Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil

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sequences of this for tens of millions of working people in the United States and throughout the world.

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ENDNOTES

1. Toby Tarrant's God, Country and Self-Interest: A Social History of the World War II Rank and File (Silver Spring, Maryland 2004) (420 pages, 120 illustrations, index, bibliography, maps) is available (cloth: $16.95, paper $9.95) from CWP at 15405 Short Ridge Court, Silver Spring, Maryland 20906 [telephone (301) 598-5427] or on line at Cath-Wkr@aol.com.


This is a blockbuster of a book. To a topic—Brazilian race relations—historically fraught with ambiguity, uncertainty, and disagreement, it brings clarity, logic, and lucidity, not to mention several truckloads of data. The result is the most important work on race in Brazil since Gilberto Freyre’s seminal The Masters and the Slaves (1933).

Telles begins by confronting the core contradiction in Brazil’s racial order: high (by US standards) levels of interracial sociability (expressed in cross-racial social contact, friendships, and even marriage) co-existing with equally high (by any standard) levels of racial inequality in education, earnings, vocational achievement, life expectancy, and other areas. Telles labels these the horizontal (sociability) and vertical (material achievement) dimensions of Brazilian race relations. Previous authors, he argues, have tended to focus on one dimension to the exclusion of the other, and have thus lined up in two opposing camps, one seeing Brazil as a hopeful instance of racial harmony and egalitarianism, the other as a case of extreme inequality and exclusion.

The achievement of this book is to acknowledge both dimensions, fully document them, and then ask how they are related to each other. In answering that question, Telles does not shrink from the multiple complexities he finds along the way, beginning with the vexing question of racial classification: how do Brazilians define who and what they are, racially? He finds that Brazilians do not identify themselves “racially,” in the sense of belonging to a collective racial
group. Rather, they identify themselves as individuals, and in terms of skin color (whence the book's title). And here things get complicated fast. In exploring Brazilians' notions of color, Telles finds three competing (and somewhat overlapping) conceptual schemes: the "official" three-category (white/brown/black) system used in the national census; the more spectrum-like, multi-category "popular" system used in everyday life; and the two-category (black/white) "black movement" system invoked by Afro-Brazilian activists. The "official" and "black movement" systems both strive for clarity and certainty. The "popular" system, by contrast, allows for flexibility and ambiguity. While its largest category, with 42 percent of the population, is "white," the second-largest (32 percent) is moreno (literally, tan or brunet), a rather vague color label that can be applied to members of any racial group (though in practice mainly to members of the "brown" census category).

Despite these complications, Telles finds that "in a large majority [88 percent—see page 90] of cases, there is no doubt about who is negro or white in Brazil." (266) Nor is there any doubt about which group is more advantaged. Two devastating chapters present a wealth of data on racial inequality in earnings, education, vocational achievement, even life expectancy, and the relative role of structural factors and discrimination in producing those inequalities.

The next two chapters consider the horizontal dimension of Brazilian race relations. Here we find Brazilians marrying across racial lines, and living in racially integrated neighborhoods, at rates much higher than in the United States. Still, they do not ignore race entirely. As of 1991, 77 percent of married Brazilians were in racially endogamous unions, showing a clear preference for marriage partners of their own color. And measures of residential segregation, while significantly lower than in the United States, are far from 0. Brazilians do take race into account in deciding who they are going to marry and where they are going to live, even if it weighs less in their decisions than in the United States.

Or less for some Brazilians than for others. As he turns to the question of how relative social inclusion can co-exist with high levels of economic exclusion, Telles notes that indices of intermarriage and residential integration are highest among the poor and working classes. Those indices are much lower in the middle class, which is overwhelmingly white, and are essentially 0 for the elite. Since it is white elites, managers, and professionals who decide how to distribute educational, health, and job opportunities among their fellow Brazilians, Brazil can simultaneously be a racial democracy for that 70–80 percent of the population who are poor and working-class, and a bastion of white privilege and racial exclusion in the middle and upper classes.

This is why, Telles concludes, if Brazilian society wishes to eliminate racial inequality, it will need to adopt a combination of "universalist" social policies aimed at aiding the poor, and anti-discrimination and affirmative-action policies specifically targeted at Afro-Brazilians. He is extremely persuasive on why both sets of policies are needed, and very informative on the negotiations, head-butting and alliances in recent years among Afro-Brazilian activists, international organizations, NGO's and Brazilian government agencies over how best to design and implement those policies.

The clarity and lucidity of Telles's findings, and the wealth of data on which they are based, make this book a genuine tour de force, and the most illuminating
examination of Brazilian race relations that I have ever read. Further enriching the analysis are its frequent comparisons between the United States and Brazil. The book is a cautionary tale of the pitfalls of trying to base universalist theoretical propositions on one or two national cases, especially when they are as sui generis as these two.

Of course no book is perfect, and this one has its requisite sprinkling of errors. Seven, not eleven, times as many Africans (4.0 million versus 560,000) came to Brazil as to the United States. (1) The 1991 census found Brazil to be 52 percent white (30), not 55 percent (90). Table 4.7 does not show that "low-educated blacks are more likely than their highly educated counterparts to be consistently classified [in color terms]"; rather, it shows that highly educated black men are more likely to be consistently classified, while highly educated black women are less likely. (97) Figure 8.1 shows browns, not blacks, increasing their presence in the Southeast between 1872 and 1890. (197)

These are minor mistakes. More consequential, I believe, is the cover, which features a photograph of an Afro-Brazilian child sniffing glue from a plastic bag. We know not to judge a book by its cover; but in this case we can, and should, judge the cover by what we learn from the book. Telles identifies "racist culture" as one of the principal supports of racial inequality in Brazil, and devotes considerable attention to the role of negative images and stereotypes in sustaining such culture. (152–57, 220) One such image, he reports, was the photo of a black youth holding a handgun, plastered on billboards in 1999 as part of an anti-firearms campaign. Citing antiracist laws, a judge ordered the ads removed on the grounds that they "reinforced racial prejudice by showing a poor black youth as a bandit." (247) How is this photo of a young black drug-user different from that of the black street criminal? Is this the representative face of the Afro-Brazilian population?

Memo to Princeton University Press: when you do the paperback edition, please find a cover more in keeping with the content of this path-breaking book.

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In *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, Theda Skocpol makes her most comprehensive contribution to current debates about civic engagement in the US. Her accessible analysis treats all of the significant issues raised in these debates, especially whether civic engagement has recently declined among Americans; if so, why; and, if so again, with what consequences for democratic governance. She argues most importantly that the nature of American civic life has changed dramatically since the 1960s as federated membership organizations have given way to professionally managed advocacy groups and non-profits more interested in recruiting donors than members.