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## Race and Inequality in Brazil: The Afro-Brazilian Struggle in the Racial Democracy

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*This research paper examines the problematic areas of inequality and racism within Brazil. It focuses on the myth of a “racial democracy,” in Brazil closely focusing on the primary causes of disenfranchisement among Afro-Brazilians: Education, Race and Political Power. This research paper will reveal the influences of Portuguese colonization of the 1500’s, and how their influence created the formation of the “racial hierarchy” within Brazilian life and culture today. It will also offer correlations between the concept of race and economic success. This research paper will ultimately show how Afro-Brazilians have been trapped in a cycle of poverty and persecution that continues to leave them marginalized within their country with little to no access to a proper education and political power.*

With the colonization of the Portuguese in the 1500s, Brazil has taken on many African cultural characteristics. According to Silva in *Race and Politics in Brazil*, the Portuguese reliance on natural resources within Brazil required a heavy dependence on slaves imported from various parts of Africa. The heavy importation of slaves eventually created one of the largest Black populations outside of Africa and dramatically changed the culture and color of Brazil. Despite this dynamic, Brazil has been plagued with racism that disproportionately affects the Afro-Brazilian population. Some of these procedures have been more blatant like the whitening policies of the government within the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as there was a drive to create a more homogeneous culture and color. While these policies reveal the early attitude of the government toward Blacks, the policies of discrimination now are more covert. Throughout the country Black Brazilians have become increasingly

isolated from social resources whereas many Whites, those of European descent, have had more access to social resources. Resources such as education have much lower rates of completion amongst Afro-Brazilians across all levels, with much of the population not finishing past the fourth grade (Walker, 2002). This lack of educational achievement and discrimination have transcended in many other aspects of Afro-Brazilian life, such as *Labor*, where they systematically are placed in low-income jobs. Along with low rates of education and lack of economic resources many Afro-Brazilians (especially women) have experienced more discrimination in developing political power, then any other racial group in Brazil. Looking at the pattern of Afro-Brazilians being disproportionately denied equal access to many social resources, their race along with their social class has been the main factor of inequality.

### **The Division of Race within Brazil**

Within Brazil the perception of race is associated with skin color along with the economic gains of a person. In Brazil there is a perception of a racial democracy, where racial discrimination is non-existent and everyone has an equal share of democracy. This assumption is untrue and racism is very prevalent within Brazil, however, it is not displayed in the same manner that is seen in the United States. In the United States there existed a legal structure that kept African-Americans segregated from the start of the country until 1960's. Other implications of racism within Brazil are seen within the ability to lose their status as a "Black" person. For example, Pele, a famous soccer player, talked about his growth in his economic status, and equated that to being 'White'. "A Brazilian anecdote tells of a poor Afro-Brazilian about how hard life is in Brazil if one is Black. The rich man's response is. 'I know I used to be black'" (Walker, 2002, p.19). This reflects the ability of Afro-Brazilians to obtain a higher social class and also lose their association with being "Black". Although this shows the possible mobility of Afro-Brazilians this advancement occurs very rarely and many times the persons "black" heritage denotes their socio-economic position within society (a concept discussed later in the paper).

The definition of "Black" in itself is often a more complex issue within Brazil since the division between White and Black is not portrayed the same as seen in the United States. According to the Brazilian census there are 135 different categories that Blacks are divided into even though the preto (black) and pardo (brown) were the most common

descriptions (Reichmann, 1999, p. 8). Therefore of these 135 categories of "Black" the color spectrum is very broad and is going to encompass groups of people who are white to very dark-skinned. Walker gives an example of this and explains how these categories can become problematic in the description of race. "Many 'white' Brazilians would be considered black in the United States both by ancestry and appearance. Whereas some people who have spent their lives being black in the United States are considered white in Brazil" (Walker, 2002, p. 19). Therefore with events like the Civil Rights movement in the United States there was an ability for Blacks to stand behind each other under a common banner to fight discrimination, but in Brazil this "common identity" is much harder to draw upon.

### **Education**

Within Brazil there is a great disparity between the rate of equitable education for Afro-Brazilians and whites and as a result they are hindered in their ability to gain better paying jobs. Comparing the rates of educational success between Whites and non- Whites reflects the lack of resources that are made accessible to this population. The rate of Afro-Brazilian participation in the labor market is comparable to that of the White population, yet they are much less likely than whites to have beyond an elementary education. (Nascimento and Nascimento, 2001, p. 115), Looking at the statistics of illiteracy rates in the Northeastern part of Brazil (an area of a high concentration of Afro-Brazilians) compared to the total population are twice as illiterate as the rest of the population (Nascimento and Nascimento, 2001, p.115, fig. 5.12).

With the lack of quality education in the public school system and with the private school system only affordable to the White elites, many Afro-Brazilians remain unable to attain adequate education. This affects Afro-Brazilians at all levels since they cannot afford schooling at a young age this diminishes their ability to access higher education in universities. This trend of discrimination within education transcends into other areas that weakens their ability have a substantial living. With their lack of access to quality education on top of the already low school completion rate among Afro-Brazilians they are systematically denied opportunities that affect their ability to earn a decent wage. Afro-Brazilians have a very low economic influence within this country with over sixty-six percent of the population that makes barely a quarter of the minimum wage (Nascimento and Nascimento, 2001, p. 115, fig. 5.10). This leaves Afro-Brazilians at an unfair disadvantage because they are always struggling economically and cannot escape absolute poverty. Afro-Brazilians are disproportionately left working in domestic labor as homemakers and also serving the elite classes of society. "Eighty percent of employed black women are concentrated in manual occupation; more than half of these are domestic servants, and the rest are domestic task (washing, ironing, cooking) among the lowest paid in the economy" (Nascimento and Nascimento, 114, 2001, p.114, table 5.10). With the lack of economic resources and education the pattern of poverty becomes inherited for Afro-Brazilian families, and generations are left with the inability to access any of the

resources of empowerment-education and wealth.

The lack of jobs that provide a living wage also causes more members of the family to be active in the job market. This affects children the most because many families make less than minimum wage; therefore, they are often responsible for contributing to the family income. "Children often leave school to 'help the family' by working in the labor fields; cutting sugar cane, working harvest or mines" (Nascimento and Nascimento, 115, 2001, p. 115, table 5.12). Since these children have an inadequate education they have no other choice but to take on these low paying dangerous jobs. This not only hinders the children from growing up and being able to move out from poverty, but their lack of education also provides them with higher rate of facing job-discrimination(s) in the future. These patterns of discrimination are not a new phenomenon against the Afro-Brazilians, rather it is trend that has been set since the Portuguese colonization of the 1500's. Portuguese laborers provided economic and social gains for the elite White minority as they exploited the labor of Africans.

### **Political Power**

Gaining political empowerment is critical in obtaining the ability to challenge the status quo set in place during Portuguese Colonization. By denying this power from individuals many are kept from making any social advancement. As Afro-Brazilians attempt to gain political power they are hindered by discrimination because of their economic and educational status. While inequality is prevalent amongst this group their inability to gain political

authority in large numbers has prevented them from improving their conditions. To look closer at this injustice author Crook and Randle (1999) state in their essay *Race and Politics in Brazil* that Afro-Brazilians women have little or no representation in a parliament of 503 representatives from all over the country (p. 19). With little representation in the political arena it is important that women make their voices heard since they are they only ones that can represent a discriminated group (minority). "Our rights are constantly violated, and we face this form of domination because the power elite has never possessed the humanity to perceive the full ramifications of what they are doing" (Crook & Randal, 1999, p. 18). Therefore this group is often marginalized and they need to gain this position of political authority to change this discriminatory structure. According to Oliveira, not only are Afro-Brazilians women hindered by racial discrimination but they also face sexual discrimination. She points to the mentality underlining many of the factors as to why there is a lack of representation of these groups. "...both women and Afro-Brazilians are stereotyped as passive, irrational, dependent, and lacking in leadership and entrepreneurial ability". With these perceptions being linked to both of these groups they are already alleged incapable of performing their job regardless of their qualifications. These inflammatory stereotypes are far from a true depiction of these groups that originate from the paternalistic and racist views that dominate this culture. These stereotypes also often serve a self-defeating purpose since these groups often do not find solidarity amongst each other. "The old saying in Brazilian

political culture that "women do not vote for women and blacks do not vote for blacks" (Reichman & Oliveria, 1999, p. 168). Therefore if these groups are unable to support each other then they are not going to gain support from any other areas.

This lack of representation is often revealed in the educational inequalities that are present between the white and non-white groups. Since Afro-Brazilians have disproportionate educational opportunities then whites, they are also less educated when seeking these positions. This led to a disadvantage in their goals of obtaining any kind of political office. "Overall, Afro-Brazilian candidates were drafted from the working class, whereas whites came from upper-middle and middle-class" (Reichman, & Oliveria, 1999, p. 173). Although these groups were recruited their political aspirations are often undercut due their lack of an equal educational background. This gives the whites that are running for office a greater advantage over Afro-Brazilians since they are more likely to have a college education (a beneficial background to operate in such an office). For women this segregation originates from a different aspect, since they often are more likely to have higher averages of education levels than men. "They [women] were more likely to come from a narrow set of occupations that includes social workers, professionals... Women from traditionally "female" occupations were clearly favored in political recruitment"(Reichman & Oliverira, 1999, p. 177). While this population was clearly qualified for these positions they did not fit in the gender roles that are highly ridged within their country. This was especially evident within the 1992

elections as they had very few women candidates representing various political parties. "Given the rate of participation of women and morenos, it appears that this electoral race was mainly disputed mainly by white and Afro-Brazilian men"(Reichman &Oliveira, 1999, p.173). Since the Afro-Brazilians are typically much less educated and with women not participating in higher degree these groups are under represented and are often unable to gain a greater equality within the country.

### **Conclusion**

The ideal of the racial democracy is a popular conception of the Brazilian elite yet with the great disparities that exist with the Afro-Brazilians one has to question those assumptions. The Afro-Brazilian population faces segregation and racism throughout their lives, such as their unequal access to a substantial education that contributes to other inequalities in the labor market. These types of discrimination are portrayed much differently then in the Untied States, where segregation was an official policy of the government. In Brazil this contemporary form of racism was not seen as an "official policy" but many Afro-Brazilians were disproportionately affected and were left in a trap of poverty for generations. Although this system of racism is perpetrated differently it serves the same purpose of marginalizing a group of people in order to help another group advance. These trends have been evident with Afro-Brazilians since they first arrived within the country, as slaves working on the land for their owners.

Just like many of other aspects of colonization throughout Latin America, these lasting affects influenced many

generations since the Europeans left. In the case of Brazil the position that slaves were placed in as a group of people that were both exploited and left in an unequal social position has continued to be a present force even today.

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