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Brazil: Racial democracy

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Abstract

The concept of racial democracy has long arisen in multiple debates in Latin America. I choose Brazil as it is considered one of the most multi-diverse countries. It showcases some scholars' points of view related to the issue in question. In definition the idea of racial democracy connotes a perfect conviviality of races relations without any form of non-existent racism and racial prejudice, the reality is far quite different in Brazil. The latter, as the second-largest country of African descent that pretends to be racially equal, is the one that suffers the most from the issue of discrimination, segregation, and racism inherited from colonialism. Such inheritance has affected the life of Afro-Brazilians and created differences that lead to a distinct set of class and color repartition, making the interconnectedness and interaction of Brazilians impossible. This article aims to provide a better understanding of this issue of racial democracy by its definition; the alternative viewpoints developed as to whether it is a myth or a reality; as well as the policy debate the concept has provoked. But none of these will be possible if we do not dive first into the geographical and historical location of Brazil.

Keywords: *Racial democracy, Latin America, Brazil, Afro-Brazilians*

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1. Introduction

The idea of racial democracy has long been an important concept in Latin America, embodying the perfect conviviality and racial harmony in the forefront of the world. In terms of analysis, the concept needs to be discussed because it has always englobed a source of multiple debates and controversies particularly in Brazil where the idea of race relation is problematic. I choose Brazil because it is one of the most multicultural and ethnical diverse nations. The later, perceived as one of the most racially mixed country, is fascinating and relevant to understand the question of race that has always been a burden. Brazil, as the second largest country of African descent that pretends to be racially equal, is the one that suffers the most from the issue of discrimination, segregation and racism inherited from colonialism. Such inheritance has affected the life of Afro-Brazilians and has created differences that lead to a distinct set of class and color repartition, making the interconnectedness and interaction of Brazilians impossible. In order to get a better understanding of this issue, this paper will deal with these following questions:

1. How to locate Brazil geographically and historically?
2. What is the definition of the concept of racial democracy?
3. What are the alternative points of view on racial democracy in Brazil?

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4. Is racial democracy a reality?
5. What kind of policy debate did the concept provoke?

2. Locating Brazil geographically and historically

“Bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the east, Brazil has a coastline of 7,491 km (4,655 mi)” ([The World Factbook Field Listing: Coastline, 2018](#)). It is the largest country in both South America and Latin America. At 8.5 million sq km (3.2 million square miles) and with over 208 million people, Brazil is the world’s 5th largest country by area and the 6th most populous. The capital is Brasília, and the most populated city is São Paulo. The federation is composed of the union of the 26 states, the Federal District, and the 5,570 municipalities. It is the largest country to have Portuguese as an official language and the only one in the Americas. Independent since 1822, Brazil contains not only the largest population of African-origin people outside of the African continent (variously estimated to amount to from 50 to 60% of the total population) but also one of the most multicultural and ethnically diverse nation, due to over a century of mass immigration from around the world. Since its independence, Brazil’s political system has evolved on large landholders and plantation owners, so prevalent in pre-modern Spain, to a system of military dictatorships for the years between 1964 and 1990. These political systems stifled open discussions about race and the effectiveness of the level Black political organizations that arose during this period ([Walters, 1991](#)).

3. Defining the concept of racial democracy

Racial democracy is a way in which government is established for the people and by the people and not based on a person’s race. On its surface, racial democracy represented the idea of rejection of Europeanization and whitening, as well as a way to embrace Latin America’s own racial past. It is a sentiment of interconnectedness, harmony and conviviality that shape the ways in which countries with diverse races/colors build their identity and belonging. These sentiments also drive hopeful attachments to the possibilities of moving beyond race and to give a new perspective on how peoples interpret issues related to racism and inequality. It can be viewed as a happy objective toward which a good feeling is directed and it provides a shared horizon of experience and shapes an affective community with which all are assumed to be aligned. It pretends to express racial equality by rejecting all ideas of discrimination or racism in its idealistic view. It seeks out collective identities that move beyond race. According to Norman ([2011](#)), in its most commonly accepted definition, the term “racial democracy has been used to describe the tranquility of race relations between “the Black and White” within Brazil. Racism in Brazil was argued to be nonexistent, which helped the country become the poster child for efforts to move the past slavery in Brazil toward racial reconciliation”.

4. The alternative points of view on racial democracy in Brazil

Racial democracy as a main concept in all Latin America and particularly in Brazil where the view that race relations are relatively harmonious and is of minor importance in shaping identities and life chances has long occupied the minds of many Brazilians, whether as an ideology, a myth and ideal, or future hope.

In this perspective, many scholars have developed different points of view on racial democracy, which lead to many alternative points of view. According to Dixon and Burdick edited book ([2012](#)) “It is worth noting that racial democracy, which can be summarized as a claim that whites and nonwhites can interact without restricting the rights and life chances of nonwhites, suffers from the contradiction that it reaffirms the existence of races: it is about races coexisting in democracy. To Stanley ([2017](#)), the social theorist Gilberto Freyre is typically credited with inventing the idea of racial democracy founded on *mestiçagem* in the 1930s. Freyre offered his thesis that Brazil was “a peaceful ‘brown’ nation born of a cultural and racial fusion of Portuguese, African, and Native peoples in northeastern Brazil” as a deliberate rebuke to widely shared anxieties in post-abolition Brazil that the nation was doomed by its large black population and high degree of racial mixture. For much of the 20th century, racial democracy was employed by the state, elites and middle-class whites to deny the existence of racism and racial inequality in society. Black activists and scholars challenged racial democracy as hegemonic ideology, demonstrating it as nothing more than a myth—racism, discrimination and racial inequality are indeed central issues in society that must be addressed through diverse actions, including public policy. In other words, this ideology affirmed that the construct of race did not exist, which therefore negated the possibility that both racially-based-prejudice and discrimination existed. Scholars have also characterized this notion of racial democracy as a dogma seeking to create the perception of a “color-blind” or “race less” Brazilian society ([Power, 1999](#)). From my viewpoint as it is as such, racial democracy is a mystifying representation of reality that no longer really appeals.

However, it does persist as an ideal and future hope, an orientation among many Brazilians of all races/colors. Many believe in this ideal, they see racism as repugnant and seek out collective identities beyond race, such as that of 'Brazilian'. At the same time, most Brazilians agree that racism exists, that discrimination makes the lives of Afro-descendants more difficult, and that policies are necessary to address racial inequalities (Da Costa, 2016). It will be interesting to question whether racial democracy is reality. It is this question that I am going to respond on the new paragraph that follows.

5. Is racial democracy a reality?

Based on what I have learned from all different readings I came across to deal with this topic, racial democracy was just a myth or an ideal. In Henry Louis Gates' book (2011), Nascimento asserted that: "This is a joke, which has been built up since Brazil was discovered. Brazil likes to spread this around the world. But it is a huge lie and the black people know that. The Black people feel in their flesh the lie that is racial democracy. You have to look at the black families. Where do they live? The black children- How are they educated? You'll see that it's all a lie". Such an argument can be well accepted because historically, by filling the intermediate positions in the occupational hierarchy with mulattoes of intermediate color, Brazilian society created its color class continuum. Whites, in rewarding lightness, also created a system of cooptation, of controlled upward mobility for mulattoes. In such a system, controlled from the top, mobility was always possible for promising individuals: talent and leadership were drained upward. Mulattoes came to see themselves as inferior to whites, but superior to blacks, which, in terms of opportunity for social advancement, was true.

In addition, the ideology of "whitening" has always been important in Brazil. The 19th century reasoning, advanced by abolitionists, that the gradual disappearance of blacks would solve the racial problems left by slavery and raise the moral tone of the nation, was augmented by Freyre's 20th century argument for human hybrid vigor through miscegenation. In fact, this symbolic reinforcement of a basic racism operated much as "Americanization" did for immigrants to the United States. In the search for upward mobility, mulattoes were set against blacks, and against their own families of origin, and all were set in search of lighter marriage partners to "whiten" their children. The example of Chica da Silva an icon in Brazil is a perfect illustration of it. She was black, yet her rise to power within the community was part of a conscious "whitening" effort. Moreover, Chica's son and grandsons consider them as white and paid money to erase their black heritage or blackness bureaucratically (Gates, 2011).

There is also a symbolic integration, which represents another form of ideological manipulation playing a role in black subordination in Brazil. This is the so called "money whitens". Brazil's many terms for shades of skin color are used symbolically to indicate wealth and social standing. A wealthy mulatto is called *Moreno* (dark brown-haired person) to indicate superior social status, a poor mulatto called *preto* (black) to indicate social inferiority. Other forms of symbolic integration have their roots in paternalism and ritual religious kinship, so that poorer, darker Brazilians frequently have much wealthier, whiter godparents. Their mutual obligations unite them in pseudo familial forms. In addition, many aspects of culture and tradition that was seen as black like *Candomblé*, *Capoeira* the *samba*, the *samba* schools that parade at *Carnaval* have been persecuted. The African Gods (*Olorum*, *Orixas*, and *Exu*) have been hidden in terms of history by whites. Without providing social or economic equality, these symbolic forms give non-white Brazilians a sense of contributing to the national culture of integration with whites, and of social mobility.

In short, racial democracy was just a myth, a mask of public face that Brazil put on for the world to claim that there is no racism and no racial discrimination, that Brazilians have never been subject to any system of legally sanctioned segregation or discrimination and that social and economic opportunities are seen as equal for whites and blacks.

The reality is quite different. In fact, for decades Afro-Brazilians of every hue have lived and perhaps suffered in the shadow of a myth of the idea of racial democracy, which their country makes them believe. However, observing the reality of the life of afro Brazilians or blacks in Brazil, we realize that this country is a very long way from becoming a racial paradise, and many sensible black Brazilians and white Brazilians know it. Brazil as the second largest Black Country in the world and one of the most racially mixed country on earth has experienced more in terms of racism, discrimination and racial tensions than any other country. The effects of the acculturative process of the Portuguese colonialism, the legacy of slavery and its negative impact on Black Brazilians, the admixture of African blood with the blood of whites or Indians, called miscegenation, and the effects of the doctrine of *blanqueamiento* or whitening the population by means of each group marrying the lighter strains within the group until the black population disappeared altogether, produced a culturally heterogeneous Brazil that has led to a complex set of social identities with consequent cultural behavior manifestations and degrees of acceptance and also of access to privilege. Given this situation, issues of color, racial prejudice, class, discrimination and marginalization become the reality of day-to-day life of Afro- Brazilians, linking "race" to poverty and poverty to racism and social exclusion and creating not only ideas of inequality between individuals

but also practice of an individual denying that he or she is “black”, denying an essentially African identity, even though the latter may be physically Black in appearance. “Brazilian Blacks, as is well documented, suffer the usual social slights and insults that accompany racial prejudice and discrimination all over the world in areas of interpersonal relations and public accommodation” (Walters 1991). It is though there was a stench of Blackness from which everyone sought to flee without taking into consideration that this stench was manufactured by those who gave the world the doctrines of racial inferiority of African peoples as a way to rationalize the heinous crime of slavery and the continued subordination of Blacks.

There is a profound chaos, a destruction of equilibrium, balance, order and peace when it comes to know the truth in terms of race relation in Brazil. The reality is that in Brazil, blacks built the country but remain second-class citizens to this day due to racial problem, racism and discrimination. Brazil’s racism is informal but devastatingly effective. This means that blacker Brazilians never have had a chance to demand redress for the racism they still feel they suffer. Their opportunities are limited within their own society, they are marginalized, and this can be seen by analyzing the geometry of social relations and the life of afro-Brazilians in São Paulo, in Bahia and Salvador Brazil’s black capital, in the Favelas of Rio. The reality is blacks in Bahia and Salvador have not been able to translate their cultural power into effective political and economic power due to the racial hierarchies and the politics of exclusion in Brazil. There exists racial discrimination and an increase of social inequalities between Whites and blacks and that racism was and is an active and colossal force in Brazil. In Brazil, the education is considered as a luxury item and most of the blacks people do not have access to education, and without access to education, they have not been able to get any professional qualifications that can allow them to get a job. As a result, the majority of them live in extreme poverty and they have much less life longevity in comparison to whites. “Unemployment is 50% higher among Afro-Brazilians than among whites. The majority of Afro-Brazilians, or 78%, live the poverty line, compared to 40% of whites, and the life expectancy of African descendants is only 66 years, compared to 72 years for Europeans descendants” (Morrison, 2007; United Nations Refugee Agency, 2008). Afro Brazilians have been the historical victims of deeply embedded forms of structural racialized social discrimination and other forms of prejudices against them and they are often accused of being at fault for their own poverty.

Thus, the reality makes us understand that there is a racialized social discrimination throughout Brazil. The darker people in society tend to be at the bottom of the social scale. The idea of racial democracy is a beautiful, alluring ideal and myth, a romantic white worldview designed to keep Afro-Brazilians in their place.

6. What kind of policy debates did the concept provoke?

Given the extent of the racial problem in Brazil at the turn of the century, there was a change in policy discourse. A greater number of people began to be convinced by the idea advanced for decades by Afro-Brazilian activists and social science researchers that racism is pervasive and something needs to be done about racial inequalities. Winds of social change through affirmative action were now sweeping across the nation with the birth of Black social movements; and many other complex questions regarding the place, status, and rights of Afro-Brazilians had to be squarely addressed. The construction of a fair and sympathetic society requires the whole community to repair past damages of their ancestors by means of affirmative action even if some critics argued that it would only increase interracial friction by forcing Brazilians to focus on race rather than to dismiss it as irrelevant. Justice Joaquim Barbosa, an expert of affirmative action argued eloquently that “affirmative action policies aim to neutralize the pernicious effects of the brutal history of racial discrimination” (de Jesus, 2013).

“Collectively these actions were watershed as they ushered in a new social landscape and radically new ways of thinking about racial discrimination because they were designed to strengthen and advance affirmative initiatives in education and set in motion a new set of social relations” (Dixon, 2016).

Decisive new stage that cemented the struggle for affirmative action goes through the two groundbreaking constitutional rulings by the Supreme Court and the Law of Social Quotas, which requires all federal universities to reserve at least 50% of their seats for Black and indigenous students was signed and enacted as priority for reducing social inequalities and implementing social integration. “If blacks don’t make it to the university, they do not share equal footing with whites, and ...once blacks reach a more equitable level then no such measures are needed” (de Jesus, 2013). Therefore, the future, hopes and the very lifeblood of Afro-Brazilians lie in the hands of the country’s university system to promote blacks’ education. There is the launch of the first program designed to offer poor blacks a road out of poverty at the University of Rio de Janeiro. It set aside 20% of the university’s admission for black students. Similar programs have spread through Brazil and have replicated in states like Bahia one of the Blackest geostrategic areas of the African Diaspora where the Steve Biko Cultural Institute was founded to challenge and address racialized inequality in higher

education (Dixon, 2016). It was unique as it catered specifically to Salvador's largely Black urban poor population who had been historically excluded from university education in Bahia.

There is also the rise of black social movement referring to complex organizations and institutions, which are heirs of a long historical process of pan Africanist resistance, fight for liberation of the Afro-Brazilian community subjected to extreme conditions of economic exploitation and racial oppression. Other political organizations also emerged to not only counter and challenge racial inequality but also to articulate a more positive meaning of Blackness. There are some important measures such as the creation of an Inter-ministerial Working Group to valorize the Black population, human rights submission report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee that proclaimed affirmative action compatible with Brazilian legislation and committed the state to take positive measures to promote equality; there are the specific policies of the National Human Rights Program aimed at providing support for Black-owned business with affirmative action programs and measures to increase access to Universities and also the international seminar on affirmative action in Brazil. Within these measures, affirmative actions are firmly in place and this new political space opened unique opportunities for greater civic engagement and empowerment for civil society actors to push for greater changes (Dixon, 2016).

Even though it has been controversial in Brazil, affirmative action is one of the concrete gains for Afro-Brazilians.

7. Conclusion

I defined racial democracy as a government established for the people and by the people and not based on a person's race. It has long become a main concept in Afro-Latin America and particularly in Brazil. The latter, is perceived as one of the most multicultural and ethnical diverse nation supposing to be a perfect model of racial democracy, a country where sentiments of interconnectedness, harmony and conviviality shape the way in which people of diverse races and colors share a common identity and belonging. Racial democracy was supposed to make everything alright and that there was no need to fight for equal rights. However, studying the historical context of Brazil with the effects of the acculturative process of Portuguese colonialism, the legacy of slavery and its negative impact on Black Brazilians, the admixture of African blood with the blood of whites or Indians and the effects of the doctrine of blanqueamiento or whitening the population by means of each group marrying the lighter strains within the group until the black population disappears altogether, we understand that Brazil has a very long way from becoming a racial democracy. This was only a myth that has been built since Brazil was discovered and Afro-Brazilians of every hue lived under the shadow of this myth. Nevertheless, the concept has provoked policy debates. Winds of social change throughout affirmative action are now sweeping across the nation and compel the larger society to listen. Affirmative action is one of the concrete gains of Afro-Civil society; it does represent a step forward in addressing racial discrimination and its horrible legacy. With affirmative action, some changes have been seen. Afro-Brazilians have the chance to equality; have much better chance to become leaders who could represent their communities in society and government. Slavery and racism left blacks at a disadvantage, keeping generations after generations of blacks trapped in poverty, inequality and discrimination. Thus, only through affirmative action and through quotas have Afro-Brazilians been able to succeed in numbers proportionate to their share of the population and gain social equality.

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