Between Black and White:
The Complexity of Brazilian Race Relations

Despite the persistence of a racial order remarkably unchanged from the time of slavery, Afro-Brazilians have yet to launch a collective attack on racism in Brazil. Such inaction is a product of ideologies which inhibit the formation of racial consciousness, political climates which discourage racially-defined political activity, and Afro-Brazilian leaders whose agendas are alien to Black Brazil's majority poor.

by Claudine Gay

In the Northeastern city of Salvador, some 16,000 children work, beg and sleep on the streets every day. Much has been said of Brazil's street children and the faltering economy responsible for their delinquency, but few recognize that the plight of homeless youth in Brazil is in no small part an artifact of Brazil's racial order. The overwhelming majority of these children are black, and while it may not be revolutionary in North America to recognize how race influences childhood, in Brazil the only thing more unusual than acknowledging racism is organizing against it.

In 1950-51, at the request of UNESCO, French social scientist Alfred Metraux led an international team of researchers to Brazil. The purpose of the study was to document what was then thought to be a "racial paradise," and to use Brazil as a model for other multi-racial nations to follow.

But instead of leaving Brazil with a recipe for racial harmony, the researchers ended up repudiating the whole notion

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"No human group could support with total inertia a situation like that faced by the Negro and mulatto population in Sao Paulo"
Florestan Fernandes, 1967
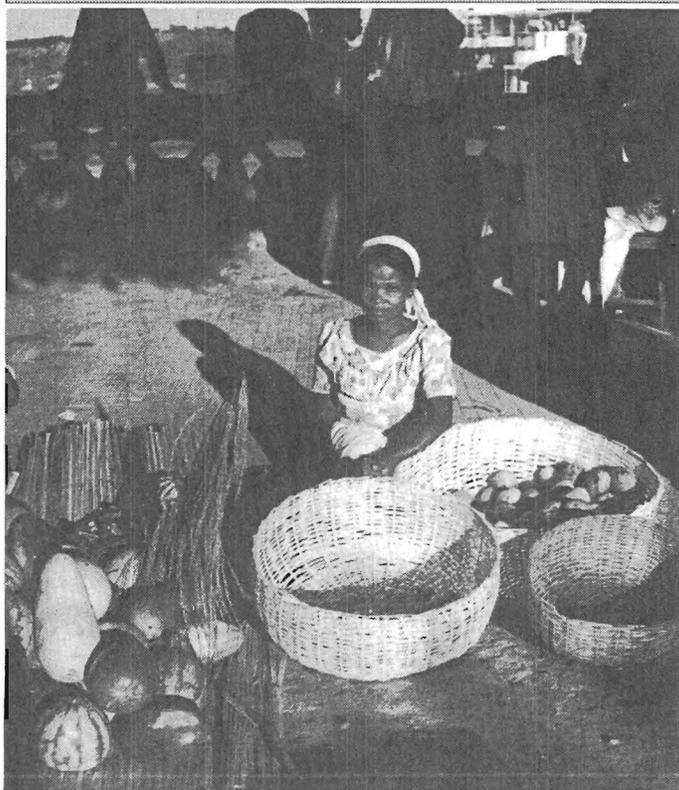
Challenging notions of a "racial paradise".
[Consulate General of Brazil]

of "racial democracy" in Brazil, illuminating the contradictions between the state's emphatic proclamations and a reality of racial discrimination. Analysts had previously celebrated the absence of legal and institutional discrimination in Brazil (like that of the U.S. or South Africa). Following the study, scholars began to focus on the more complex forms of racial prejudice that Brazil had produced. Ultimately, the most puzzling question facing the researchers was the lack of serious Afro-Brazilian opposition to pervasive racial oppression.

(The term "Afro-Brazilian" refers to that 44%—according to the 1980 Census—of the Brazilian population that is entirely or partly of African descent).

Forty years later, the question remains: Afro-Brazilians have not organized against the stark social, economic, and political inequalities that they face as a group. They are disproportionately represented in low wage, dangerous jobs; they make up the majority of residents in the *favelas* (slums) and shantytowns that lie outside the cities; they have little or no access to higher education; and they are frequently the victims of police brutality.

Three reasons help to explain why Afro-Brazilians

[Electromap, Inc.]

have not raised their voice in collective protest. First, concepts of skin color and racial status, which are prevalent at all levels of society, have undermined the development of group identity, while also delegitimizing racially-based grievances. Second, the country's political volatility, its tradition of repressive dictatorship, and its organization of political participation have made racially-defined collective protest both unattractive and unsustainable. To make matters worse, limited economic and political resources have made it difficult for middle class Afro-Brazilian militants to form ties with the numerically larger group of lower class Afro-Brazilians.

I. Concepts of Race

The power of racial ideologies rests in their ability to disguise the real basis of relations between people, and thus to champion image over fact, myth over reality. In Brazil, the ideas of "whitening" (*branqueamento*) and "racial democracy" are the ideologies which perpetuate discrimination. These beliefs have maintained a system of individual opportunity and individual responsibility which has hampered the development of racial identity and of political organization based on race.

"Whitening" and the Color-Class Continuum

The Brazilian concept of "whitening," symbolized in the popular saying "we are becoming one people," represents an ideology entirely different from white European and North American phobias about race mixture prevalent at the turn of this century. In the Brazilian view, the mixing of whites and non-whites (be they of Indian or African descent) led to the "breeding out" of non-white racial characteristics, and the propagation of white racial heritage and attributes. Over many generations and on a wide scale, inter breeding would lead to the eventual "whitening" of Brazil.

Miscegenation, or racial interbreeding, has had a long history in Brazil, dating back to the colonial period when an unfa-

vorably high ratio of white males to white females encouraged white slave holders to exploit sexually their female slaves. Since by law the children of these unions retained the slave status of the mother, miscegenation did not pose a threat to the established social order.

"Whitening" has been both a social and an individual experience. Collectively, "whitening" was reflected in the promotion of European immigration and the restriction of Asian and African immigration. These aggressive policies began on the eve of the abolition of slavery (1888), and continued virtually unabated until the 1930s.

The program, which included subsidies for the trans-Atlantic voyage, was designed to solve the labor crisis expected to develop after the end of slavery. The idea was that skilled, white European labor—as opposed to the growing population of "free coloreds"—would make up the newly forming middle class. The post-colonial Brazilian elites who favored "whitening" believed that this immigration policy would increase the coefficient of white blood in Brazil, ideally lightening the skin color of the general population.

Today, while "whitening" is no longer official government policy, it continues to be expressed in individual terms. Arguably, "whitening" has taken on a life of its own, becoming so ingrained and subtly "understood" that it no longer needs vocal advocates. It is the logic of "whitening," as both a genetic and a social process, that continues to structure the social hierarchy and regulate social mobility in Brazil.

The distinctions of black and white—or even white and non-white—that exist in other societies such as the United States, are not used by Brazilians. Instead, they refer to a multi-category system, based not on origin, but on phenotype (i.e. appearance). Essentially, Brazilians are "color-conscious" whereas as Americans and Western Europeans tend to be "race-conscious."

Brazilians evaluate an individual based on certain physical characteristics: namely, amount of pigmentation, hair type, nose, and lips. From this assessment, an individual is placed along a color continuum, anchored at the two extremes by those with either no (visible) African traits or no (visible) European attributes. As a consequence, there are literally hundreds of different categories of racial identification. And while the color continuum may create considerable ambiguity, it is clearly hierarchical: the more European attributes one has, the higher one is placed in the social hierarchy. Sociologist Carl Degler, in his comparative analysis of Brazil and the United States, translated the meaning of some of the more commonly used categories:

> The lowest level is composed of the *pretos* (blacks) and *preto retintos* (dark blacks). Somewhat above the *preto* is the *cabra*, who is slightly less black....Still moving upward, we come to the *cabo verde* (Cape Verde) who is lighter than the *preto*, but still quite dark, but with straight hair, thin lips, and narrow, straight nose.....

For simplicity's sake, we will combine this multitude of varieties into three categories: *pretos* (blacks), *pardos* (mulatto), and *brancos* (whites).

What makes this movement within the color continuum important is not just that it leads to changes in racial self-identification, but that this change brings with it new privileges. The less one is physically identified with the *pretos*, the closer one approaches full citizenship and its attendant benefits. The

straighter the hair, thinner the nose, lighter the skin, the greater the access to education, better housing, better employment, and higher standards of living. The mulatto's access to the spoils of white citizenship is one of the ways in which "whitening" discourages their challenge of the system.

However, along with skin color, "money also whitens." According to this logic, in poverty, the mulatto is socially positioned closer to the *pretos*, whereas, once "whitened" by money a *preto* becomes a *pardo*, regardless of actual color. For blacks who succeed in securing substantial earnings, not only does this open up to them new—though limited—possibilities of vertical mobility, it also triggers shifts in racial self-identification. In this way mobility drives a wedge between the perceived interests of the upwardly mobile and those of the rest of the Afro-Brazilian population. Thus, the social significance of color and wealth tends to weaken Afro-Brazilian solidarity.

When we take all this together what emerges is a color-class continuum. The bottom of this continuum is poor and black, the top is white and privileged. In the middle we find a bizarre mixture of upwardly mobile mulattos, monied blacks, and even poor whites. The emphasis on appearance over origin highlights the physical diversity among Afro-Brazilians, thereby detracting from the reality of a shared ancestry as common ground on which to build racial solidarity.

For Afro-Brazilians aspiring to join the mainstream, success is seen not as a function of an organized effort to change Brazilian society, but rather as a matter of individual effort and responsibility. In this way, blacks and mulattos both adhere to and perpetuate, if only passively, the "whitening" ideology.

The diversity of Carnival: A symbol of "racial democracy"?
[PJ&B Photo International]

Shadow Boxing: The Myth of Racial Democracy

The myth of Brazil as a racial democracy has also undermined the legitimacy of Afro-Brazilian grievances, thereby making social change an unlikely prospect.

The concept of racial democracy was already taking shape in Brazil in the early part of the twentieth century, to be fully developed in the 1930s by Brazilian Gilberto Freyre. After witnessing the overt racism of the United States, Freyre extolled the virtues of the Brazilian racial order, linking its tolerant and democratic nature to the nation's more humane experience of slavery.

Later, "racial democracy" was grafted into official state policy and rooted in the official view that Brazil is a country in which race makes no difference to opportunity or status. Furthermore, the Brazilian government claims that the country is free of both institutional and informal forms of discrimination. Access to public resources—be it education, health care, employment, political participation—is equally available to all citizens. Therefore, the potential for upward mobility is perceived as simply a matter of fair competition and individual merit.

Advocates of "racial democracy" point to any one of a number of symbolic forms of integration as support for this argument: miscegenation, the growing mainstream appeal of Afro-Brazilian religions, and the diversity of Carnival. Despite the role of the UNESCO study that detailed a more realistic picture of race relations in Brazil, elites have tenaciously defended this benevolent image of racial equality.

Analysts concede that, at best, the UNESCO study made Brazil more self-conscious about its international reputation. Symbolic of that new self-consciousness was the Afonso Arinas law, reluctantly passed in 1951, which makes racial discrimination in public places a misdemeanor, punishable by fine or imprisonment. The move was prompted by an internationally embarrassing incident when American performers Katherine Dunham and Marian Anderson were barred from a Sao Paulo hotel. Yet, the Arinas Law has shown itself to be merely a cosmetic change—rarely enforced and unaccompanied by stronger measures.

But though "racial democracy" is clearly a misnomer, the concept survives for concrete reasons. Most importantly, it has proven effective in both inhibiting racial uprising, and absolving the government from decades of inaction. By insisting that Afro-Brazilians enjoy opportunities to better themselves and freedom to compete, the myth has resulted in a widespread attitude (among whites and Afro-Brazilians) that the problems of the black urban population are largely due to the incapacity and irresponsibility of individuals, rather than to social prejudice. If a high proportion of Afro-Brazilians remain poor and uneducated, it is perceived as a fault of their own laziness, ignorance, and weaknesses. Such failures are attributed by some to the legacy of slavery, which left Afro-Brazilians ill-prepared to compete in capitalism, and by others to theories of racial inferiority.

By invoking an ideology that at once *denies* and *justifies*

the reality of racial inequality, both the state and white Brazilians are exempted from responsibility for the socioeconomic deterioration of the Afro-Brazilian community. "Racial democracy" denies Afro-Brazilians both a point of contention as well as a target for their protests. In fact, Afro-Brazilians who have spoken out against the myth of racial democracy and demanded redress of inequalities have been labeled "racist," "anti-democratic," and even "anti-Brazilian."

II. Politics

Though the ideologies of racial democracy and whitening have been a powerful force limiting racial solidarity, the lack of Afro-Brazilian collective activity has also been influenced by the political reality. The character of the regimes in the last 40 years has controlled the availability of a political arena where Afro-Brazilians could speak out. The history of the Second Republic (1945-1964) and the military dictatorship (1964-1985) go a long way in explaining the absence of an Afro-Brazilian mass movement.

The Second Republic and the Redirection of Grievances

In October 1945, a military coup deposed President Getulio Vargas, drawing the curtain on his repressive *Estado Novo* (New State) and escorting him to self-imposed exile on his ranch in Rio Grande do Sul. The coup and the subsequent December elections, judged to be among the freest in Brazil's history, ushered in a new political phase: civil liberties, suspended since 1937, were restored, and political parties were once again permitted.

Yet despite the new openness inaugurated in 1945, the expected reemergence of the *Frente Negra Brasileira* did not occur. (The FNB, or Brazilian Black Front, was a political movement born in the 1930s, and the first Afro-Brazilian organization to aggressively lobby the government, and attempt to organize the black vote on a national scale). The absence of an Afro-Brazilian political movement was a product of two interacting forces: on the one hand, the rules of industrial relations organized under Vargas; on the other, the emergence of competitive political parties in the Second Republic.

Under Vargas the state had been highly centralized, modeled partly along the lines of European fascism. The federal government, enjoying unchallenged authority, aggressively restructured the economy—one of the most important measures being a reorganization of industrial labor relations in 1943.

The new labor code, which would last until the 1980s, mobilized labor into government-controlled unions by plant and industry, and outlawed any state- or nation-wide labor organization. These unions, while holding a monopoly on representation, were also under the close scrutiny of the labor ministry which controlled union finances and elections. Employers were organized and directed by the state in a similar fashion.

Designed primarily to provide the

executive with a mechanism for controlling the economy, corporatism—as this system is known—proved to have unintended consequences on Afro-Brazilian political behavior. By the time that the new labor code had been instituted, Afro-Brazilians formed a large and growing portion of the urban labor force.

Despite its constraints, corporatism represented a form of political participation previously unheard of for Afro-Brazilians. Earlier, the government had been ruled through a one party system, and labor unions had been dominated by European immigrants. Under the conditions of the *Estado Novo*, corporatism appeared to be a marked improvement for Afro-Brazilians, creating a sense of integration into Brazilian politics.

This sense of integration was enhanced by the new openness of the Second Republic. Now, not only were Afro-Brazilians attached to the state, but they were attached to a democratic state, theoretically accountable to its citizens. In addition, there were now competitive political parties, including the labor-based *Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro*, which actively sought Afro-Brazilian support.

By establishing institutional channels and admitting Afro-Brazilians into the political system, corporatist labor unions and the labor party defused the sense of need for racially-defined political activity. As a consequence, the few collective endeavors which took place within the Afro-Brazilian community were primarily social, recreational, or cultural in their orientation. Preeminent among these was the nationalist Black Experimental Theater, founded in the 1940s by Abdias do Nascimento and Sebastiao Rodrigues Alves, as a forum for both Black artistic expression and consciousness-raising.

Dictatorship and Repression

Whatever the aspirations of the Black Experimental Theater and other collective endeavors, its prospects were abruptly cut short by the military coup of 1964 and the 21-year dictatorship which followed. Concerned with what it perceived as the excesses of populism and the shambles of the Brazilian economy, the military moved swiftly to purge the government bureaucracy, universities, and trade unions and to adopt an economic stabilization program.

The first of the general-presidents, General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco, managed to resist "hardline" pressure to suspend constitutional guarantees. However, by 1968 the growing political radicalization of students and industrial workers drove then-President Artur de Costa e Silva to decree the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5), effectively authorizing the suspension of civil rights as a matter of national security.

AI-5 and the accession of General Emilio Garrastazu Medici to the presidency inaugurated the most repressive phase of the military dictatorship, from 1968-1974. The government censored the media, controlled all public events, and continued arbitrary purges of university faculty and other institutions. Overt politi-

President Getulio Vargas (1930-45, 1951-54), ruled over the repressive Estado Nova.

cal mobilization was illegal and impossible. Thus, there were essentially no collective endeavors—be they political or cultural—within the Afro-Brazilian community. Afro-Brazilian newspapers no longer operated. Long-time activists, such as Abdias do Nascimento, chose self-exile. Popular culture witnessed a brief, youth-oriented "black soul" current in the late 1960s, but this was limited to little more than afro hair styles and dashikis.

Starting Over

It was 1985 before the military dictatorship had fully given way to civilian democratic government. However, the democratization of Brazil took over a decade, beginning in 1974 with the slow unveiling of *distensao* (decompression) and accelerating after 1978 with the definitive start of *abertura* (opening). Initiated under President Geisel, the transition was from the outset a tightly controlled, elite process. With *distensao* the military dictatorship reduced its human rights violations, and relaxed restrictions on civilian political organizations. With legal barriers lifted and the fear of persecution reduced, civil society began cautiously to reemerge from the ashes.

In this new political environment, Brazilians of color came to question publicly the reality of "racial democracy." At first, this renewed debate was contained within the student and intellectual communities. They bitterly denounced Brazilian racism at conferences such as the Congress of Black Culture in Cali, Colombia in 1977. They also established organizations (e.g. the Brazil-Africa Interchange Society, the Research Institute of Black Cultures) in order to exchange information and build solidarity with Africa. Meanwhile, Afro-Brazilians outside of these circles participated in the militant *sindicatos*, as well as other social movements such as human rights groups, women's groups, and the *communidades eclesiasis de base* (CEBs) organized by the Catholic Church.

Afro-Brazilian political efforts became less fragmented as *abertura* advanced, democracy became more certain, and Afro-Brazilian activists revived old communication networks. On June 18, 1978, representatives from a number of Afro-Brazilian organizations, outraged by a series of racially-motivated incidents, joined forces in Sao Paulo to form the Unified Movement Against Racial Discrimination (MUCDR).

As their first project, MUCDR organized a July 7, 1978 demonstration to protest two acts: (a) the April 28 beating death of black worker Robson Silveira da Luz, by a Sao Paulo policeman; and (b) the May expulsion of four young black athletes from the volleyball team of the Tiete Yacht Club because of their color. Two thousand people participated in the protest on the steps of the Municipal Theater. The organizers read an open letter to the population in which they outlined their campaign against "racial discrimination, police oppression, unemployment, underemployment and marginalization."

Invigorated by this initial success MUCDR rapidly launched a process of institution building: holding a National Assembly, electing a National Executive Council, setting up its organizational structure, recruiting delegates nationwide, and developing a Charter of Principles. At the First National Congress of MUCDR, held in Rio in December 1979, the organization changed its name to the Unified Black Movement (MNU), emphasizing that any struggle against racial discrimination must be led by Blacks.

The establishment of the MNU, while catalyzed by specific new grievances, was first and foremost a product of the


High hopes, but still living with the status quo.
[Consulate General of Brazil]

political transition. The organization and its co-founders took advantage of the relatively more open and tolerant political climate of *abertura* to rally Afro-Brazilians around issues of mutual concern. Furthermore, not only was the climate more open but also more politicized, a result of the reemergence of civil society. The *sindicatos* and CEBs, which had emerged in the mid-1970s with *distensao*, politicized Afro-Brazilians, preparing them for their role in the MNU-organized protests of the late-1970s.

III. Problems of Leadership

Afro-Brazilian activists and foreign observers alike held high hopes that the MNU would develop into an Afro-Brazilian mass movement that would rival the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. However, by the early 1980s it was clear that this would not be the case. While the MNU continued to mobilize in frequent nationwide protests, its constituency became increasingly limited to Afro-Brazilian students, professionals, and artists. Considering that only 4% of *pretos* and 6% of *pardos* have completed even nine years of schooling, the MNU's constituency was extremely small, unrepresentative of the majority working class Afro-Brazilian population.

Again, part of this failure can be attributed to the political environment—particularly, the party reform of 1979, which allowed the opposition to return to multi-party competition. Operating in much the same way as in the Second Republic, party competition and the promise of free elections encouraged competition for black electoral support. Parties adopted anti-discrimination platforms, and organized commissions to investigate race relations. Affiliation with one of these political parties served a critical function which the MNU could not: it created a sense of attachment to the mainstream political apparatus, thus defusing the perceived need for racially defined political activity.
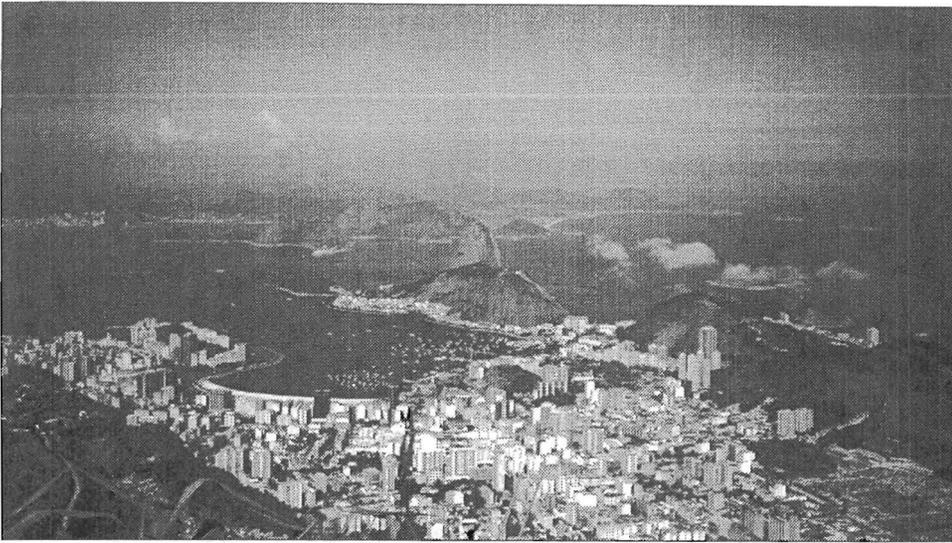
Rio de Janeiro: a city of beauty, not shared equally by all.
[BC Pictures]

High Hopes, But Failures to Bridge the Class Divide

Yet beyond politics, or even the ideology of "racial democracy" and "whitening," there is still another reason for the failure of the MNU: the inability of its middle class leadership to bridge the class divide. Collective endeavors among Afro-Brazilians, past and present, have tended to be elitist—either in their mission or in their membership.

Whether organized with an elitist intention (such as the exclusive social and athletic clubs) or not, rarely have collective projects brought Afro-Brazilians from different socioeconomic classes together as equals. Even the FNB, for all of its effort at organizing the Afro-Brazilian vote, maintained a leadership comprised exclusively of professionals and white-collar office workers. Poor and working-class Afro-Brazilians were clients, not partners. The MNU was no exception. The inability of its middle-class militants to form effective linkages with the poor and working-class majority insured that the movement would not move beyond a small, well-organized elite exercise.

The MNU's failure to bridge class divisions had nothing to do with lack of effort. In fact their elaborate organizational structure placed a heavy emphasis on the inclusion of the *povo* (poor person). The fundamental organizational unit, as approved by the founding National Assembly in 1978, was to be the Center of Struggle (*Centro de Luta*). Centers were to be formed in work areas, villages, prisons, candomble and umbanda temples, samba schools, churches, and favelas. A vast network of these Centers were to criss-cross the county, educating and mobilizing the masses around issues of local concern.

A network of Centers did develop. By 1986, in fact, there were 12 chapters of the MNU in major cities throughout Brazil. However, these Centers were not forming in favelas and samba schools, but rather in academic institutions and cultural organizations. It was a younger generation of Afro-Brazilians, many with one or more years of university education, that were among the first and most eager respondents to the MNU's organizational call. Their eagerness was in large part a measure of the economic and political exclusion they had suffered under the military dictatorship.

As their numbers grew, it was their aspirations and rhetoric which came to define the organization. The movement became an expression of frustration among upwardly mobile Afro-Brazilians denied admission to the middle-class status to which their education and qualifications entitled them. To that extent, the aspirations of these activists were too removed from the lives of the poor to facilitate cross-class linkages.

Among the poor the more pressing issues concerned overcrowding, access to basic services, health care, and crime. Had the MNU continued to organize around more tenable issues, as it had done in the initial protest against police brutality, the gap between middle-class militants and the masses of Afro-Brazilians might have been bridged.

Living with the Status Quo

The absence of an Afro-Brazilian mass movement, especially in the last 40 years, has been no simple matter of acquiescence, nor of insufficient grievances. Rather it is the result of three forces which have psychologically and politically discouraged racial solidarity. The ideologies of "whitening" and "racial democracy" have complicated attitudes towards race, divided loyalties, and rewarded individual enterprise over collective endeavor. Politics have been organized to either repress or re-channel collective action. And Afro-Brazilian activists have allowed protest to remain an elite exercise.

Florestan Fernandes may be correct: Afro-Brazilians probably cannot indefinitely continue to leave the Brazilian social order unchallenged. But the obstacles to collective political action are formidable. In the absence of the psychological and political prerequisites, organizing an Afro-Brazilian mass movement may prove more challenging than living with the status quo. ●

Suggestions for Further Reading

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