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Race, colour, and skin colour in Brazil

Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães

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The contemporary anti-racist zeal is banning the word 'race' of our everyday vocabulary. This practice was sanctioned by UNESCO in the postwar years and is now widespread in the press. 'Skin colour' became the morally correct way to refer to physical differences before covered by the idea of 'race'. Such a development would be inconsequential if the contemporary social sciences had not included in our vocabulary 'skin colour' as a natural concept, morally neutral. In this article, taking a Brazilian perspective, where 'colour' was historically constructed as a variant of 'race', I try to show the deception of such a naturalistic practice, and suggest that the classification of people by 'skin colour', not only has its foundation in the idea of race, but tends to bipolarity, unlike the Brazilian concept of 'colour', which is based on the ideology of whitening.



Position Papers Series

Race, colour, and skin colour in Brazil

Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães

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Abstract

The contemporary anti-racist zeal is banning the word 'race' of our everyday vocabulary. This practice was sanctioned by UNESCO in the postwar years and is now widespread in the press in Brazil. 'Skin colour' became the morally correct way to refer to physical differences before covered by the idea of 'race'. Such a development would be inconsequential if the contemporary social sciences had not included in our vocabulary 'skin colour' as a natural concept, morally neutral. In this article, taking a Brazilian perspective, where 'colour' was historically constructed as a variant of 'race', I try to show the deception of such a naturalistic practice, and suggest that the classification of people by 'skin colour', not only has its foundation in the idea of race, but tends to bipolarity, unlike the Brazilian concept of 'colour', which is based on the ideology of whitening.

Keywords

race, racism, anti-racism, skin colour, whitening, Brazil

Race, couleur et couleur de peau au Brésil

Résumé

Le militantisme anti-raciste contemporain est en train de bannir le mot «race» de notre vocabulaire quotidien. Cette pratique a été sanctionnée par l'UNESCO dans les années d'après-guerre et est maintenant largement répandue dans les médias au Brésil. La « couleur de peau » est devenue la manière moralement correcte de faire référence aux différences physiques auparavant désignées par la notion de race. Un tel développement serait sans conséquence si les sciences sociales contemporaines n'avaient pas inclus dans notre vocabulaire la « couleur de peau » comme concept naturel et moralement neutre. Dans cet article, à partir d'une perspective brésilienne, où la « couleur » a été historiquement constituée comme une variante de la « race », j'essaie de montrer que cette forme de naturalisation manque son but, et je suggère que la classification des gens par la « couleur de peau », non seulement a ses fondements dans l'idée de race, mais en outre tend à la bipolarisation, contrairement au concept brésilien de « couleur », qui est fondé sur l'idéologie du blanchissement.

Mots-clés

race, racisme, anti-racisme, couleur, couleur de peau, blanchissement, Brésil

Raça, cor e cor da pele no Brasil

Resumo

O afã anti-racista contemporâneo está banindo a palavra 'raça' do nosso vocabulário cotidiano. Tal prática foi sancionada pela UNESCO nos anos do pós-guerra e hoje está disseminada na imprensa. "Cor da pele" passou a ser o modo moralmente correto de se referir às diferenças físicas antes recobertas pela ideia de "raça". Tal desdobramento seria sem consequências se as ciências sociais contemporâneas também não tivessem incluído em seu vocabulário "cor da pele" como um conceito natural, moralmente neutro. Nesse artigo, a partir da realidade brasileira, onde a "cor" foi historicamente construída como uma variante da "raça", procuro demonstrar o engano naturalista de tal prática, e sugerir que a classificação das pessoas por "cor da pele", não apenas tem seu fundamento na ideia de raça, mas tende à bipolaridade, ao contrário do conceito brasileiro de "cor", que se fundamenta na ideologia de embranquecimento.

Palavra-chave

raça, racismo, anti-racismo, cor da pele, embranquecimento, Brasil

European current denial of race goes in par with the affirmation of skin colour as natural difference. What really puzzles me in this recent trend is not its general acceptance in the media but its currency in sociological papers. How come that a science constructed on the methodological principle that only social facts can explain society takes as natural the classification of individuals by colour?

This position paper is then a first contribution to disentangle the persistence of race, surreptitiously or not, as a marker of social differences in the western hemisphere.

Beyond race and racism in Brazil

In the Brazilian social sciences, race has already undergone various twists and turns, providing a clearer example than many other cases, perhaps, of the political vicissitudes of scientific notions and concepts. In Brazil the term was introduced by the 1870 generation, which adopted it from the natural sciences of the time with the aim of providing a scientific framework to studies of Brazilian culture, while simultaneously proposing a program of political development for the nation post-slavery (Skidmore 1974, Ventura 1991, Schwarcz 1993). This use roughly denied, therefore, the framework established by von Martius in his famous 1845 pamphlet *Como escrever a história do Brasil* [How to write the history of Brazil] (Rodrigues and von Martius 1956), in which the Brazilian nation should be the result of the the amalgamation of the three races – the European, the Amerindian, and the African.

For the 1870 generation, the concept of race, as employed by 19th century biology, was useful to explain the cultural differences between peoples and the subordinate way in which they were incorporated into the global market system through European expansion and conquest. To be clear: the concept was abstracted from history and from social, economic and cultural forms in a way that reduced the stark inequalities between peoples to physical and biological characteristics. As Manoel Bonfim (1993) pointed out in 1905, disputing the scientific nature of the concept, the racial theory did have a clearly imperialist motivation. Brazil's scientists introduced therefore a domestic imperial motivation to the theory of races, explicating as natural the inequalities of

a nation seen as the result of the intermixing of three races, though stressing this outcome would result in a homogenous people of Latin culture. This miscegenation process, potentialized by the stimulus given to new migrations of Europeans to Brazil, became known as *embranquecimento* or 'whitening.'

Far from being mere intellectual speculation, *mestiçagem* (miscegenation) and *embranquecimento*, processes that provided the young Brazilian nation with a homogenous demographic base, became firmly established as full-blown racial policies in Brazil (Park 1942), even after the concept of race and the theories spun from it became wholly discredited in the scientific and intellectual world. As just one example: the 1930 revolution and later the New State, as well as the Second Brazilian Republic, would provide the nation with a cultural policy explicitly based on these two pillars: miscegenation and hegemony of the Portuguese and Latin language and traditions. Capitalist development in Brazil, from 1930 onwards, worked to homogenize national markets (of capital, commodities and labour), further intensifying cultural and racial homogenization. Between 1940 and 1970, regions like the North and Northeast (or some pockets of the Southeast) in which a quarter of the population declared themselves white, became reservoirs of manual labour for the South and Southeast where the impact of mass European immigration, which declared itself white, had been greater.

It was during this period that the term 'race' was banished from Brazil's scientific, political and social vocabulary, not only as a consequence of the processes to which I refer, but also because of the tragedies caused by racism elsewhere in the world, principally the Nazi Holocaust during the Second World War, racial segregation in the United States, which lasted well into the post-war period, and apartheid in South Africa, surviving into fairly recently.

The return of race

How should we explain, then, the return of race to our contemporary language in Brazil? The term is so widely present, including in everyday communication, that IBGE (the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística) introduced it into its demographic censuses in 1991, transforming the earlier question "What colour are you?" into "what colour/race are you?" In responding to this

question, we must recognize that the term had not completely vanished, but has instead become submerged. Firstly the expression that came to define the Brazilian ideal of national homogeneity, its demographic hybridism and the recognition of the cultural importance of all the peoples in the nation's formation, was that of *racial* democracy. Secondly, in bureaucratic and popular usage, the term *colour* substituted that of race, but left visible all the elements of racist theories. Colour, in Brazil, is more than skin colour: the texture of a person's hair and the shape of their nose and lips, as well as cultural traits, are important elements in the classification of colour (black, brown, yellow and white). Thirdly, the term *etnia*, ethnicity, coined to explain human cultural diversity, also came to be used in everyday sociologies as a marker of almost irreducible differences, that is, as a synonym of race. The term 'race' was suppressed without the social process of marking differences and boundaries between human groups losing all its reductionist and naturalizing impetus.

But the most important factor in terms of the resurgence of race as a social classifier took place as a political strategy for inclusion rather than exclusion, for claiming rights, not subjugating others. It was the social movements of young black, brown and mixed (*mestiço*) people, independent professionals and students, who reintroduced the term to affirm their bodily and spiritual integrity against the diverse forms of inequality to which they were subjected in modern Brazil, despite – and maybe precisely because – of its racial democracy. These social movements have a long trajectory in Brazilian history, spanning from the societies and journals of *men of colour* at the start of the 20th century, passing through the Unified Black Movement of the 1970s to the black NGOs of the present.

Race returns, therefore, not this time as a motto of imperialism or colonialism but as a gloss used by the subordinated for the inferiorized and unequal way in which blacks, people of colour and brown people are generally included and treated. For social scientists, just as for political activists, the notion of race has visible strategic advantages over ethnicity: it immediately evokes the history of oppression, dehumanization and opprobrium to which the conquered peoples were subjected. Furthermore, in the process of the miscegenation and hybridism suffered over the years, the ethnic identity of black people (their origin, their

cultural markers, etc.) has been relatively weak compared to the physical markers used by the racial discourse.

Modernism, and the mestizo nation

Reborn in the political struggle, the notion has been recuperated by contemporary sociology as a nominalist concept – that is, expressing something that does not actually exist in the physical world but has an effective social reality (Guimarães 1999). Without the concept of race, it would be impossible to explain the long trajectory that culminates in the mobilization of the symbols, themes and repertoires of contemporary social movements. Race, as an analytic concept, allows us, for example, to examine the accusation made by some anthropologists (Maggie 2005) that the insistence of today's black movement on classifying as *black* those who declare themselves *brown* and *black* in censuses is an anti-modernist attitude returning to a racialism that briefly marked the naturalist intellectuals of the 1870s generation. In the remainder of this brief article I look to show how the Brazilian system of colour classification is unable to be sustained without surreptitious recourse to the notion of race and the theory of whitening.

I would begin by observing that any attempt to label the attitude of the black movement 'anti-modernist' only makes sense when we refer to the Brazilian Black Front of the 1930s. Indeed, at that time, while black people in São Paulo were politically mobilized around the *black* racial identity, exploiting the general climate of racialization of politics blowing in from Europe, throughout the rest of Brazil, modernist and regionalist intellectuals – many of them *mestiços* – were reinventing Brazilian nationality around the ideal of racial mixture. It should be remembered that this ideal of miscegenation and hybridism stemmed from an earlier period. I have remembered von Martius, but it should be said that the first massive assumption that the Brazilian nation had a mixed people dates from the abolitionist campaign. Re-reading Nabuco in *O erro do imperador* [The emperor's mistake], we find the idea clearly spelled out:

When the noblemen and aristocrats opposed to Mr Dantas, almost all descendents of plantation masters and farmers, went to the win-

dows of the Chamber and looked out at one of these popular demonstrations, they discovered neither top hats or overcoats, but, in a glance, bare feet on the ground and exposed shirtsleeves, and said only: "That's worthless, they're scoundrels." Perhaps, but this is our people, a people who walk barefoot in their shirtsleeves, they are not a white people.

Of course Nabuco's opinion, common among black abolitionists, was not fully shared in academic circles until the 1930s, as shown by his compatriot Oliveira Lima, who wondered whether "the farmers" comprised part of the people or just the riffraff, the "people properly-speaking":

In Brazil, as throughout Hispanic America, there was a lack of people. In one of his official letters to the Austrian Chancellery, the *chargé d'affaires* Mareschal observes that even if the country were to suffer the horrors of revolution, "the people would tire of anarchy more quickly than in Europe since it is entirely composed of farmers, without the riffraff that becomes a blunt instrument in the hands of agitators." The riffraff existed but it was an element completely outside of political life: the degree of ignorance and the lack of culture impeded the people properly-speaking from any participation in the conscious life of the community.

The system of colour classification

As it happens, in *Racismo e Anti-racismo no Brasil* [Racism and Anti-Racism in Brazil] I have already shown that the country's colour classification system originates from the complex theory of whitening that the naturalist generation shaped from the diverse racial theories then in vogue. This origin is made explicit by Oliveira Vianna (1959 [1932]: 45). In this theory, colour is not reducible to "skin colour," that is, to simple tonality. Colour is just one of the physical traits, albeit the main one, along with hair, nose and lips, that together with cultural traits – "good manners," knowledge of European culture – formed an evolutionary gradient of whitening. Black, brown, white. There was never any hesitation in classifying someone of dark skin but 'fine' (i.e. European) features and good education in the white group. And included among brown people were certainly those with 'negroid' physical traits but who were light-skinned and well educated.

It is this system of racial classification by colour – but not by skin colour – that is slowly being modified in Brazil as the ideal of whitening loses its strength. On one hand, the political organization of black people, which totally rejects whitening and tries to inculcate a historical, political or ethnic notion of race. When referring to history, the notion unites people who shared a common experience of oppression; when referring to politics, it creates an association around demands; when referring to ethnicity, it looks to create a feeling of community through culture. In each case, the colour gradients would be counter-productive were they not grouped to turn black and brown people into a single discrete (non-continuous) category, which could well be baptized *Afrodescendent* or *black*.

On the other hand, colour is being replaced by skin colour as a classificatory principle. In this mode of classification, today widely found in Europe and heavily used in the media, even in the United States, skin colour is the only accepted criterion. In other words, some *whites* could be called *morenos*, *dark*, *foncés*, *brown*, without being *black*. Why is this form of classification expanding in Brazil? Is it purely an effect of the growing intensity of the country's contacts with Europe and the United States?

Observing this form of classification more closely, some facts come to the fore. First, the term white is generally ethnicized to signify European "from the cradle," that is, neither of colonial origin nor an immigrant from somewhere outside of Europe. Second, this classification seems to coexist with other native classifications. For example, President Obama continues to be referred to as *black* in Europe and Brazil since he is called black in the United States, or a *mestiço* Brazilian capoeira performer is also called *black* in Europe because he is a bearer of African-Brazilian culture. Third, this classification does not apply to Oriental peoples, like the Chinese, Japanese or Koreans. Skin colour refers to a gradient between black and white.

We can provisionally conclude that this form of classification is even less consistent than the earlier form, which took into consideration other physical traits besides skin colour, enabling a more extensive gradient. Another conclusion, apparently paradoxical, is that despite being more fluid across the gradient, classification by skin colour discriminates the *white* group better: in

other words, it distinguishes all the other colours without the risks of confusion enabled by whitening. Racial forms of classification are avoided and negated with skin tonality taken to be a natural fact. However this stratagem may well imply a return to an old dichotomy: *whites* versus *people of colour*.

If this is the case, why do so many people in Brazil now insist on speaking of “skin colour” rather than just “colour”? In fact a recent study by IBGE (2008) shows that Brazil’s traditional form of classification remains in full force. In the table below we can see that other physical traits, family origin, culture and socioeconomic position are equally mobilized to define the census category “colour/race.”

Table 1: Brazil, indicating the proportion of people aged 15 or over using specific aspects to define their own colour or race, 2008

Skin colour	82.3
Physical traits	57.7
Family origin, ancestors	47.6
Culture, tradition	28.1
Socio-economic origin	27.0
Political/ideological option	4.0
Other	0.7

Source: IBGE (2008)

In full force, but modified. My argument is that the traditional Brazilian system of classification is being modified by the fact that the ideal of whitening is losing its meaning. Some other facts can be cited to support this line of reasoning. Indeed, from the 2000 census onwards the white population began to decline more rapidly than predicted by demographic trends alone, while the brown, black and yellow populations started to increase again. These changes clearly suggest that a process of racial reclassification is under way, given that demographic trends (birth and death rates and migrations) fail to explain the phenomenon.

For this reason, perhaps, Table 1 should be examined more closely. Are the influences of family origin and ancestors, culture and tradition not in complete disagreement with the classic 1960s studies by, among others, Harris (1970), Azevedo (1953), Nogueira (1954), Sanjek (1971) and Wagley (1952)? In these works, as we have seen, only physical traits and social position mattered.

But according to this IBGE study, there is an increasing importance of factors responsible for defining ethnicity (origin and culture).

Moreover, if we compare two surveys conducted by DataFolha, the first in 1995 and the second in 2008, the responses to the same questions register a diminution of 18% in the number of people declaring themselves white unprompted and an increase of 18% in those declaring themselves ‘tanned’ or ‘lightly tanned’ (*morenas* or *morenas claras*: see Table 2). Can this data be interpreted as a renunciation of whiteness by some of the ‘whites’ of a darker colour, those who consider themselves *morenos*? This is what I suggest. This renunciation could not be made if other factors like their family origin (their ancestors) or cultural tradition had not acquired more importance in the construction of racial colour identity relative to ideals of whitening.

Table 2: Unprompted colour self-declarations in 1995 and 2008 (in %)

What colour are you?	1995	2008	Diff
White (Branco)	50	32	-18
Tanned (Moreno)	13	28	+15
Brown (Pardo)	20	17	-3
Black (Negro)	7	7	0
Light tanned (Moreno claro)	2	5	+3
Black (Preta)	1	4	+3
Yellow (Amarela)	1	2	+1
Mixed (Mulato)	1	1	0
Light (Clara)	0	1	+1
Other	1	3	+2
Do not know	4	1	-3
Total in %	100	100	0

Source: DataFolha

Skin colour: the denial of race and the abandon of the whitening ideal

What I am suggesting, in other words, is that skin colour may be emerging into the foreground among the elements considered in Brazil’s classification precisely because the ideal of whitening has become weaker. Put otherwise: as the ideology of whitening loses its hold, so the system of classification by racial types, which considered

physical traits and social position alone, is losing its salience. Skin colour begins to stand out, therefore, from the old racial system.

In order to explain the strength that skin colour has acquired in people's perceptions, we also need to recognize that this form of social classification (which makes explicit reference just to skin colour) is not only prevalent in contemporary western Europe, but also freely used in the Brazilian press and the common sense sociology, today backed by social scientists and geneticists of renown. Hence the intellectuals who signed the manifesto "One hundred and thirteen anti-racist citizens against the racial laws" assert the non-existence of human races, but ignore the existence of social colour groups, emphasizing only individual variation in skin colour as an objective and natural reality:

Human races do not exist. Genetics has proven that the iconic differences of so-called human 'races' are superficial physical characteristics that depend on a tiny portion of the estimated 25,000 genes of the human genome. Skin colour, an evolutionary adaptation to the levels of ultraviolet radiation found in different areas of the world, is expressed in less than 10 genes!

Even in Anglophonic sociology, once so imbued by the social reality of races, this naturalist and individualist theory of colour has its supporters. For example, Michael Banton, one of the most prominent English sociologists in the field of "race relations," has also adopted the discursive strategy that the antidote to racism is to affirm 'colour' as a natural, objective and individual reality, discarding any political or analytic use of the notion of race, which is taken to be merely a product of imposing a colour line.

This example shows that not only 'race' but also 'colour' and 'skin colour' can be used in the same context imbued with ideology and politics, and can be manipulated as natural concepts in the anti-racist struggle or in racist impositions. They can also serve as markers for a discourse of solidarity and a feeling of community belonging, which is ultimately what distinguishes ethnic discourse – a reference to a common origin – from a nationalist discourse – the sharing of the same societal and political destiny.

In the case of black identity in Brazil, various markers have already been utilized by the mobilizing discourse, recalling that, as Barthes (1994)

wrote, ethnic formation is also a political undertaking: colour (people of colour), race (the black race) and social position ("the negro is a place" as Guerreiro Ramos said [1995]). Undoubtedly the first two forms of mobilization were the most effective, despite being scientifically incorrect and imprecise. Unfortunately, human ethnicities, races and colours prove to be resistant to forms of enlightened reason. It seems impossible not only for human beings to escape society but also for them to move beyond more restricted forms of group solidarities. The individualist utopias, as Marx pointed out, are inventions only possible in complex societies formed by social classes and other elementary forms of belonging.

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