intermarrying with non-Hispanic Whites in increasing numbers (Arias 2001; Rosenfeld 2002); on the other hand, Puerto Ricans--who tend to be darker skinned--are more likely to experience residential segregation at rates akin to that of African Americans (Massey and Denton 1993). The implication is that, at least on some level, the dominant group is allowing the lightest Latinos to get closer to them (and no intergroup relation is closer than intermarriage), while relegating the darkest Latinos to the status of Blacks. If those trends were to continue, in time both lighter-skinned and darker-skinned Hispanics might become invisible, the former being absorbed into privilege, and the latter, into subjugation.

So far, I have only considered race and how Latinos fit into a racial system from the standpoint of the U.S. dominant group, or from a “top down” perspective. That alone would be too simplistic, because it ignores both human agency and the sociocultural legacy that immigrants bring with them.

Regarding their sociocultural legacy, most Latinos come from countries which, unlike the United States, acknowledge skin color gradation, with a myriad shades in between the White and Black extremes; in other words, the one-drop rule does not make sense in Latin America. Like the United States, however, Latin American societies are also racialized, even if they have not developed a system of *de jure* discrimination such as the one that characterized the United States up until the second half of the twentieth century. Overall, in Latin America, Whites and lighter-skinned individuals enjoy higher social status than their darker-skinned counterparts, who are subjected to *de facto* racial prejudice and discrimination.

Individuals raised in such societies learn early on to operate within a system of racial stratification, and that is where human agency comes in. When immigrants come to the United States, they soon realize that Blacks are the country's most despised minority. Although, after centuries of fierce oppression, African Americans had fought for and won some basic civil rights in the 1960s, affirmative action policies started to be dismantled barely three decades after their implementations, as if they had accomplished their goals in such a short time. When "diversity and equal access programs" replace affirmative action policies, the specific issue of race has to compete for attention with those of class and gender, among others. Meanwhile, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, most African American students continue to get an inferior education; though African Americans are the most open to living in racially integrated neighborhoods, they are the least preferred neighbors (Charles 2000); African Americans are also less likely to be hired because prospective employers increasingly prefer West Indians and Latinos, whom they see as having a better work ethic (Cooper 2000; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991).

Very possibly, Afro-Latinos have experienced racial victimization in their own countries and are likely to go through similar situations here. Afro-Latinos may also perceive a preference by the larger society for lighter-skinned Latinos, which might further approximate Afro-Latinos to African Americans. Moreover, Afro-Latinos may admire African Americans for their struggles for and past victories over the acquisition of civil rights. All of those are potential points of unity between Afro-Latinos and African Americans. In short, Afro-Latinos and African Americans may very well focus on their most obvious commonality: their African ancestry, which, in a racialized system, puts them all at a tremendous disadvantage.

There are, however, points of tension as well. Because of their massive yearly immigration and higher fertility rates, Latinos are taking over neighborhoods previously occupied by African Americans. Many recent immigrants--especially the undocumented ones--, may feel they have no choice but to take lower-paying jobs, jobs that African Americans, because of their vast familiarity with the society, are much less willing to take. Citing Los Angeles as an example, Cooper (2000) notes,

The black population is down from 15 percent to just below 10 percent.... The Latino population has grown from 10 percent to 44 percent and is still growing. Go to virtually any site of employment in Los Angeles, whether it's a grungy junkyard in South Central, a trendy eatery on the West Side, a car wash in the South Bay, a chi-chi \$7-a-shirt dry cleaner in the Valley, a labor-intensive garment factory downtown, a fast-food joint in Hollywood or your neighbor's weekend project to update his landscape and, inevitably, those behind the counter, on the line, at the machine, on the register, in the trench and at your service are low-paid Latino workers.

Like countless Americans before them, African Americans may develop nativist feelings toward the immigrants as a reaction to the latter's growing visibility and perceived economic threat. Moreover, as I mentioned before, stereotypical views lead some employers to prefer Latinos to African Americans; no doubt, this stirs fears of intergroup animosity. Furthermore, in time Latinos may perceive African Americans the way the larger society does, i.e., at the bottom of

the stratification system, which might lead them to try to distance themselves from African Americans by asserting a Latina ethnicity. (Ironically, that might be even more pronounced among darker-skinned Latinos, who might see the emphasis on ethnicity as the opportunity to overcome the lower status afforded them in their countries of origin as well as here.) In turn, African Americans may resent Latinos for making them feel passed over once again in their struggle to achieve higher status in U.S. society.

In a society that continues to focus on the Black-White racial divide, Latinos (especially Afro-Latinos) are often ignored. That is bound to change in view of their growing numbers. The relationship between Latinos and African Americans is a social phenomenon in the making. The possibilities of an intergroup coalition exist, given the minority status imposed on both groups by the larger society; in effect, the lumping together of African Americans and Afro-Latinos could help them join forces over their lesser power vis-à-vis the dominant group. Whether that political coalition actually comes to fruition and solidifies will depend on each group's being conscious of and overcoming the potential for conflict that their very lack of power engenders.

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