



**FACT AND MYTH:
DISCOVERING A RACIAL PROBLEM IN BRAZIL**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines prevalent attitudes towards race in Brazil's multiracial society. The author notes that, while there is a considerable literature on slavery and the struggle for abolition, relatively little work has been done on race in Brazil today even though color continues to correlate highly with social stratification. He argues that historically the Brazilian elite has been able to hold to a belief in white superiority and at the same time deny the existence of a racial problem by adopting an "assimilationist" ideology. This begins with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thesis that Brazil was progressively "whitening" and continues up to the present day with the widely held view that disproportionate Afro-Brazilian poverty is a legacy of socioeconomic disadvantage and not a result of discrimination. This official ideology has strongly affected the availability of data until recently and has generally been a dominant influence on mainstream academic research on race. The author traces the emergence of criticism of the "myth of racial democracy" from Afro-Brazilian militants and some social scientists, and gives a brief overview of the existing research on contemporary Brazilian race relations. He concludes by outlining a future research agenda for Afro-Brazilian studies.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza las actitudes prevalecientes hacia los diversos grupos étnicos en la sociedad multirracial del Brasil. El autor observa que, mientras que existe una considerable literatura sobre la esclavitud y la lucha por abolirla, se ha, en cambio, estudiado relativamente poco a los diversos grupos raciales en Brasil, a pesar de que el color continúa correlacionándose en gran medida con la estratificación social. El autor argumenta que, históricamente, la élite brasileña ha sido capaz de mantener la creencia en la superioridad del blanco y, al mismo tiempo, de negar la existencia de un problema racial adoptando una ideología "asimilacionista". Ello comienza con la tesis de finales del siglo diecinueve y principios del veinte de que Brasil se iba "blanqueando" progresivamente y continúa hasta la fecha con la opinión ampliamente difundida de que la desproporcionada pobreza afrobrasileña constituye un legado del atraso socioeconómico y no un resultado de la discriminación. Esta ideología oficial ha influido fuertemente en la disponibilidad de datos hasta fechas recientes, y ha ejercido generalmente una influencia dominante sobre la corriente principal de la investigación académica que trata el problema racial. El autor analiza el surgimiento de las críticas al "mito de la democracia racial" por parte de militantes afrobrasileños y de algunos científicos sociales y proporciona un breve panorama de la investigación existente sobre las relaciones raciales brasileñas contemporáneas. Concluye presentando una agenda para la investigación futura en el área de estudios afrobrasileños.

Every Brazilian and every perceptive visitor knows that racial terms are not clearly defined in that society. The lesson is especially striking for North Americans and Europeans, who are used to a conventional black/white (or, at least, white/nonwhite) dichotomy. That polarization was institutionalized in U.S. racial segregation, a polarity that Europeans, unused to home-country contact with nonwhites in the modern era, instinctively understood.

But Brazil, like most of Latin America, is different. In the Caribbean and Latin America the European colonizers left a legacy of multiracialism, in spite of early attempts to enforce racial endogamy, i.e., the prohibition of marriage outside the same racial category. Multiracial meant more than two racial categories—at a minimum, three. The mulatto and the mestizo became the “middle caste,” with considerable numbers attaining free legal status, even under slave systems. The result was a system of social stratification that differed sharply from the rigid color bifurcation in the U.S. (both before and after slavery) and in Europe’s African colonies. There was and is a color (here standing for a collection of physical features) spectrum on which clear lines were often not drawn. Between a “pure” black and a very light mulatto there are numerous gradations, as reflected in the scores of racial labels (many pejorative) in common Brazilian usage.

This is not to say that Brazilian society is not highly color conscious. In fact, Brazilians, like most Latin Americans, are more sensitive to variations in physical features than white North Americans or Europeans. This results from the fact that variations along the color spectrum, especially in the middle range, are considered significant, since there is no clear dividing line.

The question of accurate color terminology is especially difficult when discussing Brazil. The terms used in the Brazilian census—*preto*, *pardo*, and *branco*—translate literally as “black,” “brown,” and “white.” The principal distinction in this paper will be between white and nonwhite, the latter including *preto* and *pardo*. To designate the latter, i.e., nonwhite, the term used here will be “Afro-Brazilian” rather than “black,” since *preto* (the literal Portuguese translation of “black”) is a far more restrictive (often pejorative) label in Brazil. The increasingly common term used in Brazil (in the mass media, for example) for nonwhite is *negro*, but the English equivalent is archaic for an English-speaking audience. It should also be noted that *negro* is the label that Afro-Brazilian militants use in their campaign to convince all Brazilian nonwhites, above all mulattos, to “assume” their color and not succumb to the belief, à la whitening ideology, that a lighter nonwhite can hope for greater social mobility.

In sum, Brazil is multiracial, not biracial. This makes its race relations more complex than in the U.S., and more complex than most Europeans expect. The most important fact about this multiracial society, from the standpoint of those wishing to study it, is that until fifteen years ago there were virtually no quantitative data with which to analyze it. Between 1890 and 1940 neither the Brazilian government nor Brazilian social scientists considered race to be a significant enough

variable to justify recording it in the national census. Even when race was later included, as in 1950 and 1960, until the 1976 household survey (PNAD) there were no data by race on income, education, health, and housing (there were limited data on marriage, fertility, and morbidity).

Table 1

Racial Composition of the Brazilian Population

Year	Branco (white)	Pardo (brown)*	Preto (black)
1835	24.4	18.2	51.4
1872	38.1	42.2	19.7
1890	44.0	41.4	14.6
1940	63.5	21.2	14.7
1950	61.7	26.5	11.0
1960	61.0	29.5	8.7
1980	54.8	38.4	5.9

Source: Fiola 1990.

Discussion about Brazilian race relations was therefore invariably based on “soft” data. History and anthropology were the two main intellectual approaches used. Historians dwelt on laws, travellers’ accounts, memoirs, parliamentary debates, and newspaper articles. They avoided researching police records, health archives, court records, personnel files and other sources from which they might have constructed time series. When they did consult such sources, it was usually to study slavery. They seldom studied race relations in the larger society. The telling anecdote remained the accepted form of evidence. Nonetheless, historians did not hesitate to draw conclusions about the historical nature of race relations. But to do so they had to lean heavily on “qualitative” evidence.

Anthropologists produced a rich literature describing many dimensions of relations among and within distinguishable racial categories, often emphasizing the subtle distinctions. Inevitably, however, their picture remained particularistic. They could not tell us whether race made a macro difference in educational attainment, or income, or professional advancement. They were not, after all, sociologists. We cannot consult their monographs for statistics on which to base verifiable judgements about relative social welfare in Brazil.

* “Pardo” is often taken to mean “mulatto” in Brazil but not always. It is also sometimes used to refer to other mixed bloods.

Sociologists, demographers, economists, and political scientists, from whom we might expect such analysis, were disarmed. They had no data. The government collected no information and analysts made virtually no effort to generate their own. Why?

The answer lies in the way Brazilians have looked at their own society. We begin with certain facts about that society in the last century and a half. First, as we have seen, it was multiracial. There was no clear-cut racial line, either legally or in social practice. For someone from the U.S. or South Africa (or virtually any European colony in Africa), the chief defining feature was the lack of a “descent rule” (Harris 1964a). Racial category was *not* defined exclusively by ancestry, but by a combination of factors, including physical appearance, apparent station in life and, to a limited extent, ancestry (Nogueira 1985). This contrasts with the U.S. or South Africa, where race was defined by descent and certified in legal records. The latter were then used to enforce racial endogamy with such laws only being declared unconstitutional in the U.S. in 1967 (*New York Times* 1991). No such laws existed in modern Brazil.

Second, despite the lack of a clear “color line,” Brazilian society was based on an explicit belief in white superiority, although not white supremacy. The distinction is crucial. To understand it we must go back to the colonial era.

Although Portuguese racial attitudes in the colonial era need more study, we can say that white stood at the apex of the social scale and African at the bottom. But the Portuguese in Brazil differed from the English in North America. In the English continental colonies the colonists transformed the social superiority into a doctrine of moral superiority (later “white supremacy”) and institutionalized it in legalized rules enforcing racial endogamy. This structure hardened after the Civil War into the Jim Crow system, which became easy to enforce because of the rigid biracial categorization that had become fixed long before abolition. It was also reinforced by the rise of scientific racism, which came to dominate U.S. and European academic and elite circles after the mid-nineteenth century. These “scientific” theories purported to prove, by physical, historical, biological or behavioral evidence, the superiority of whites. This prejudice was later to produce a politically significant backlash in the U.S., as white guilt—the product of a religious perfectionism and a philosophical egalitarianism, both absent in Portuguese America—led white U.S. citizens eventually to accept racial integration for an Afro-American minority one quarter the size of Brazil’s.

Brazil never had the option, at least after the mid-colonial era, to enforce racial endogamy, or its implicit biracial assumptions, because too many persons of color (primarily mixed bloods) had entered free society—by birth or manumission. Relatively few had penetrated to the top of the society (the exact pattern of such mobility cries out for research and analysis), yet the moral and social legitimacy for drawing a sharp color line was already lost. Enforced racial endogamy and segregation were practical impossibilities.

To deal with this reality, the Brazilian elite had developed an assimilationist ideology to rationalize their de facto multiracial society. Although they believed in white superiority, as could be clearly seen in the parliamentary debates over the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, they did not express the same deep fears of being overwhelmed demographically (and eventually politically) by nonwhites as did their U.S. counterparts. This is ironical, since by the mid-nineteenth century the nonwhite proportion of the population in Brazil was far larger than in the U.S. (see table 1).

This de facto assimilationist ideology faced a severe challenge when the doctrines of scientific racism struck Brazil, especially after 1870 (Skidmore 1974). How could the Brazilians reconcile their multiracial society and its implicit assimilationist assumptions with the “new truth” that white was not only absolutely superior, but that it faced a mortal challenge from what white supremacists in North America and Europe called “mongrelization?”

The Brazilian elite offered an ingenious response. They turned on its head the basic assumption of the white supremacists. They accepted the doctrine of innate white superiority, but they then argued that in Brazil the white was prevailing through miscegenation. Instead of “mongrelizing” the race, racial mixing was “whitening” Brazil. Miscegenation, far from a menace, was Brazil’s salvation. Since they had no means of proving this scientifically, Brazilian simply asserted that Brazilian experience substantiated their claim. It gained its most famous rationale in Gilberto Freyre’s claim (Freyre 1959, 1963) that the unique cultural legacy of the Portuguese had turned Brazilians into a new race (which in practice had precious few dark skinned at or near the top).

This assimilationist ideology, commonly called “whitening” by the elite after 1890 (Skidmore 1974), had taken hold by the early twentieth century, and continues to be Brazil’s predominant racial ideology today. In effect, the Brazilian elite argued that Brazil, unlike the U.S. to which they frequently (and unfavorably) compared it, had no racial problem: no U.S. phenomena of race hatred (the logical product of the white supremacy doctrine), racial segregation and, most important, racial discrimination. In a word, Brazil had escaped racism. It was on the path to producing a single race through the benign process of miscegenation. The unrestrained libido of the Portuguese, along with his cultural “plasticity,” had produced a fortuitous racial harmony. Brazil, thanks to historical forces of which it had not even been conscious, had been saved from the ugly stain of racism (DaMatta 1987).

The implication of this ideology was that color did not matter in Brazil. Racial difference was on its way to extinction. Leading Brazilian scientists in the early twenty century freely predicted that their country was headed toward total whiteness. In a paper presented in London in 1911, the Brazilian anthropologist João Batista de Lacerda (1911) estimated it would take no more than another century. Upon returning to Brazil he was attacked for being too pessimistic.

In practice, the assimilationist assumption led the government to take a revealing step: it omitted race from the census. Although race had been included in the census of 1872 (the first) and of 1890, it was omitted in 1900 and 1920 (there was no census in 1910 or 1930), only reappearing in the 1940 census. From 1890 to 1940, therefore, the basic data collection ignored racial categories in the New World country that had received more African slaves than any other (Fiola 1990).

Since there were no data, there could be no discussion of the facts of race relations. Exactly how did relations among people of different color proceed? Even if the color spectrum were blurred, even if there was no legally enforced racial endogamy, even if there was no segregation, was race—despite all the subtleties of its definition—insignificant in Brazilian lives? Could the largest slave population in the New World (total abolition came only in 1888, latest in the Americas) have left no legacy of racial antagonism?

The Social Reality: 1890-1976

How could slavemaster and government violence—amply documented by Brazilian historians—have been transformed into such a benign scene? Historians have by and large avoided even investigating the question. One can count on the fingers of one hand the Brazilian authors who have done serious research on postabolition race relations. It is as if the topic of race ceased to have any relevance in Brazil after slavery ended in 1888.

Yet evidence for such research is readily at hand. Virtually every court record, police blotter, personnel file, driver's license, and voter's registration card has, at least until recently, included a racial category. Newspaper stories have routinely identified Afro-Brazilians (whites don't need identification). There have even been separate beauty contests for mulattos. In truth, Brazil has remained a highly race conscious society. Popular music, television, folklore, humor, and literature are saturated with references to race. For anyone who has lived in Brazil in this century, there can be little doubt that awareness of racial categories is a staple of everyday life.

But historians have focussed virtually all their attention on the institution of slavery and its abolition. Even race relations (in the broadest sense) *before* abolition have come in for little attention. The all-important topic of free coloreds in slave-holding Brazil, for example, is largely unresearched and unanalyzed. Yet it is the key to understanding the emergence of the most important feature of modern Brazilian race relations: its multiracial nature. A prime example is the attempt to explain how the middle racial category emerged in Brazilian history. The U.S. historian Carl Degler pointed to the "mulatto escape hatch" (Degler 1971) as the essential difference between North American and Brazilian race relations. Yet when it came to explaining why this "escape" developed in one society and not the other, he chose to emphasize, in what was

necessarily a speculative manner, the inferior status of women of the slave-holding class in Portuguese America and therefore of their supposed inability to prevent the acceptance (or even legitimation) of their husbands' illicit mixed blood offspring.

From the historians we have only a few glimmerings of Brazilian social reality after abolition. Nonetheless, from other sources we know that race mattered greatly. One cannot read the tortured poetry of the late nineteenth-century symbolist poet João da Cruz e Souza without feeling his anguish over the pain of being black. One cannot read the novels of Lima Barreto without being moved by the hypocrisy and contempt with which a talented and ambitious mulatto was treated by early twentieth-century Rio de Janeiro society (Barbosa 1964). One cannot read without shock the graphic accounts of the brutal suppression of the all-black enlisted men's 1910 rebellion against the still standard practice of whipping in the navy (Morel 1963) or the accounts of relentless police raids against Afro-Brazilian religious cults in the Northeast in the 1920s. In this context one is not surprised to read that one of the first groups to suffer repression at the hands of dictator Getúlio Vargas's police after the coup of 1937 was the fledgling *Frente Negro Brasileiro* (Andrews 1991).

There can be no doubt that color correlated highly with social stratification in Brazil. No sensible Brazilian would have denied this in 1900 and no sensible Brazil would deny it today. The question is why.

The predominant answer from the elite, and from the social scientists, has been a simple application of the assimilationist thesis. Nonwhites languish far down in the social hierarchy, it is argued, because of class, not race. They are the victims not of discrimination but of their disadvantaged poor socioeconomic background. That, in turn, stems from a combination of factors: the legacy of deprivation under slavery; the resulting disadvantage vis-à-vis the European immigrants who streamed into Brazil after abolition; the liability of being concentrated in the poorest sector (the countryside) of the poorest region (the Northeast). This has combined to weaken the Afro-Brazilian in the increasingly competitive capitalist economy. It is therefore not surprising, by this logic, that Afro-Brazilians are disproportionately represented at the bottom of the economic and social scale.

The solution, by this reading of the problem, is a logical extension of the assimilationist thesis. Nonwhite poverty will decline as poverty in general declines. The solution to the misfortune of Afro-Brazilians is the same as the solution for all Brazilians: rapid economic growth.

We thus face an interesting paradox when looking at post-1888 Brazilian society. On the one hand, the elite succeeded in imposing its assimilationist ideology, expressed not only in official census policy but also in the academic research, as we shall see below. On the other hand, Brazilian society exhibited to its writers and its artists, especially the Afro-Brazilians, a social structure that bore the marks of something deeper than mere class. Furthermore, on the

functional level—police reports and personnel records—the elite was always careful to track racial categories.

The Debate over Race: 1890-1976

The assimilationist ideology of “whitening” for the last century permeated the rhetoric of politicians, social philosophers, and literary mandarins. It has also been common currency among social scientists. It reached its apogee in the widely read writings of Oliveira Vianna, the lawyer-historian who produced an extended apologia for the supposedly superior role of the “Aryan” in Brazilian history (Vianna 1922). He was echoed in the words of Fernando de Azevedo, doyen of Brazilian sociologists, who in his preface to the 1940 census described Brazil’s future thus:

If we admit that Negroes and Indians are continuing to disappear, both in the successive dilutions of white blood and in the constant process of biological and social selection, and that immigration, especially that of a Mediterranean origin, is not at a standstill, the white man will not only have in Brazil his major field of life and culture in the tropics, but be able to take from old Europe—citadel of the white race—before it passes to other hands, the torch of western civilization to which the Brazilians will give a new and intense light—that of the atmosphere of their own civilization (Azevedo 1950:40-41).

Against these prophets of a whitening Brazil there arose a band of (white) articulate dissenters in the 1900-1930 era. In the face of the formidable prestige of North Atlantic scientific racism, these dissenters had the courage to denounce the doctrine of white superiority, as well as white supremacy (the latter having long been anathema in Brazil). Such writers as Manoel Bomfim and Alberto Torres directly challenged racist doctrine (Skidmore 1974). In so far as they defended Brazil against the charge of racial degeneracy, they were welcomed. But they had little effect in undermining the underlying elite faith in whitening. Even the pioneering anthropologist Edgar Roquette-Pinto, who fought to promote the environmentalist concept of “culture” in refutation of the prevailing scientific racism, made little dent on the academic world’s underlying endorsement of whitening.

The most interesting voice in this dialogue was Gilberto Freyre, a Northeast-born sociologist-historian-writer who produced the apologia par excellence for the virtues of miscegenation. He argued eloquently, often in response to Oliveira Vianna, for the beneficial and creative effects of the Portuguese colonizer’s mixture with the Indian and African. In the 1930s and 1940s he applied with great skill the precepts of his antiracist mentor, the Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas (with whom he had studied), to refute the now waning claims of scientific racism. But in the end Freyre’s eloquence served primarily to reinforce the whitening ideal by showing how the overwhelmingly white elite had acquired valuable cultural assets from their intimate mixing with the non-European, especially the African. For both Brazilians and non-

Brazilians, Freyre became the high priest of racial assimilation in the Portuguese-speaking world. He has remained to this day the intellectual talisman to whom the Brazilian elite turns when refuting any suggestion their society might be racist.

It should be clear why the whitening ideology led politicians and academics alike to believe that race merited little attention either in data collection or in formal discussions about their society. Indeed, one might ask whether their eagerness to ignore race might have masked a fear of facing an obvious doubt: with Brazil's huge nonwhite population (56% in the 1890 census) how could they be so certain it would whiten? Might it not go in the opposite direction? In any case, to control the collection of data was to control the society's knowledge of itself. That, in turn, meant control of the nation's public policy agenda.

The indifference to race as a variable gained strength also from explicitly antiracist social scientists who concluded, on the basis of their (primarily anthropological) field research, that race, as it operated in the North American context, had no comparable role in Brazil. One of the earliest was the U.S. sociologist Donald Pierson, whose research in the 1940s on the heavily Afro-Brazilian region of Salvador, Bahia, led him to stress the fluidity of color lines and the mobility of the mulatto (Pierson 1942). The most outspoken of these researchers was the U.S. anthropologist Marvin Harris, who in the early 1960s argued that Brazilians were so inconsistent in their application of racial categories that no meaningful pattern could be established (Harris 1964). This was a skeptical extreme that went well beyond the more scholarly respectable concept of "social race" which he and Charles Wagley had elaborated in the early 1950s in their explanation of Brazilian reality (Wagley ed. 1952).

But in his hyperbole Harris had merely lapsed into the standard Brazilian excuse for eliminating race from the census: the lack of agreement on the definition of racial categories. This rationalization has been repeatedly invoked to justify abandoning any effort at mapping the complexities of Brazilian racial relations. It was the official explanation for the omission of race in the 1970 census, a decision undoubtedly influenced also by the military government's often expressed aversion to any criticism of Brazil's "racial democracy."

This mentality dies hard in Brazil. In preparing for the 1980 census authorities attempted once again, despite the easing of military rule, to omit race from the official count. Only vigorous protest from demographers, academics (a new mood and a new generation had emerged, as explained below), Afro-Brazilian militants, and elements of the press forced a reconsideration. Officials backtracked, allowing the inclusion in the 1980 census of two questions about color in the 25% sample.

In 1983 census researchers in the central government institute (the IBGE) produced a highly revealing analysis of this data, the first ever collected on race as a variable in the labor force (Oliveira et al. 1985). The results showed a clear pattern of discrimination against Afro-Brazilians.

The President of IBGE refused to allow publication of the study. It did not appear until two years later, on the decision of a new president (*Veja* 1985).

This establishment mentality—shared by virtually all politicians, most technocrats, and many academics—provoked three main lines of dissent: (1) the “São Paulo school” led by anthropology professor Florestan Fernandes; (2) Afro-Brazilian militants; and (3) a new generation of (virtually all white) social scientists, especially demographers.

The “São Paulo school” was the label given to the Paulista anthropologist Florestan Fernandes and his students and fellow researchers, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Octávio Ianni. Their work grew out of a UNESCO-sponsored research project that was the first systematic large-scale analysis of modern day Brazilian race relations. The project also included the Bahian anthropologist Thales de Azevedo and such foreign Brazilianists as Charles Wagley of the U.S. and Roger Bastide of France.

The project began with the objective of investigating the realities of what the outside world had perceived (usually via Gilberto Freyre’s writings) as Brazil’s “racial democracy.” The results of the research were mixed. Wagley, and his students Marvin Harris and Harry Hutchinson, produced monographs that substantiated their concept of “social race,” which was perfectly compatible with the assimilationist ideology. Thales de Azevedo’s portrait of Bahia (1953), the largest Northeastern state and the area of Brazil’s greatest African influence, emphasized the mediating role of the mulatto in that still highly traditional society. Fernandes and his students were critical of the established myth of “racial democracy.” This resulted in part from their more radical intellectual background. Both Fernandes and Ianni started from Marxist assumptions, while Cardoso, if sympathetic to Marxist analysis, assumed a more Weberian approach.

Within the “São Paulo school” Fernandes (whose principal book in this project was coauthored with Roger Bastide) went farthest in contesting the assimilationist dogma. All these researchers’ work began with the assumption that “color prejudice” *did* exist in Brazil. Yet the bulk of the research was historical, mostly concentrating on slavery or the decade immediately thereafter. Even when most critically minded they seemed reluctant to shift their gaze from the panorama painted by Gilberto Freyre to look extensively at the twentieth century. In 1951, for example, Fernandes and Bastide published a detailed “study project” on “racial prejudice in São Paulo.” They laid out the guidelines for an ambitious opinion survey, but they took care to qualify their document as on “a purely abstract level” (Bastide & Fernandes 1971:271). There is no record the project was ever carried out.

Fernandes went on to become the best known and most influential Brazilian academic critic of the dogma of Brazil’s “racial democracy” (Fernandes 1989). He coined the memorable phrase that Brazilians exhibit “the prejudice of having no prejudice” (Fernandes 1969). He became the most authoritative Brazilian voice arguing that race was a significant variable in

determining a Brazilian's life chances. Yet neither he nor any of the São Paulo school conducted empirical research to document the message for which they become famous.

The politically motivated dismissal of Fernandes, Cardoso, and Ianni from their University of São Paulo teaching posts in 1968 precluded further research. And there can be no doubt that the cloud of repression imposed by the Military after 1968 made field research on race relations virtually impossible. Not only was race omitted from the 1970 census, but government censorship precluded any criticism in the mass media of the image of Brazil's "racial democracy." The U.S. government's Inter-American Foundation, which had made grants to several Afro-Brazilian communities (for consciousness raising and social activism), was unceremoniously expelled from the country (Skidmore 1985).

Interestingly, much of the left, although bitterly opposed to the military regime, also regarded the question of race as strictly secondary. Whatever might appear as racial discrimination was, by this view, a result of socioeconomic stratification. A revolutionary attack on the capitalist system was the key to achieving social justice, and nonwhites would benefit more or less automatically from the adoption of more egalitarian policies. Racism, according to this view, was simply not an independent variable.

Holders of this view were not dupes of the Freyre myth, properly speaking, but rather devotees of an economistic world view. Economic injustice rules the capitalist world and attacking it would lift all boats, whatever their color. In truth, these intellectuals may have been more deeply influenced by the myth of racial democracy than they would like to admit. But the rationale for their position differed significantly and must be seen as such.

The second group to challenge the establishment doctrine of assimilation through "whitening" were the Afro-Brazilian militants (Moura 1959). These were the black and mulatto Brazilians who not only said racial discrimination was pervasive but also rejected outright the alleged white superiority that had underlain the assimilationist consensus. They argued implicitly that African traditions were as valuable as European traditions.

These voices were tiny in number. Their strains could be heard occasionally in the nineteenth century, and again in the 1920s and 1930s, when an Afro-Brazilian press and Afro-Brazilian political movement arose, centered primarily in São Paulo (Andrews 1991). It was snuffed out during the Estado Novo (1937-45) but reappeared after 1945 in the person of its best known spokesman, Abdias do Nascimento (1968, 1979). The return of authoritarianism in 1968 once again silenced the Afro-Brazilian militants, who resurfaced with the gradual political opening of the late 1970s (Turner 1985).

The relative lack of militant Afro-Brazilian protest in twentieth-century Brazil, in the face of now documented discrimination, is a phenomenon worth studying. How can it be explained? One reason is the whitening ideology, which operated to coopt mulattos. A second reason is a

corollary of the first. Because there was no legal segregation, there were no parallel nonwhite institutions, such as the U.S. all-black Protestant churches which in the U.S. furnished most of the leadership for the civil rights movement (Skidmore 1972).

In the late 1970s a new generation of Afro-Brazilians—small in number but outspoken in their militancy—arose to contest in an unprecedented way the “myth” of Brazil’s racial democracy. In several major cities, primarily in the industrialized Southeast, they organized protests against police brutality and mistreatment at the hands of public agencies, as well as discrimination in the job market and in public places. The movement enjoyed a flurry of publicity in the late 1970s and early 1980s and provoked greater interest among foreign academics than their Brazilian counterparts (Mitchell 1985). The militants never enjoyed broad support in the Afro-Brazilian community, although they argued that their potential support went deep. The movement was bedeviled by factionalism and a barrage of animosity from the political and cultural establishment. The latter termed them “un-Brazilian,” “racist,” and mindless imitators of the U.S. civil rights activists.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the militants’ political movement, they were significant as a social phenomenon. It was one expression of a wave of Afro-Brazilian consciousness stronger than had ever appeared in twentieth-century Brazil. It could be seen in the outpouring of Afro-Brazilian literature, much of it published in modest editions at the author’s expense (Camargo 1986; *Cadernos Negros* n.d.). It could be seen in the highly militant Afro-Brazilian action groups within a leading national labor confederation and among domestic employees in São Paulo. It could be seen in the increasing willingness of prominent blacks and mulattos (especially in the arts and entertainment) to speak out about their experiences of discrimination (Costa 1982).

Yet it would be rash to argue that Afro-Brazilian protest has had any significant impact either on the prevailing assimilationist ideology or on social behavior (although the fact that our earliest data dates from 1976 makes documented discussion of trends impossible). It is true that the 1988 Constitution (the eighth since 1824) for the first time in Brazilian constitutional history outlawed racism, declaring that “the practice of racism constitutes a crime that is unbailable and without statute of limitation and is subject to imprisonment according to the law” (art. 5, XLI). But the necessary enabling law has never been passed, and Brazilian civil rights lawyers are finding it difficult in practice to establish a legal basis for their criminal complaints (*Folha de São Paulo* 1991).

It should be added that Afro-Brazilian militants today regard their battle as only in its preliminary stages. One of their greatest challenges is the fact the pervasiveness of the assimilationist ideology. It has penetrated into every layer of Brazilian society. Militant Afro-Brazilians see their country’s ambiguous racial terminology as their greatest obstacle to creating solidarity among nonwhites. They have appropriated the Portuguese term *negro* as their identifying label—a term meant to proclaim the oneness of *preto* and *mulatto*. They challenge

nonwhites to “assume” their true color, directing their fire above all at those who believe they can “whiten” themselves by “correct” attitudes and behavior. The latter are disparaged as the *negros de alma branca* (“blacks with a white soul”), or the nonwhites who have fallen for the concept of “social race” articulated by the anthropologists.

The final group dissenting from the assimilationist ideology is the new generation of (almost entirely white) social scientists, intellectuals and social activists who have become convinced that racial discrimination is a pervasive reality in Brazil. It was inevitable that this revisionist initiative would require a full-scale attack on Gilberto Freyre, as the leading spokesman for the myth of “racial democracy.” It was delivered by a young São Paulo historian (Mota 1978). These new dissenters include demographers, journalists, social workers, and labor union and church activists (CNBB 1988) who have had the courage to denounce both racial discrimination and the assimilationist ideology that befogs public discussion of race relations in Brazil. They, along with the Afro-Brazilian militants, form the backbone of the historically most serious challenge to establishment practice and ideology.

1976: Some Brazilians Discover a Race Problem

The National Household Survey (PNAD) of 1976 marked the first time the Brazilian government had ever collected and published data on employment and income by race. The results showed unmistakably that race was an independent variable in determining life outcomes. Suddenly all the previous generalizations about race relations had become obsolete. Researchers could no longer get by with citing anecdotal evidence. Now there was hard data. The “class vs. race” thesis had been put to the test and found wanting. When education, age and sex were controlled, race turned out to be the only explanation for significant variations in income (Table 2).

In fact, the disparity grew with educational attainment. This data seemed to refute the “social race” hypothesis. The more the nonwhite approximated what the Brazilian elite assumed to be the ultimate noninheritable marker, i.e. education, the greater the income disparity vis-à-vis the white. The pattern reappeared in the data from the 1980 census and the 1982 PNAD.

What could one conclude about these findings? Most important, racial discrimination did exist despite the absence of the descent rule and despite the absence of legal segregation. In short, the absence of the key markers of institutionalized racism in the U.S. did not mean the absence of systematic discrimination. Second, mulattos did better than blacks, in general, in earnings. Within an overall pattern of discrimination, therefore, multiracialism still operated. Exactly how remains to be explained.

Table 2

Urban Nonwhite Earnings as a Proportion of Urban White Earnings by Sector

1976 PNAD	Pardos	Pretos
Professional	49.6	36.9
Semiprofessional	72.4	80.8
Manufacturing	76.4	60.9
Construction	82.8	77.4
Commerce	82.8	51.0
Transport	82.7	81.0
Services	66.2	64.6

Source: Oliveira et al. 1985

What has been the effect of these revelations? Minimal. Perhaps we should not expect much in the short run. But this data has given ammunition to the dissenters—the Afro-Brazilian militants and the white iconoclasts and activists. It was much in the air at the Constituent Assembly that drafted the 1988 Constitution (Santos and Pimenta n.d.). And it is much cited by the activists who are fighting for change at the level of unions, courts, employers, and the media.

Social scientists tell us that the data base on Brazilian race relations is still very thin. There is much more we need to know about health, housing, education, family structure, etc. Little of this is covered in the bare bones questionnaires of the census data. Indeed, researchers have had to fight even to get access to the data already collected. Much of the most important information has never been published and is available only on tapes, which the census bureau refused to release for years and then only at great cost to users. Official policies have been so obstructionist that a group of researchers have organized a pressure group to force the census authorities to release future data (the 1990 census is yet to be undertaken!) on a timely and accessible basis. Even more interestingly, activists have organized a campaign to convince Afro-Brazilians to respond accurately when the census enumerator asks their race. The objective is to counteract the “whitening” ideology by getting mixed bloods not to identify themselves as white, which would distort the census data.

The fact of the matter is that the new facts about racial discrimination in Brazil have yet to register any significant impact upon the elite, the politicians, or the scholarly community. In a word, the Brazilian establishment still does not believe their society has a racial problem. Gilberto Freyre, not Florestan Fernandes, still dominates enlightened Brazilian public discussion. The antiracist article in the Constitution of 1988, like the Affonso Arinos Law of 1951 (which outlawed racial

discrimination in public accommodations), is rhetoric, not a societal commitment. The efforts of such progressive state governors as Franco Montoro in São Paulo and Leonel Brizola in Rio de Janeiro (his first term) to move against racial discrimination have largely aborted. Their successors sabotaged their initiatives, sometimes blatantly.

What is most interesting from the standpoint of this paper is the lack of reaction among academics. The occasion of the centenary of abolition in 1988 was an important indicator. That would have seemed the ideal opportunity to do a stock-taking of progress in race relations in the century since the end of slavery. Instead, there was a flood of self-congratulation as befitting a racial democracy that had allegedly escaped unscathed from the trauma of slavery. Brazil even witnessed the scene of the imperial heir of Princess Isabella, the benefactress of the "Golden Law" of abolition, receiving obsequious thanks from an awed delegation of black and mulatto Brazilians.

Militant Afro-Brazilians sought to make their case against the myth of racial democracy in 1988. But they were largely drowned out by the civic ceremonies celebrating Brazil's genius in having liquidated slavery without such traumas as the U.S. Civil War.

No social scientist rose to the challenge to produce an in-depth portrait of contemporary Brazilian racial relations. We are still without any comprehensive, well documented overview based on the post-1976 data. The Brazilian academic community has been notably slow to assimilate, or even to acknowledge, the new reality.

We do start with some guideposts and research instruments. One is the bibliographical guide to publications in Portuguese on slavery and race relations in Brazil (Centro de Estudos Afro-Asiáticos forthcoming). A second is the two-volume guide to archival sources in Brazil on Africa, slavery and the Afro-Brazilian (Arquivo Nacional 1988). A third is the source collection documenting the Brazilian observation of the 1988 centennial of the abolition of slavery at CIEC of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Maggie 1989).

There are also a series of recent bibliographical surveys, of which only a sample can be mentioned here: Carlos A. Hasenbalg, "Notas sobre Relações de Raça no Brasil e na América Latina" (Trabalho apresentado no I Encontro sobre Gênero e Raça, Fundação Memorial de América Latina, Centro Brasileiro de Estudos de América Latina, São Paulo, 13 a 15 de agosto de 1990); Hasenbalg, "A Pesquisa sobre Migrações, Urbanização, Relações Raciais e Pobreza no Brasil: 1970-1990" (Trabalho apresentado no seminário "Temas e Problemas de Investigação de Ciências Sociais: Brasil e América Latina," IDESP, Campos do Jordão, SP, 5 a 7 dezembro de 1990); and Ciro Flamarion S. Cardoso, "A Historiografia Brasileira sobre a Abolição: Análise de uma Seleção de Obras Publicadas Entre 1979 e 1987." An interesting recent overview by a non-Brazilian highly critical of establishment opinion in Brazil is given in Jan Fiola (1990). The first major overview to be done after the late 1970s was the collaborative volume edited by Pierre-Michel Fontaine (1985).

Among the important volumes of papers produced for recent conferences in Brazil are *Desigualdade Racial no Brasil* (Lovell 1991), which contains a wealth of demographic data, and *100 Anos Depois: Perspectivas dos Discursos sobre "Raça" e "Diferença"* (CIEC-UFRJ forthcoming), which resulted from an October 1989 conference that looked at both race and gender.

Yet there has been little social science research drawing on the new official data or attempting to generate any new data. Take political science. There is not a single published monograph on race in Brazilian politics. One article by Amaury de Souza (1971) remained the only substantial scholarly paper until Glaucio Soares and Nelson do Valle Silva (1987) debunked the myth of "moreno socialism" ("mulatto socialism") that had grown up around Rio de Janeiro Governor Leonel Brizola. Three mulattos won state governorships in 1990 but we await any political science analysis of the role race may or may not have played in their election (*Jornal do Brasil* 1990; *Veja* 1990). What of the five Federal Deputies who identify themselves as Afro-Brazilians? How have they organized to defend Afro-Brazilian interests in the Congress? What special problems do they face in representing their constituents, white and nonwhite? These and many more questions await investigation.

Economics has produced even less. One searches in vain for any academic economics center devoting any attention to the variable of race. It is a non-subject for economists. Researchers in education have at least made a start. The key institution here has been the Fundação Carlos Chagas in São Paulo (Rosemberg 1991).

Sociology is the social science discipline that has produced most quantitative research on race relations, virtually all of it by demographers. The fundamental work based on pre-1976 data is by Carlos Hasenbalg (1979). The only book-length studies drawing on post-1976 data are by Lúcia E. Garcia de Oliveira et al. (1985), Charles Wood and J.M. Carvalho (1988), Carlos Hasenbalg and Nelson do Valle Silva (1988), the Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (IBASE 1989), and P.A. Lovell (1991). The most important of the principal article-length studies are by Nelson do Valle Silva (1981; 1985), Carlos Hasenbalg (1985), and Hasenbalg and Silva (1990). Most of the more technical studies by demographers are to be found in the *Anais* of the annual meetings of ABEP (Associação Brasileira de Estudos Populacionais), especially the VI Encontro Nacional de Estudos Populacionais at Olinda, Pernambuco, 1988.

History and anthropology are the two disciplines that have produced the most extensive research on race relations. The overwhelming quantity of the historical research and publication has been on slavery and the struggle for abolition. This tendency was only reinforced by the funding generated for the 1988 centennial of abolition. Research on slavery and race relations before 1888 has certainly been enriched by recent work, with its focus on the wide rural-urban variations in slavery, the frequency of slave resistance, the paths to manumission, the fate of exslaves and free coloreds (before 1888), and the comparison of Brazilian slavery and pre-

abolition race relations with other major slave-holding regions in the Americas (Lara 1988; *Luso-Brazilian Review* 1988; Scott et al. 1988). Historical research on post-1888 race relations is however, almost nonexistent, although the beginnings of research are apparent (Maciel 1988). The first major study (on São Paulo, 1888-1988) is by a North American scholar (Reid Andrews 1991). Most of his documentation comes from original research, since the previous scholarly secondary literature is so sparse. The leading centers of historical research, such as the University of São Paulo, the University of Campinas and the Fluminense Federal University, continue to focus on pre-1888. Such historical studies as are done come most often from scholars in other disciplines, such as education, demography, or literature.

Anthropology is the other discipline, along with history, that has produced the most research in Afro-Brazilian studies. This is what one would expect, since anthropology takes race and ethnicity as central themes. Anthropologists have produced a rich monographic literature that concentrates on religion, folklore, language, music, art, and dance (Carneiro 1961; Braga 1988). But it has focussed primarily on the African “survivals,” the elements of Afro-Braziliana that show the continuing influence of some “pure” African origins. The pioneering work of Roger Bastide (1978) on Afro-Brazilian religion is the supreme example of this genre. It is duplicated in the present-day work of SECNEB (*Sociedade de Estudos da Cultura Negra no Brasil*) group in Bahia. To such researchers we owe the large body of literature on *candomblé*, *macumba*, and *capoeira*, along with Afro-Brazilian folklore, music, cuisine, and art.

The problem with this scholarship, as with the study of slavery and pre-1888 race relations, is that it rarely connects to contemporary race relations. The practical effect, although far from the intention of the scholars, is to produce a predominant cultural mind-set well captured by Carlos Hasenbalg when he analyzed a slick magazine ad sponsored by a metallurgical firm which showed “a photograph of a Negro *mestre-sala* and mulatta *porta bandeira* (lead couple in a samba parade) presenting themselves to the “sambadrome” stands. The ad suggested the contrast between two Brazils:

One is the eternal Brazil, “blessed and tropical,” represented by Negroes parading in their samba school. The other is the spectators, looking on from their strong steel bleachers. The latter is the new Brazil, changing and progressive. We thus have a counterpoint between the idea of development, seen positively, and its negative: the merely folkloric, represented by the Negroes. The ad is a perfect example of the appropriation of Negro cultural production, presented as typically Brazilian, into its most folklorized and commercialized form. (Hasenbalg & Valle Silva:187)

Even the most innovative of the social anthropologists, such as the highly creative faculty at the *Museu Nacional* (Rio), have made little progress in looking at contemporary race relations. Indeed, it is hardly on their agenda as an explicit topic, although it enters tangentially in their

research on such themes as urban neighborhoods, sport, middle-class sexual mores, political symbolism, and syncretistic religious practices.

The fact is that quantifiable studies with policy relevance will not come from the anthropologists because it is not what they are trained to do nor what they are most interested in. That is not to say that they will not continue to contribute rich insights or that their collaboration with other social scientists will not be vital for success in developing the field. On the contrary, their participation will be vital. But they will not *themselves* produce the kind of research and training most relevant to policy debates over how to deal with Brazil's racial problem.

The fields of literature, art, art history, dance, theater, film, and communications suffer from the same limitations as anthropology, yet they also have a vital contribution to make. All have enriched and will continue to enrich our understanding of race and race relations in Brazil, although they have received less emphasis in this overview. To take but one example, discourse analysis can greatly illuminate the mentalities—both elite and nonelite—with which Brazilians approach race (Vainfas 1986; Azevedo 1987).

A Research Agenda

It is not difficult to assemble a list of promising topics for research in Afro-Brazilian studies. In so far as scholars accept the fact that racial discrimination is a reality to be investigated, the areas for investigation become obvious. The following is merely a tentative list (drawn primarily from agendas suggested by leading researchers such as Carlos Hasenbalg, Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, and Elza Berquó) which practicing researchers could quickly adapt and revise:

- (1) Basic population dynamics: the demographic profile by race. The population growth by race, broken down by gender, income level, education, location, etc. What are the facts behind the much discussed "browning" of Brazil? What explains this phenomenon?
- (2) What are the recent changes, especially during the 1980s, in socioeconomic stratification by race? By indicators such as income, education, occupation, and housing?
- (3) Education merits special attention, since it has often been seen as the most ready instrument for social mobility. What is the evidence for differential access to education, especially secondary and university education, by race? How does this vary by type of institution (public vs. private, etc.) and region?
- (4) What are the variations by race in access to other social services, such as health care, employment training, government pensions, subsidized housing, labor courts and civil and criminal justice?
- (5) What is the effect of race in the labor market? How does it influence the behavior of employers, labor unions, Ministry of Labor and Labor Court officials, etc?

Conclusion

It must be stressed that there is still not consensus among the Brazilian elite, or even among Brazilian social scientists, that Brazil suffers from significant and systematic racial discrimination. Yet evidence to prove it is rapidly accumulating. What matters, however, is how Brazilian society reacts to that information. That, in turn, depends on two factors.

The first is whether Afro-Brazilians come to see their life situation as being determined to a significant degree by racial discrimination. If so, will they translate this consciousness into collective action? In doing so, they could become politically powerful, since they are virtually half the population (and since illiterates, who are disproportionately numerous among Afro-Brazilians, have recently been enfranchised).

The second factor is whether white Brazilians choose to accept the facts about discrimination and are prepared to take remedial action. In short, will they honor their country's commitment to democracy, which can never be realized under conditions of racism?

Finally, will Brazilian social scientists take the lead in acknowledging and documenting the facts about racial behavior in their country? And how will they choose to act on that knowledge? Their response will have much to do with the fate of democracy in Latin America's largest and most misunderstood multiracial society.

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