Melissa Nobles

The myth of Latin American multiracialism

Many Latin American nations have long proudly proclaimed a multiracial ideal: unlike the United States, countries like Brazil and Mexico have celebrated the mixing of races, and claimed to extend equal rights and opportunities to all citizens, regardless of race. As a result of the region's regnant faith in racial democracy, it has long been widely assumed that Latin American societies are nondiscriminatory and that their deep economic and social disparities have no racial or ethnic component.

Yet new statistical evidence (a by-product of democratization) suggests that most of the region's societies have yet to surmount racial discrimination. At the very time that some in the United States have timidly embraced multiracialism as a fitting ideal for North Americans, Latin American critics have begun to argue that multiracialism, like racial democracy, functions as an ideology that masks enduring racial injustice and thus blocks substantial political, social, and economic reform.

Latin American elites have always been deeply concerned about the racial stocks of their populations and have always prized the European antecedents of their peoples and cultures – just like their counterparts in the United States. But at the same time, and unlike their U.S. counterparts, Latin American political and cultural leaders in the first half of the twentieth century viewed their societies as unique products of racial intermingling. Sensing that such racial mingling might help define an emergent nationalism, intellectuals and statesmen argued that extensive racial mixture had resulted in the formation of new, characteristically 'national' races.

For example, the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos (1882 – 1959) famously celebrated the idea of racial mixture by arguing that all Latin Americans, and not just Mexicans, were a *raza cósmica* (cosmic race) comprised of both Spanish and indigenous peoples. But his conception of mixture left no doubt as to the

Melissa Nobles, an expert on the comparative study of racial and ethnic politics, nationalism, social movements, and issues of retrospective justice, is associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the author of "Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics" (2000), which examines the political origins and consequences of racial categorization in demographic censuses in the United States and Brazil.

© 2005 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Downloaded from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/0011526053124398 by guest on 28 March 2024

eminence to be accorded to peoples of European descent. As scholars have observed, the idea of a cosmic race at once gave indigenous peoples a place within a new racial identity while simultaneously relegating all things Indian to a backward and romantic past.

As a result of the work of writers like Vasconcelos, the idea of racial mixture in Latin America has long been a normative goal, and not just a simple assertion of demographic facts. Latin American societies have tended to pride themselves on their multiracialism. Although Brazil was for many decades the largest slaveholding society in the hemisphere, and lacked a mass multiparty democracy until 1945, it was one of the first Latin American countries to declare itself a racial democracy. The paradoxes of Brazil are typical: The ideal of racial democracy flourishes most vigorously when political democracy has not. The rhetoric of multiracialism has routinely been deployed by oligarchic and authoritarian regimes.

The myth of the region's racial democracy has nevertheless proved durable, mainly because few have critically questioned it. Most Latin American countries have collected data on racial identification erratically, if at all. For example, Venezuela has not collected such data since 1854, the year slavery was abolished there. Neither Colombia, nor Cuba, nor the Dominican Republic conducts a national census in which residents are classified by race or color. Instead, Latin American scholars and policymakers have generally drawn racial and ethnic data for their countries from foreign sources, such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

The absence of reliable data has made it virtually impossible to test the regional claims of racial democracy. While the visitor to a Latin American city may be pleasantly surprised by the apparent lack of animus and social segregation along color lines, he or she will still be struck by the seemingly close correspondence between skin color and class that is characteristic of the region. This state of affairs is especially pronounced in the Andean area, where indigenous communities have recently begun to engage in visible and dramatic protests against the status quo, contributing to political instability.

The myth of Latin American multiracialism

In recent years, moreover, it has become ever harder to credit declarations of racial democracy, and for a simple reason: for the first time ever, many Latin American governments are gathering reliable racial and ethnic data. Demands for the gathering of such data have been most successful in Brazil, but groups representing blacks and indigenous peoples have pressed for similar measures in Colombia, Ecuador, and Guatemala.

In Brazil, as in the other countries, these organized efforts have come on the heels of greater political liberalization. The dual efforts to get Brazilians to identify their skin color as accurately as possible on their census schedules and to force the Brazilian Institute of Statistics and Geography (IBGE) to alter its methods of categorization began in 1990, five years after Brazil's emergence from twenty-one years of institutional military rule, the longest such rule in twentieth-century Latin American history. Similarly, in Colombia, attempts to change the census have accompanied the political opening and constitutional reform of the early 1990s. In both cases, organized groups have sought either to have census racial categories changed (as in Brazil) or added (as in Colombia) for two related reasons. The first is to challenge the view that the societies are indeed as 'white' as previously claimed,

Downloaded from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/0011526053124398 by guest on 28 March 2024

and the second is to cross-tabulate the racial with other essential socioeconomic indicators in order to measure the extent of economic stratification by race.

Organized groups have not limited their activities to the domestic political arena. Recognizing the power of international institutions, they have also enlisted many of them in their census reform efforts. If governments are slow in responding, the reasoning goes, they will respond more quickly to international pressures. On this score, black and indigenous activists first lobbied to have international lenders take their issues on board, arguing that the ethnic and racial dimensions of class inequality in Latin America have been ignored. Their demands were consistent with the World Bank's priorities on poverty alleviation, for example, as articulated by Bank president James D. Wolfensohn in his 1997 annual address.[1]

Once the banks had committed to addressing color inequalities, they had to ascertain the scope of the problem, and thus became stakeholders in the census data issue. Beginning in 2000, the Latin American and Caribbean Social Development Unit within the World Bank, along with Inter-American Development Bank and the Colombian Statistical Department, sponsored a workshop in which demographers, government census personnel, and indigenous and black Latin American and Caribbean organizations gathered to discuss how racial and ethnic questions should be incorporated into national censuses.[2] A follow-up meeting held two years later in Peru was attended by more than a hundred representatives from eighteen Latin American countries. Representatives gave mixed reviews of the national census institutes' efforts. For example, Ecuadorian indigenous and black groups complained of being completely excluded from the census process, unable to participate in the formulation of a racial/ethnic question.[3]

Yet what is perhaps more revealing is how these census meetings were tied, by both the banks and activists, to bank-funded projects aimed at measuring the social inclusion of blacks and indigenous peoples. According to the reigning myth of racial democracy, after all, both of these groups were already fully incorporated in distinctively multiracial societies – so there was presumably nothing to measure.

The claim that inequalities in Latin America are borne disproportionately by indigenous groups and blacks has been significantly boosted by census data, when such data are collected and tabulated against other socioeconomic indicators. For most of the twentieth century, the IBGE had not cross-tabulated color categories with socioeconomic indicators; it was not until Brazil's 1976 household survey that color data were pegged to health, education, and housing. Furthermore, before the color question was reintroduced in the 1980 census, people trying to determine the possible role of color in these matters were forced to use data from the 1950 census. (The 1960 census asked a color question, but the data from it were belatedly and not fully released. The color question was removed from the 1970 census.)

Recent racial data for Brazil has made dubious the claim that skin color is inconsequential. Data from the 1976 household survey and from the 1980

1 The World Bank, *La Ventana Newsletter : A Report from the Latin American and Caribbean Social Development Unit*, vol. 1

2 Ibid., vol. 1.

3 Ibid., vol. 2.

Downloaded from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/0011526053124398 by guest on 28 March 2024

census showed that Brazil's nonwhites were disadvantaged when compared to whites in terms of educational attainment, labor force participation, and wages.[4] According to a 2001 study based on the most recent census data, economic and educational disparities persist, with blacks and browns concentrated at the bottom of the economic ladder, comprising 70 percent of the poorest decile. Blacks and browns also continue to earn less than whites with comparable levels of education.[5] Statistical analysis has uncovered other patterns of discrimination besides those grounded in social and economic inequalities. Using Brazil's 1988 household survey, scholars found that blacks and browns were more likely than whites to be victims of police abuse.[6]

Data like these from Brazil are exactly what advocates for the gathering of racial data have hoped to find in other Latin American and Caribbean countries. Similar evidence of racial discrimination would undercut the political and economic claims that racial democracy has been realized in practice. As a result, parties across the political spectrum might be forced to rethink their public policies.

Already, in the face of organized domestic pressure and international attention, politicians in the region have begun to change their views. They have strengthened antidiscrimination laws and introduced affirmative action policies. In certain cases new legislation has been passed, while in other cases, existing legislation is being enforced for the first time.

For example, Brazil's first antidiscrimination law, the Arinos Law, passed in 1951, was largely a dead letter, resulting in just two convictions with penalties in over forty years. Then in 1989 this criminal code was updated by the Caó Law, which for the first time made "acts of prejudice" a criminal offense subject to mandatory imprisonment. But while Brazilians increasingly have recourse to the Caó Law, scholars and practitioners agree that the myth of racial democracy still hampers the law's effectiveness.

At the same time, in recent years the Brazilian Center and Left have supported the implementation of new affirmative action policies. In 1996, following the recommendations of black activists such as Helio Santos and former senator Abdias do Nascimento, the former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso introduced a national human rights program in which affirmative action policies were proposed.[7] This program was further supported by Brazil's delegation to the 2001 International World Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa. In preparation for the conference, activists and government officials prepared a report that called for the implementation of affirmative action, including racial quotas, in the admission policies of public universities.

4 See, for example, Carlos Hasenbalg, "Race and Socioeconomic Inequalities in Brazil," in Pierre-Michel Fontaine, ed., *Race, Class, and Power in Brazil* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1985); Peggy A. Lovell and Charles H. Wood, "Skin Color, Racial Identity, and Life Chances in Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 25 (3) (1998): 90–109. Color data from the 1991 census were not released until 1998.

5 Mala Htun, "From Racial Democracy to Affirmative Action: Changing State Policy on Race in Brazil," *Latin American Research Review* 39 (1) (2004): 63.

6 Michael Mitchell and Charles Wood, "Ironies of Citizenship: Skin Color, Police Brutality, and the Challenge to Democracy in Brazil," *Social Forces* 77 (3) (1998): 1001–1020.

7 Brazil Ministry of Justice, National Secretary of Human Rights, "National Program of Human Rights" (Brasília: Ministry of Justice, 1996).

Downloaded from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/0011526053124398 by guest on 28 March 2024

This trend has continued under the current administration of President Ignacio Lula da Silva. He has appointed the first black Brazilian to serve on the nation's supreme court. Universities have recently announced new guidelines for admission. For example, the University of Brasília will adopt a 20 percent quota for Afro-Brazilians, with a special mechanism for accepting indigenous Brazilians. The application form includes a precoded question of ethnoracial identification and requires a photograph. In contrast, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro is implementing a 20 percent quota system for graduates of public high schools, regardless of racial or ethnic origin. Because public high schools are largely populated by Brazil's black and brown poor, this quota will dramatically alter the composition of student populations at the Federal University.

It is hard to overstate the significance of affirmative action policies in Brazil, given the country's long history of declaring such policies unnecessary. Yet, as in all other countries where these policies exist, disagreements over their value persist. In Brazil the recent debate has revolved around categorization and eligibility. In 2000, a number of Brazilian academics, census bureau officials, and black activists petitioned to replace the term 'race' with 'color' on the census, and to condense two color categories, *pardo* (brown) and *preto* (black), into the single category of *negro*. Proponents of the change argued that 'race' connoted a common cultural and historical trajectory in ways that 'color' did not. They also argued that *pardo* and *preto* should be grouped together under *negro* because the two groups share a similar socioeconomic profile, and because *negro* was the term used by most black organizations. In the end, however, the IBGE decided against revising the categories to be used on the 2000 census forms.

Despite this setback, the issue of whether official categories, census or otherwise, are capable of capturing Brazil's color diversity and complexity is very much alive in the nation's ongoing debates over affirmative action. If it is agreed that color identifications in Brazil are complex, flexible, and relatively unstable, can public policies reliably be based upon them?

So far, the answer appears to be a qualified yes. Here, the mere existence of color categories on the census is decisive. Since these categories are the basis of national statistics and statistical analyses, they appear to comprise suitable, if blunt, criteria for affirmative action policies. However, there is a significant difference between categories that are used for national surveys and those that are used for job and educational applications. While attention to skin color and other physical characteristics permeates informal social interactions (witness Brazil's rich color lexicon), color terms do not, as a rule, appear on official documents, such as Brazil's national identity cards and hospital and school forms. (Telling exceptions to this rule are local police reports.) Critics of affirmative action deplore the growing use of racial categories in official documents, while advocates of affirmative action want to refine and revise the categories in order to pinpoint more precisely enduring inequalities.

One final point about racial statistics in Brazil is worth noting. While the nation's black activists have been successful in unraveling the claims of nondiscrimination and racial democracy, they have been far less successful in raising black racial consciousness. Their efforts around the 1991 census were designed to

Downloaded from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/0011526053124398 by guest on 28 March 2024

do just that. Perhaps affirmative action policies will be more effective in that regard. Yet, in a paradoxical way, widespread consciousness, which presumably leads to mass political mobilization, has not been necessary to securing substantial policy gains. Affirmative action is now very much in play in Brazil, all without the mass movements and political unrest that have usually prompted these policies in other countries. Brazilian exceptionalism, of a different sort, may be alive and well.

Democratization has been an enormously important part of Latin America's experiences. In the past, by masking the deep inequities among Latin Americans, the myth of racial democracy has often hindered the deepening of political democracy. Yet as democracy becomes more real in the region, however slowly, the unreality of racial democracy becomes ever more obvious. For some Latin Americans, the challenge now is to preserve the ideal of racial democracy as a worthy aspiration. For others, though, the task is to construct new national narratives that break boldly with an ideology that has been discredited.

It is too soon to know the outcome of this debate, but one thing is clear. It is going to turn, in significant measure, on racial statistics.

Downloaded from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/0011526053124398 by guest on 28 March 2024