

Combating the Myth of Racial Democracy in Brazil

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While Brazil and the United States share a history of slavery, the changes to race relations in Brazil following emancipation differ greatly from the African American experience in the United States. The United States continuously enacted discriminatory laws against people of color such as Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws. From this emerged a society with government-institutionalized racism. In contrast, Brazil did not experience the same type of institutionalized racism and did not have overtly racist discriminatory laws. This is not to say that Afro-Brazilians did not struggle for social and racial equality following emancipation; rather, Brazil saw substantial differences in their racial social hierarchy due to their unique reasons for emancipation. Out of this emerged the opinion that racial prejudice and stratification existed more along the lines of wealth and class as opposed to the color of one's skin. Sociologist Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães wrote in his essay "The Misadventures of Nonracialism in Brazil" that "in Brazil racism developed in a different way, present in social practice – a racism of attitudes – but unrecognized by the legal system and denied by the nonracialist discourse of nationality."¹ Hence, a myth of racial democracy and inclusion emerged regarding Afro-Brazilians. Namely, this myth propagates that racism and inequality were not as prevalent in Brazil as they were in the United States and that blacks experienced little to no racial oppression.

The 1920s saw the second rise of the Ku Klux Klan during which violence against black Americans increased dramatically. In the 1930s and 1940s, as a means to better understand and contrast the growing racial disorder in the United States, researchers turned their focus to race relations in Latin America. From these studies emerged the myth of racial democracy in Brazil. One such book by sociologist Donald Pierson entitled *Negroes in Brazil: A Study of Race Contact at Bahia*, published in 1942, examines the racial and social status of Afro-Brazilians following emancipation in 1888. Pierson attempted to show that racial discrimination and social hierarchies based on race did not really exist in Brazil; instead, Brazilian social hierarchy was based upon class and wealth. Furthermore, Pierson claimed that those of African descent and mixed blood were better off in Brazil than in other countries, specifically the United States, due to the lack of institutionalized racism. Accordingly, while there may have been social inequality among different races, this inequality was largely based on one's standing among social class.

Pierson conducted a two-year field study in Brazil from 1935 to 1937, twenty-two months of which were spent in the seaport town of Bahia.² His book gives a general overview of the history of Bahia and describes the social hierarchy of the town as well as the local blended population of Portuguese, Indians, and Afro-Brazilians, and gives a brief overview of the Brazilian slave trade as well as relations between the white and slave populations. The weight of Pierson's study is in the chapter "Miscegenation" in which he examines the mixing of races through intermarriage and procreation. Pierson asserted that when the color lines broke down, so too did racial stratification in Brazil. In the next part of the book, "Race and Social Status," Pierson continues his study of crumbling race lines by focusing on the social climb of those of mixed race to powerful and prestigious levels. Writing his book a mere fifty years after emancipation, Pierson examined how the following generations of mulattoes were able to attain certain levels of political and social successes. While it asserted no direct military threat towards the Communist mainland, it did remove a preexisting assurance of security along the Strait.

By comparing it to other parts of the world with racial hierarchies resulting from European colonization, specifically India and South Africa, the final part of *Negroes in Brazil*, entitled "The Bahian Racial Situation," focuses on Pierson's main claims summarizing race relations in Bahia. Pierson contends that in India, intermarriage and mixture was frowned upon, and those of mixed races were cast out by both parental groups. Likewise, in South Africa, Pierson explained that as more Dutch women came to the colony, they attempted to minimize the mixing of races by "preserving the integrity of their racial stock."³ Pierson argued in contrast that Brazilians celebrated miscegenation and sought to absorb and blend ethnic identity. He made this bold statement without much evidence, to which he readily admits: "the reasons for this deviation in Brazil are not quite clear, and it continues, therefore, to be a problem."⁴ Although Pierson was unable to explain this deviation, other historians have offered up their own claims, to be discussed later in this paper.

Another major weakness of Pierson's study is that he focused on the seaport city of Bahia, yet often used his findings to generalize for all of Brazil. This led to inaccurate conclusions for other major cities that are demographically unlike Bahia. Furthermore, many of the conclusions his study offers lack significant data to support them.

¹ Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães, "The Misadventures of Nonracialism in Brazil," in *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 165.

² Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil: A Study of Race Contact at Bahia* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1942), xxi.

³ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

Pierson often makes claims and then goes on to contradict them. For instance, while he believed that racial prejudice is far less prevalent than class prejudice, especially in comparison to the United States, he stated that this does not mean that racial prejudice did not exist at all in Brazil.⁵ However, he then goes on to claim that racial identity has little influence on Brazil's social and governmental institution, and that racial prejudice is an individual problem, not a societal one. He goes on to claim that a major reason for Brazil's lack of racial stratification is due to its desire and success at assimilation and acculturation. Yet he fails to provide much corroborative evidence as to why this took place.

The 1950s saw an even greater interest in Brazil as an example of harmonious race relations. The hope was that if other countries could understand the unique racial democracy of Brazil, then they could improve their own strained racial situations. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) gathered a team of historians, anthropologists, and sociologists to conduct an in-depth and comprehensive study of race relations in Brazil in 1951. Marcos Chor Maio's article "UNESCO and the Study of Race Relations in Brazil: Regional or National Issue?" in the *Latin American Research Review* looks at this study in detail and how the initial UNESCO proposal sought to showcase Brazil's supposedly harmonious racial relations by studying three major Brazilian cities: Bahia, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro.⁶

Maio's article is a thorough and extensive historiography of race relations in Brazil from the early nineteenth century to the 1950s. Maio stated, "the belief in Brazil as an exemplar in race relations dated back to the nineteenth century, when reports from travelers, scientists, journalists, and politicians from Europe and the United States registered surprise at the peaceful coexistence in Brazil among whites, blacks, and natives."⁷ Specifically, from the 1920s to the 1940s a more positive view of a "racial paradise" emerged and "relations between blacks and whites in Brazil came to be perceived instead as an indicator of tolerance and harmony" and the idea of a Brazilian racial democracy became "an ideological cornerstone of racial integration."⁸ Due to this reputation, UNESCO and fellow scholars looked to Brazil as an example of racial democracy and desired to emulate it through understanding the history of Brazilian race relations.

Maio went on to discuss the findings of the report, which advanced ideas that were aligned with Pierson's notion that true discrimination was based upon social hierarchy, not the color of one's skin. However, the report also showed that social mobility was much more difficult among the colored peoples of Brazil. Afro-Brazilians were generally of a lower, poorer class and opportunities to advance socially were scarce. The UNESCO study showed that non-biological qualities such as class, education, and status affected racial classifications, showing that racial democracy in Brazil was not as simple and firm as previously thought.⁹ Maio asserted that the UNESCO research findings "did not deny the importance of the myth of racial democracy. Rather, they revealed the tensions between the myth and the Brazilian style of racism."¹⁰ Thus, while Brazil was seen as a country that is relatively harmonious when it comes to race relations this does not mean it is without any color prejudice. Yet, the general consciousness of Brazil as a racial democracy, an idea promoted by foreigners and Brazilians alike, was not altered.

The 1960s saw an increase in black activism in the United States and consequently the study of slavery began to focus more on the individual experiences of slaves, rather than just the institution of slavery. Many historical studies had previously ignored the complex implications that the institution of slavery, abolition, and the subsequent African American struggles had on American society as a whole. Consequently, many historical studies of this time looked at comparative studies between the United States and other former slave colonies where scholars felt little racial prejudice was experienced. Brazil was a natural and obvious choice to use as comparison, due to its supposed racial democracy.

One such study by Carl N. Deglar entitled *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*, published in 1971, sought to compare race relations in Brazil and the United States in order to better understand race relations, specifically why and how they differed. Deglar's study of race relations in Brazil challenged the Brazilian myth that people of color did not experience severe racial discrimination by taking on the popular theory proposed by historian and sociologist Frank Tannenbaum in his 1947 book *Slave and Citizen*. Tannenbaum made the claim that the lack of racial prejudice in Brazil was due to the institutional differences of slavery as compared to the United States. Tannenbaum alleged that a major difference between slavery in the United States and Brazil was that there never emerged a racist defense of slavery in Brazil. This led to a society with less racial discrimination than the United States; however, Brazil was not free from prejudice. Deglar pointed out that race relations and class

⁵ Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil*, 328.

⁶ Marcos Chor Maio, "UNESCO and the Study of Race Relations in Brazil: Regional or National Issue?" *Latin American Research Review* 36 no. 2 (2001): 120.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 134.

¹⁰ Ibid.

standing are intricately linked in Brazil. The most important factors in determining a citizen's privileges were their wealth and class, as opposed to race. While race does play a role in national identity and upward movement, the influence of wealth is far more integral to inclusion in dominant society.

Deglar relied heavily on previous historiographical studies of Brazil and most of his book is spent discrediting claims of racial democracy put forth by other historians and sociologists. Deglar not only denounced the idea of Brazilian racial democracy, but also discredited the idea put forth by Tannenbaum by presenting an alternative thesis for the differences in racial prejudice between the United States and Brazil. Deglar claimed, "The key that unlocks the puzzle of the differences in race relations in Brazil and the United States is the mulatto escape hatch."¹¹ In the United States if you contain "one drop" of African ancestry, you are considered black. According to Deglar:

In Brazil, as in Latin America in general, this simple, biological definition of the Negro never developed. Instead, a special place was reserved for the mixed blood – the mulatto – a development that opened up much wider possibilities for social mobility.¹²

In Brazil, the mulatto was an entirely different racial group; thus, Brazil was a multiracial country, while the United States was biracial.¹³ Mulattoes existed in much greater numbers in Brazil, and due to this unique definition of a separate mulatto race, they were able to achieve social mobility. Those in the United States who perceived Brazil as a racial democracy at times failed to realize that mobility is reserved for those of mixed race, people who otherwise would be classified as black in the United States due to the "one drop" rule. When Americans saw mulattoes who were achieving social mobility as black, they were using the American definition, failing to see the separate black and mulatto identities in Brazil.

Although Deglar made striking claims and his "mulatto escape hatch" theory is supported with contextual evidence, his final argument is somewhat pessimistic and defeatist: "The evidence presented here can only make the achievement of full racial equality seem more difficult than many may now anticipate...some people may even conclude that equality is illusory."¹⁴ Deglar asserted that the United States might never be able to achieve racial equality, especially if it does not happen in Brazil, where institutionalized racial discrimination barely exists. Rather, racial discrimination is more ambiguous and informal in Brazil, leading to the emergence of the myth of racial democracy. Additionally, writing the book with a specific agenda in mind, especially considering it was written during the Civil Rights movement, Deglar's objectivity was perhaps too rooted in his own time period. George M. Fredrickson commented on this type of problem among historical studies in the introduction to *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States*:

Like all history, comparative history is influenced by the location of the historian in time and space. When Americans write about race in Brazil or South Africa, even if they do not make explicit comparisons with the United States, their work often searches implicitly for analogies or contrasts with the current state of black-white relations in their own country... To varying degrees, it reflects current interests and ideologies in its search for a 'usable past.'¹⁵

This anachronistic approach to historical and sociological studies, specifically as it relates to race, may lead to incorrect or problematic conclusions. This is not to say that these conclusions are without merit, but rather that one must look at the study's contemporary political and social environment to determine how a possible bias might have evolved.

A rather unique study on the myth of racial democracy is Kim Butler's 1998 book *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador*. Butler did a comparative study of Afro-Brazilians in São Paulo and Salvador from 1880 to 1930. By comparing a city with a large black population to one with a small black population, Butler was able to define how racial, social, and political involvement (or lack thereof) formed black identity following abolition. What makes Butler's study unique is her use of sources that lends itself to a comprehensive and alternative approach to the topic of racial democracy. She placed a heavy emphasis on oral histories through interviews with surviving activists and examined neighborhood census records to point out local segregation and stratification. Butler also studied black activism newspapers from the early 1900s to 1930s, as well as records of black

¹¹ Maio, "UNESCO and the Study of Race Relations in Brazil," 224.

¹² *Ibid.*, 203.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁵ George M. Fredrickson, "Race and Racism in Historical Perspective: Comparing the United States, South Africa, and Brazil," in *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States*. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 1.

brotherhood societies. The emergence of these black activist societies contradicted the notion that Afro-Brazilians did not feel marginalized or discriminated against. Thus, the idea of a racial democracy begins to break down.

Butler studied two separate areas of Brazil, yet she did not over generalize in the way that Pierson did. She effectively maintained a difference between the areas studied and was specific when making claims regarding one or the other. Through her use of oral histories, which are often overlooked in historical research, Butler brought a personal Brazilian voice to her study. Furthermore, her introduction is especially strong. She discussed the challenges of a racial history of Brazil because race began to disappear from census and other statistical records after emancipation in 1888.¹⁶ This lack of race on census records, some have argued, is evidence that a citizen's race was not important, which works to further perpetuate the idea of a racial democracy in Brazil.

Butler maintained that Afro-Brazilians fell into the following three categories: integrationists, alternative integrationists, and separatists. Those who wished to become active members of the political realm in order to forge a place in mainstream society were integrationists. Conversely, alternative integrationists wanted political representation while maintaining their black identity. Lastly, separatists wished to detach themselves from the mainstream and form their own black communities.¹⁷ By examining black activism of the early twentieth century, Butler demonstrated that racial inequality was prevalent and how some Afro-Brazilians fought against it. Butler further discussed how class discrimination coincides with racial discrimination and thus cannot be portrayed as two separate issues as had been done in previous scholarship. Regarding the emergence of distinct racial identities, Butler wrote:

Elites [wealthy whites] were taking advantage of the malleability of ethnicity and using it as a strategy to protect the insularity of their group. Afro-Brazilians also began to manipulate imposed identities as a strategy of their own. Discrimination against Afro-Brazilians as 'blacks' or 'Africans' provided them with both common cause for protest and a collective identity that would foster ethnic solidarity.¹⁸

Butler demonstrated that Brazil's reputation as a functioning racial democracy was not shared by all Afro-Brazilians, many of whom who sought to carve out specific political identities. Had these groups not felt marginalized they would seemingly not have worked together to form organizations, such as the Frente Negra Brasileira (Black Brazilian Front), to improve their social and political standing.

Perhaps the most effective and convincing study on Brazil and the myth of racial democracy lies in a series of essays from the 2001 book *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States*. Similar to previous studies, it looks at racism and social hierarchy as a symbiotic relationship, rather than two independent issues. An essay in the book, "Dance of Deception: A Reading of Race Relations in Brazil" by Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, provided substantial and solid statistical evidence to prove that Brazil is not the racial paradise it and others perceive it to be. The authors write, "Traditionally, analysts have been so enamored of the idea of harmony among races in Brazil as to largely ignore racial inequalities."¹⁹ This essay effectively pointed out racial inequalities through the use of statistical data.

Recall that Pierson was unable to account for the deviation among miscegenation and intermarriage following emancipation, but Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento made a claim that Pierson admittedly could not explain. Immediately following emancipation in 1888, blacks far outnumbered the white population (6.1 million blacks to 3.7 million whites) and the white elite sought ways to decrease the black population of Brazil.²⁰ "Abolition brought panic to the ruling elite, which hurried to set about constructing public policies aimed at rubbing out the 'black stain' and 'purifying the nation's racial stock.'"²¹ These policies that encouraged European immigration and miscegenation were not as direct as the Jim Crow laws and Black Codes of the United States that visibly suppressed and marginalized African Americans. Rather, they were covertly aimed to decrease the population gap between blacks and whites in Brazil. Pro-immigration policy can be seen as its own form of institutionalized racism, although it is in no way as damaging as what African Americans experienced in the United States by way of legalized segregation, coerced labor systems, and often judicially ignored violent hate crimes.

Unfortunately, the authors' most significant and condemning claim lacks sufficient corroborative evidence. When seeking out the added quotes of "black stain" and "purifying the nation's racial stock," one sees that they are

¹⁶ Kim Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁹ Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, "Dance of Deception: A Reading of Race Relations in Brazil" in *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 111.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

quoting a 1672 document and a nineteenth-century work by a Cuban historian, making them seem largely out of context. This is not to say that all of their evidence and sources are lacking; on the contrary, their essay provides extremely in-depth statistical evidence. Rather than focusing on Brazil in the past (such as Butler, Pierson, and Deglar), the authors pointed out the current disparities among Afro-Brazilians by looking at different statistical sources on income, education, and living conditions. Specifically, they examined census records to look at race, as well as economic studies to observe how wealth is unequally distributed, leading to severe class stratification between elite and poor. These statistical reports showed that white Brazilians are far better off in terms of wealth, education, health, and general living conditions. Afro-Brazilians are among the poorest and under-educated in Brazilian society, demonstrating that race and class are interwoven.²²

The final sections of Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento's essay discuss the national policies put into place beginning in the late 1980s to help alleviate the great divide between the poor and wealthy, specifically aimed at the poor Afro-Brazilian population. These policies are a reluctant admittance to the idea that Brazil could no longer cling to its national identity of a racial democracy "that has acted as a smoke screen to mask very stark racial inequities."²³ Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento also touched upon the lack of a widespread political activist movement: "in contrast to the United States and South Africa, where explicit racial oppression gave legitimacy to black peoples' organized struggles, the racial-democracy ideology deprives the dominated population of its base for collective self-defense and self-uplifting."²⁴ In other words, the lack of a large political civil rights movement in Brazil is not proof that racial democracy exists, rather that the need for such movements was not felt as strongly due to the lack of explicit government sanctioned discrimination. While Butler pointed to some political black activism early in the nineteenth century, it was short lived and failed to accomplish drastic changes among Brazil's black population and their class standing. Furthermore, maintaining the idea of racial democracy in Brazil worked to preserve the status quo of the majority of Afro-Brazilians belonging to the lowest class, resulting in a subversive form of racism.

The issue of racial democracy in Brazil has been a thoroughly studied and debated topic. Through all of the research, it can be asserted that while there may not necessarily be government-institutionalized racial discrimination in Brazil, this does not mean that racial prejudice does not exist. While it is true that there were no laws to suppress blacks (such as the Jim Crow laws of the United States), the government enacted subversive policies in an attempt to control the newly freed black population. Frederickson wrote in the introduction to *Beyond Racism*, "the Brazilian state sought to 'whiten' its population after the end of slavery by the encouragement of European immigration but did not extol race purity and seek to promote it by banning intermarriage and regulating interracial social contacts as did many of the North American colonies or states."²⁵ These policies were not as harsh or detrimental to the Afro-Brazilian population as the obviously discriminatory policies of the United States, but rather they set the ground work for a country where blacks still struggled for social and political equality by fostering the development of mulattos through miscegenation and a strict social hierarchy based on wealth and class. Frederickson continues:

Currently the insistence of some conservatives that racism has ended in the United States, thus making affirmative action unnecessary, may be performing a function similar to the myth of 'racial democracy' in Brazil. Denying racial prejudice and discrimination when they in fact exist is sometimes called 'the new racism' in the United States. In Brazil, it might be better described as the same old racism.²⁶

Consequently, racial stratification and discrimination was just as widespread in Brazil as it was in the United States, although it manifested in alternative ways. These less obvious manifestations of racism went unnoticed and Brazilians and non-Brazilians began to see the country as a racial democracy.

The idea that social standing provides more opportunity to be discriminated against is valid; however, when one looks at the state of Afro-Brazilians today, the evidence points to overwhelming inequalities. Lynn Huntley writes in the preface to *Beyond Racism*:

The people and government of Brazil are just beginning to publicly acknowledge that appearance or racism contribute to the nation's color-coded power hierarchy and help to sustain disparities and inequality... Still largely invested in its image of itself as a 'great racial democracy,' and awakening from a period of military governance that ended in 1985, Brazil has only recently begun to look

²² Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento, "Dance of Deception," 109.

²³ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁵ George M Fredrickson, "Race and Racism in Historical Perspective: Comparing the United States, South Africa, and Brazil," 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

outward and recognize that, like its companions South Africa and the United States, it must find ways to expand opportunities.²⁷

Brazilians may want to appear as racially indifferent, however, upon closer examination one can see how racism has manifested in the social hierarchy of Brazil. Unless Brazil is able to step back from the myth of racial democracy, her people will continue to be restricted from progressive upward mobility and racial conciliation.

When comparing the United States with Brazil, many historians have mistakenly looked at the issues specifically as black and white, without taking into account the multiracial identity of many Brazilians. Studies from the early nineteenth century up to the 1970s tended to focus on the mulattoes of Brazil and to apply conclusions to the black Afro-Brazilian population without taking into account that the mulatto is seen as a separate race in Brazil. These interpretations often led to an over-generalization of Brazilian race relations that in turn perpetuated the myth of racial democracy. By comparing different studies over a wide range of time, one can identify the strengths and weaknesses surrounding this myth and can work to refute it.

²⁷ Lynn Huntley, preface to *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), xi.