Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research informing New Yorkers and the world. This week's guest is Linda Martín Alcoff, who is a professor of philosophy at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She specializes in epistemology, feminism, race theory, and existentialism. Alcoff has called for greater inclusion of historically underrepresented groups in philosophy and notes that philosophers from these groups have created new fields of inquiry including feminist philosophy, critical race theory, and LGBTQ philosophy. She earned her PhD in philosophy from Brown University. She was recognized as the Distinguished Woman Philosopher of 2005 by the Society for Women in Philosophy. She is the author of 13 books, including The Future of Whiteness, published by Polity Press, 2015. She began teaching at CUNY in early 2009 after teaching for many years at Syracuse University. Welcome, Linda.

Linda Alcoff: Nice to be here.

Tanya Domi: Here we are 15 months after the 2016 presidential elections, the shocking election indeed of Donald Trump that was followed by the Women's March, considered the largest demonstration in US history, and the subsequent explosion of the Me Too moment that we're currently occupying. Arguably, this is probably the most significant mobilization of women in America since second wave feminism. What are your thoughts about this?

Linda Alcoff: It's incredibly exciting to see. For one thing, it's important to know that it's not just in the United States. It was in some ways really galvanized by a lot of activity going on in Mexico, and Argentina, and Egypt, and India around some large cases, and huge demonstrations, and policy proposals, and initiatives, and reform movements. To see it happening in the United States in places like Hollywood, I tell my students, don't be fatalistic about the future. You never know what's going to happen. The most important thing, I think, to understand that the movement has done is it's not just the fact that women victims are coming forward and making accusations. Many of the women who have come forward against some of the more famous figures came forward before. What's happening is a shift in public reception to accusations made by women and other victims. There's more credibility being accorded to the accusers. There's more seriousness being understood in regard to these kinds of crimes of sexual harassment, as well as assault and rape. Now we understand, we should understand that harassment often doesn't stop with harassment, it leads to assault and rape.

Tanya Domi: Absolutely. The principle in terms of domestic violence is that unless there's some kind of intervention, it is going to escalate. What's really remarkable about what you're seeing is the change in the reception. That is what is so markedly different. This recent terrible moment in a Michigan court of all the
Olympic gymnasts, just a shocking number of women who were silent for so, so many years, and not a single adult at Michigan State University or in USA Gymnastics came forward to help these women. It was a really, really horrible moment, and yet I was so inspired, personally inspired by their courage and strength.

Linda Alcoff: And by the judge willing to take criticism from her peers to allow for an extended amount of testimony. In a few cases, the victims of Nassar had come forward earlier, but they were not allowed to go forward in the courts because of statute of limitations. There's changes in the public's reception, but also it's forcing us to think about changes in court procedures that disallow accusers, especially of childhood incidents. I'm a survivor of childhood sexual assault, and I know that in almost all cases somebody knows. Somebody hears a scream. Somebody sees the evidence. What we have to really think about is it's not just a crime that's caused by the fact that these are very vulnerable people who are silenced, but there's a cohort around perpetrators.

Linda Alcoff: There's so many institutions, from religious ones, to military ones, to university ones, to political ones that provide cover for the predators to find vulnerable people. That's what's got to change. It's not just the ability for accuser to come forward but for them to be heard, for them to speak in court, for them to speak in the public, and for us to hear their words and rethink our practices in many of our institutions, our practices around morally blameless heterosexual behavior, what's thought of as morally blameless heterosexual behavior, but really to take another look at daily practice in so many domains of life.

Tanya Domi: I think it's really interesting that it's been a series of women coming forward talking about what has happened to them. Then this past week we have seen the events of a White House staffer who was engaged in domestic abuse of his former spouses become a national story, and we see the president trip all over himself in affirming the staffer, the male staffer. The reaction has not only been harsh and swift from the public, it also is being reflected in polling data now that white women who have been supporting Trump, those numbers have dipped by more than 10 points for the first time since he has taken office. There seems to be a shift that there's enough of this. There's enough disgust maybe that it will perhaps have some political consequences.

Linda Alcoff: Yes, that's what's amazing about this movement since October, Me Too Movement, but also some cases earlier that actually people have been taken down and taken out, people as powerful as Dominique Strauss-Kahn, and Jimmy Savile at the BBC after his death, and Harvey Weinstein so that money and power-

Tanya Domi: Which really might have been the trigger. Harvey Weinstein seems to be the one guy too many that triggered this moment.
Linda Alcoff: What’s frustrating is Weinstein had a whole career. Strauss-Kahn had a whole career. They made a lot of money. They got a lot of fame. They were able to do a lot of things and make a lot of choices and judgements. It’s at the end that they have their comeuppance. We need to figure out how to change our practices, our legal practices as well as other practices, to get at these folks before the end of their career, before they have 50 or 150 victims.

Tanya Domi: Agreed, agreed. Not only do we have this Me Too moment, but Trump’s election actually marks the first time in US history, at least in the modern era, when America has elected a populist to lead the nation, a man who many believe to be perhaps the most racist, xenophobic, and sexist president in history. Is Trump one of the reasons why you are co-organizing a two-day conference with a preponderance of your philosophy friends on racial inequality in March?

Linda Alcoff: Yes, and the focus on racial inequality is quite purposive. I think there’s been too much of a focus on what we have achieved in the United States in terms of racial justice, how far we’ve come, how many things have changed, and yet scholars who actually work on this topic will tell you to a person that the changes are not nearly as significant as they are often touted to be by our leaders, including President Obama, I think, in terms of poverty, and incarceration, and violence, and injustice in every institutional sphere. We wanted to have a conference that would not think about idealized conceptions of racial justice and equality but really think about inequality, not only to note that it still exists, but also to think about what constitutes it. Does having a predominantly Latino or African American neighborhood constitute or is caused necessarily by racial inequality?

Linda Alcoff: One of our speakers, Tommie Shelby from Harvard, has written a really important book called Dark Ghettos in which he argues that having a perfect integration of neighborhoods is not necessary for racial justice, that you could have a preponderance of an ethnic group in a neighborhood and that not constitute racial injustice under certain conditions. The question is, what are those conditions? When is a preponderance, for example, of certain racialized groups in a sector of the labor market, when does that constitute injustice and when does it not? There’s a lot of interesting questions there.

Tanya Domi: That is interesting. As a race theorist, I think that you have some special insights here. Your last book was recognized as probably one of the top books in America on the issue of race. We’re in this moment where Black Lives Matter emerged after the horrendous events in Missouri, and of course here in New York City on Staten Island, the death of Eric Garner, the murder of Eric Garner, just a plethora of black men and children being killed in this country by police officers, and there’s no consequence. There’s no consequence. You see organizations like the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and Human Rights addressing the UN, which is something that has periodically happened over many decades in the last 60, 70 years of civil rights movement where appeals have been made to the UN. Now we’re really confronted by probably the most
racist administration probably in my lifetime. Of course, I was a young child. I'm one year and one day older than you, Linda.

Linda Alcoff: Oh, really?

Tanya Domi: Yes. I remember JFK, and LBJ, and of course going through what we went through 50 years ago this year with the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. We have seen a lot, but where is it going to end? When is it going to stop? Some of my friends in the movement would say, "When do we get to liberation? Equality is not enough." How do you answer that?

Linda Alcoff: I think it's critical to think, as Dr. King advised us to do, about both race, and class, and gender together. If we just think about race and gender and we diversify the CEO level and the professional managerial class, it's not going to necessarily trickle down to people's lives, the majority of people's lives who work regular kinds of jobs. We're making progress in terms of we now have more women professionals, we now have more people of color who have achieved middle class, we have a larger middle class of color than we had when you and I were little kids. But that doesn't translate to the kinds of employment experiences, the on the job deaths of Mexican day laborers in the United States, the fact that one sanitation worker dies every single day in the United States, as the Times reported this week, and the kind of police reactions to people in which there's murder, as you say, with no consequences. We have to think about making progress in terms of racism and sexism but always with a connection, with an intersection to class issues so that we can see where the majority of the problems are and think more broadly about what the solutions will be.

Tanya Domi: I reviewed your writings in The Stone at the New York Times. You talk about being a Latina and how that informs your views, not just your views but your work, your research. We occupy all these different identities. Some of us are gay and/or a woman, or some of us are Latina and we're a person of color, or we may have multiple identities. That's very common. It is really wonderful to see that the academy is now embracing us in a way that you hear it particularly at the Graduate Center, I think it's pretty distinctive, about the work in this building. I just wanted to ask you, not only do we have a racist and sexist regime in DC, but we also probably have one of the most xenophobic, probably since the 1920s. As a Latina and as a scholar, how do you confront and talk about really an immigration policy that's being pushed on multiple levels to rid this country of really 11 million people, however they can do it?

Tanya Domi: I just read this week where even in New York there were 20 times the requests by ICE to NYPD for actions that were apparently all declined, allegedly, according to NYPD. At this time, most undocumented people must be absolutely living in fear 24/7. When I think about that, I recall the fact that the Anne Frank Foundation called Trump's policies really what you would call child abuse. They called them child abuse. Everything in the world as we know it seems to be
This country was founded by immigrants fleeing their own oppression, which is such an irony. I'm actually the granddaughter of an immigrant who came here from Albania. We're in this moment. The only reason she could've been disqualified is if she had tuberculosis at that time coming through Ellis Island. Now if you have brown skin and you're on the street, you probably fear literally for your life.

Linda Alcoff: Yes, and one thing people need to be aware of is that most Latino families have an undocumented person in their family. It really affects almost all of us in some way because there's somebody we know or somebody in our circle that doesn't have documentation. I feel like what Trump has been doing really before he was elected during the campaign, the kinds of stuff he was saying was creating this massive nationwide stereotype threat that immigrants were experiencing. I'm an immigrant from Panama, from Central America, which he would probably refer to by an epithet which I shouldn't say on this podcast. You feel it in your psyche when you hear these things being repeated over and over in the media. It's quite painful. Even when you know how wrong it is, it's just painful to be attacked in this way.

Linda Alcoff: I think what's important that Trump has been helpful for, he's been helpful for a number of things. He's been galvanizing feminism, but he's been helpful to reveal the fact that our immigration policy has always been about race. Its history until 1965 was overt, and there were laws in the 19th century about who could become a citizen of the United States, which countries. There were quotas for people coming from certain kinds of countries. It was only since 1965 that that quota system dropped. There's always been a certain idea that certain immigrants are good and others are not, and it has to do with their racial identity, their geopolitical origin. We have these ideas about what they can contribute, whether they'll be loyal to the United States government, whether they will be able to be assimilated to a WASP culture and national voice of public discourse. There's a racism in our talk of immigration. We should not any longer talk about our immigration policy without thinking about how it may be informed unconsciously perhaps by people's implicit ideas about racial groups in different regions of the world.

Tanya Domi: Oh, without a doubt, I completely agree. What's interesting is the fact that he now uses this term and all the Republicans are using the term chain migration when in fact it's been the policy of the United States to reunite families since 1952, irrespective of race. With all the limitations and the policies, that has always been a principle. Actually, our colleague, Phil Kasinitz, just wrote an oped in the Daily News talking about how chain migration will actually probably ultimately undercut the idea of attracting some of the best skilled people here because they won't be able to bring their family members. They don't even think about that, but maybe they do. That's perhaps one of the unintended consequences of this really harsh, and I consider it a nihilist approach. It's just like out of parallel world that I actually just can't relate to.
Tanya Domi: Here we are. As a matter of fact, right now 25 minutes ago, the Senate started a second day of debate on the immigration bill. We don't know where it's going to end up, but there is hope that maybe the DACA people will be protected and will be able to stay. I don't think the American public will be able to tolerate seeing massive images of people being deported out of this country. It's happening now, but we're talking about people that are your teachers, your doctors. They're everywhere. They're in universities. We're talking about the Teacher of the Year in New Mexico is a DACA person.

Linda Alcoff: The parallels with World War II when the United States turned away ships of European Jews fleeing genocide are so crystal clear. There's already people who have been deported and who have been murdered. There was a woman who was murdered by her husband. She came to the United States fleeing domestic violence. They sent her back. She was murdered, I think, within a week.

Linda Alcoff: I think the other thing that too many people in the United States are not aware of is that we need to move away from the narrative of poor people wanting to get to a rich country because there is preexisting relationships between the United States and many of the countries where the largest numbers of immigrants come from, preexisting relationships in which we've interfered with democratic movements, we've engineered coup d'états, we've robbed them of their resources, and given them short shrift on labor costs for the production of goods that we use and take advantage of in this country. There's an obligation, I think, because of these prior long traditions of terrible foreign policy toward many parts of the world, particularly Latin America and Southeast Asia, obviously, but other parts of the world as well, that really need to be factored in to how we think about our attitude, and what we owe, and what is just in relationship to the immigrants trying to come.

Tanya Domi: Yes, I agree with all that. I think a good place to go here is that at the end of the day you actually took on the whole issue of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who created this spectacle in New York City back in 2011. Nobody's even recalling that now, which is, I think, a real interesting absence. He allegedly and probably without a doubt attacked a maid in the hotel where he was staying. He was considered to be the next candidate for the most liberal party in France for president. There was a national consensus by this spectacle that no, he was not even a candidate. You took this on in your writings, and you talk about the juxtaposition, the difference with the French and their morays, and contrast it with the American and their puritanical history. Can you talk about Dominique Strauss-Kahn as the forerunner of this period? He was out there, and then he disappeared. Now we can actually compare Trump to him in some ways, and there's probably many differences. I'd like to hear your views on that.

Linda Alcoff: What was so interesting about that case was the fact that the hotel maid, who was a Guinean immigrant, Nafissatou Diallo, was believed. It was like the case with the Duke lacrosse team a number of years ago in which an African American sex worker was believed. These are categories of victims that are
often never given any kind of credence or credibility, or if they are, sometimes believe they're harmed, but they can be harmed. They're strong enough to take it, or they're not serious. They don't get credence as being victims that deserve justice. Recent research that I've read shows that this is widespread problem for hotel maids. In many instances, hotels give their maids a panic button that they can push in case they're in somebody's room and they get attacked. There's reason to give her credence.

Linda Alcoff: The question you're raising about cultural relativism is really interesting. After Strauss-Kahn was accused, there was this discussion about how it's just different among the French, they just have different sort of practices and mores. Pretty quickly a big public conversation happened in France in which women were saying they don't enjoy being groped, they don't enjoy being harassed, that the difference is not as big as it is sometimes imagined to be. Flirting is one thing, but most of us, it's easy to find a distinction between flirting in a workplace and harassment that continues when your no and your polite no is not heard and the person continues, or absolutely unwanted groping and touching is fairly easy to see what that is.

Tanya Domi: That's basically simple assault. We're talking about crimes.

Linda Alcoff: It's not really that ambiguous an interpretation. I think the idea, and Trump has this idea too, that it's innocuous behavior, it's just sexual banter, it's just boys will be boys, as Melania said ...

Tanya Domi: Or locker room talk.

Linda Alcoff: ... is such a mischaracterization, an intentional mischaracterization of the reality of harassment, which causes women every day to change their jobs. Then they change their jobs and they can't give the full reasons for it, so they can't get unemployment insurance. It's a real problem of employment, an unfairness in employment for women across this country and many parts of the world. The Strauss-Kahn case, I think, was very important because it was a moment, even if it was a brief moment, where the victim in this case was listened to, and her voices were heard. We hope that even though the justice in that case was modest, that that case become echoed in future cases so that other victims can take courage and hope from what happened in that case and the fact that he is no longer the powerful world leader that he once was.

Tanya Domi: That's a good place for us to stop. I want to thank you for being with us today.

Linda Alcoff: Thanks for having me.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to the Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Linda Martín Alcoff. The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City, with production,
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