

NPR, AUG 30

'I'm Not Racist, I'm Argentine!'

20:34

Leah Donnelly, Adrian Florido, Shereen Marisol Meraji



A recent scuffle between an elotero and a pedestrian in Hollywood re-energized discussion about legalizing street vending in California.

Adrian Florido

This viral video out of Hollywood raises an interesting question: What does racism look like from one Latino to another?

In the video, two Latinos — one, a dark-skinned Mexican street vendor, the other, a lighter-skinned Argentine out walking his dog — confront each other on an LA street. First, the walker complains that the vendor is taking up too much space on the sidewalk. “Mueve tu carro,” he says, “Si no lo mueves, te lo voy a mover yo.” (“Move your cart. If you don’t, I’ll move it for you.”)

The walker makes a move toward the vendor. The vendor throws chili powder at him in response. Then, the walker tips over the food cart, spilling corn, ice and syrup into the street.

As the vendor looks over the wreckage, he accuses the other man of being a racist.

“No soy racista!” the man responds. “Soy Argentino.” (“I’m not a racist! I’m Argentine!”)

The video ricocheted around LA’s Latino community, viewed more than 200,000 times. And it sparked a lot of discussions. Many activists used it as more fuel for the argument that [street vending should finally be legalized](#) in California. But people on the street, including a lot of street vendors, were more interested in talking about the racial issues it stirred up.

Is this a story about colorism? Latinos confronting other Latinos? Or are we seeing something else entirely?

I don't particularly read this story as Latino against Latino. I read this through a whiteness lens, that comes out of colonization. Europeans believed the indigenous were inferior. They could conquer the Western Hemisphere as they did under the presumption that white was better.

That trickles down in Latin America, just like it does in the United States, but it has different manifestations. We know that people from Argentina, not all, but generally speaking, are very proud of their European ancestry, specifically Italian, to mark themselves as white — not to be confused with those others who were “contaminated” with indigenous and Afro-descended blood.

Colorism and racism exist among Latinos from every country. Are we making Argentines a scapegoat?

Well, this was a particular incident and so we're talking about the Argentine point because the man was Argentinian. But you're absolutely right. In Latin America, there's this Latino exceptionalism, right? People say, “We don't have racism here. My brother is black, my grandma's blue. We're all one.” We hear these kinds of fallacies, even when we know that *güerito* has positive connotation and *negrita* has a negative connotation. So for me, the biggest takeaway is how we continue to see these racial regimes historically and contemporarily privilege whiteness, and thinking about how that plays out across borders, across history, across communities.

There's something about this video that really felt like it exposed some of our dirty laundry, as Latinos. From your vantage point, do you think that it threatens this fragile unity that exists between different Latino groups?

I don't. I'll tell a quick story. My father is conservative and monolingual and he listens to Univision, *Telemundo*. He calls me [one night] and he's like “Este país no nos quiere aquí. Este país es racista contra nosotros.” You know, “This country doesn't want us here. It's racist against our people.” And I was like “Oh my gosh, can you put my dad on the phone? Because I don't know who this is!”

And that is a reflection of the time. Clearly, there's a lot of internal issues within Latino communities. White-passing Latinos do in fact use their privilege to socially and racially distance themselves from other Latinos. But I think the racialization process that has happened in the last 30 years has really unified Latinos in a way that I have not seen before. They understand that when Trump says that Mexicans are rapists, he's really talking about all people from Latin America. They understand that they're being targeted as a group.

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