Who Is Black in Brazil? A Timely or a False Question in Brazilian Race Relations in the Era of Affirmative Action?
Sales Augusto dos Santos
*Latin American Perspectives* 2006; 33; 30
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X06290122

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://lap.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/33/4/30

Published by:
*SAGE* Publications
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Latin American Perspectives, Inc.

Additional services and information for *Latin American Perspectives* can be found at:

**Email Alerts** http://lap.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

**Subscriptions** http://lap.sagepub.com/subscriptions

**Reprints** http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

**Permissions** http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Who Is Black in Brazil?

A Timely or a False Question in Brazilian Race Relations in the Era of Affirmative Action?

by

Sales Augusto dos Santos

Translated by Obianuju C. Anya

At the end of 2001 the question of race became part of the Brazilian national agenda under the pressure of black social movements for the establishment of quotas for admission of Afro-Brazilians to public universities. There was already strong resistance to this proposal. One of the principal arguments against this kind of affirmative action was and continues to be that Brazilian racial boundaries are not as rigid as those of the United States—that, given its substantial miscegenation, it is impossible to know who is black. The myth of racial democracy seriously limits realistic discussion of racism and racial identity because it prevents the identification of dysfunctional race relations. The question is not who is black but what sort of society Brazilians want to build.

Keywords: racism, racial discrimination, Brazilian racial classifications

Although discussing matters of race remains taboo in Brazilian society, the subject became an official part of the country’s political dialogue following the Third World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa, from August 30 to September 7, 2001. As a result of considerable pressure from black movement groups and the accords reached during the conference, the Brazilian media, especially the press, began to investigate questions of racial inequality in Brazil more thoroughly and openly, thus allowing their unprecedented inclusion on the national political agenda.¹ In 2001 the

Sales Augusto dos Santos is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Brasília, where he is investigating race relations in Brazil. He is also a member of the university’s Nucleus of Afro-Brazilian Studies and editor of Affirmative Action and the Fight against Racism in the Americas (2005). Obianuju C. Anya is a lecturer in Portuguese and Spanish at UCLA and the founder of Group Zikora Binah, a language-education collective dedicated to promoting unity and intercultural understanding among blacks throughout the Americas. Part of this article was published in Oliveira et al.’s (1998) A cor do medo: O medo da cor.
nation’s leading newspapers and print publications not only reported extensively on the Durban conference but also began to debate the subject of race in Brazil. During the months preceding and immediately following the conference, from July to September 2001, they published little-known statistics on racial inequality and a myriad of other race-related information rarely deliberated in the mass media.

According to the black activist Ivanir dos Santos (2001), the intense public discussion resulting from this unprecedented focus on the situation of blacks in Brazil secured a definitive place for the issue on the national political agenda or, at the very least, elevated it to a level at which it could never again be ignored. However, the subject on which most of the attention was focused was not the plight of blacks in Brazil but the proposed establishment of admissions quotas for black students in public universities. Newspapers and magazines invited well-known intellectuals, politicians, and black activists to discuss the issue while also running in-house editorial commentaries on the proposal. Prestigious publications such as the *Jornal do Brasil* agreed that it was indeed necessary to implement quotas as a tool for ensuring that blacks were afforded the opportunity to acquire higher education, but their opinion represented a minority voice obscured by overwhelming public opposition to affirmative action policies of this sort. A prominent member of the opposition was the *Folha de São Paulo*, the nation’s most influential and widely read newspaper, which took a clear stand against affirmative action while at the same time explicitly recognizing the existence of rampant and pervasive racial discrimination against blacks in Brazil. The principal argument the *Folha* and others used against the idea of admissions quotas for blacks in public universities or any race-based affirmative action program was the assertion that, given the notorious lack of rigidity in racial classifications in Brazil and the nation’s considerable levels of racial miscegenation, it would be impossible to distinguish who were the most deserving black beneficiaries of such policies. In other words: How can one establish programs to favor blacks when we cannot even determine who is black? This article endeavors to answer this question.

**WHO IS BLACK IN BRAZIL?**

It has been the great pride of Brazilians to affirm and promote the supposed racial democracy in which they live, especially when compared with the abhorrent “Negrophobia” demonstrated by their neighbors in the United States. Talk of race and racism is still a social taboo (Guimarães, 1999), and this is perfectly illustrated by the fact that while 89 percent of Brazilians
pollled in a nationwide study by the Datafolha Institute (the national survey and research arm of the Folha de São Paulo) agreed that their society was indeed racist, only 10 percent of respondents admitted that they themselves were racist (Turra and Venturi, 1995: 13). Such results remind one of a famously pragmatic statement made by Florestan Fernandes, one of the country’s most brilliant sociologists and a researcher on the subject of race relations in Brazil. According to Fernandes (1972: 42), “We have here a sort of reactionary prejudice, if you will, a prejudice against prejudice itself.” Brazilians openly discriminate against blacks but wholly resist any recognition of the fact that they would be capable of such a thing. Instead, ordinary citizens and even the government of Brazil look past their own behavior and responsibility while pointing accusatory fingers at what they see as “true” expressions of racism in other places, especially the United States.

The Brazilian government’s official stance on race relations until the end of the Itamar Franco administration was that of unfailing support of the notion that Brazilian society lacked any propensity toward prejudice and racial discrimination. The image that the government promoted both domestically and around the world lauded relations among ethno-racial groups in Brazil as harmonious and problem-free, and any difficulties experienced by blacks in the country were attributed to unfavorable socioeconomic status rather than racism. Only with the arrival of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1995 was this discourse abandoned in favor of a more realistic portrayal of race relations in Brazil. During a speech on November 20, 2005, Cardoso declared that racial discrimination against blacks did indeed exist in Brazil (Folha de São Paulo, November 21, 1995) and reiterated this fact in his opening statements at the international seminar “Multiculturalism and Racism: The Role of Affirmative Action in Modern Democratic States,” a meeting organized to debate racism in the nation and create public policies against discrimination (Souza, 1997: 11). His speech at the seminar established Cardoso as the first Brazilian president to reject publicly and officially the myth of a racial democracy in our country (1997: 14–16):

Here in Brazil we constantly live with and are surrounded by prejudice and discrimination. . . . Discrimination in our society has long been consolidated and is constantly reproduced. . . . This situation must be brought out into the open so that we can condemn it, and not merely with words but also through mechanisms and processes that will lead to a transformation of our society into one where truly democratic relations among different races, classes, and social groups can abound.

This break with the official party line was further concretized by Cardoso’s successor, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, who during his inaugural speech on
January 1, 2003, lamented, “There is much cruelty and discrimination in Brazil, especially against members of the black and the indigenous communities” (Silva, 2003: 6). This public admission of racism in Brazil, made by the country’s head of state, was followed by his pledge to create the Secretaria Especial de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial (Special Secretariat on Policies to Promote Racial Equality—SEPPIR), a department to which on March 21, 2003, he granted status equal to that of a federal ministry. In the same inaugural speech cited above, Lula stated:

At least half of our Brazilian people—the black and overwhelmingly impoverished half—have been seriously harmed by racism and discrimination. More than 64 percent of those living in poverty and at least 70 percent of indigents are black. Blacks also number greatest among the unemployed and underemployed populations of our country. . . . This cruel and unjust situation is not only a direct product of our national history and the history of the institution of slavery which lasted four centuries in Brazil, leaving behind profound and indelible marks on our society; it is also a result of the absence of public policies created to ameliorate and eradicate it. The Brazilian government should not remain neutral on issues of race and racism. Instead, it should actively ensure that all Brazilians are granted equal opportunities in the pursuit of a better life. . . . This new secretariat [SEPPIR] will give deserved priority to the promotion of racial equality in Brazil and, in conjunction with all levels of state and federal governments, will make way for the effective integration of projects and policies to that end.

While observing this remarkable abandonment of the long-cherished myth of a racial democracy in Brazil, one must not assume that the change in official discourse resulted solely from the “political will” and desire of the Cardoso and Lula administrations to fight racism. The demonstrated change in the government’s stance on racial discrimination was also a response to considerable domestic and international pressure against the fallacious idea of utopian harmony among ethno-racial groups in Brazil. By the time Cardoso declared that the emperor had no clothes, the international community no longer viewed Brazilian race relations with the benevolent eyes of the 1950s (Skidmore, 1992: 55). Within the country antiracism and black movement groups, armed with national polls and statistics revealing that society severely discriminated against blacks (Turra and Venturi, 1995), applied great pressure on the government to begin discussing the creation of policies to aid the victims of Brazilian racism. Curiously, however, at the very moment when certain progressive elements of the Brazilian government and society began to discuss and propose the implementation of affirmative action programs for blacks, the myth of racial democracy, which hitherto had seemed almost entirely discredited, once again resurfaced among social scientists with even more powerful and seductive appeal through such questions as the ubiquitous “Who is black in Brazil?”
In the Brazilian social context such an inquiry is not entirely senseless, given the fact that our system of racial classification is indeed considered “ambiguous” by some social scientists when faced with the high level of miscegenation among the country’s major racial groups. As observed by Hasenbalg (1997a), Guimarães (1997), Da Matta (1997), Reis (1997), Sansone (1996; 2004), and Turra and Venturi (1995), this system can be quite indeterminate and subjective because of the number and complexity of terms that Brazilians themselves use, for example, when asked by national pollsters and researchers from the national census bureau of the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics—IBGE) and Datafolha to assign themselves to specific race/color categories (Souza, 1997; Turra and Venturi, 1995).

The 1976 IBGE Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios (National Survey of Sample Households—PNAD) innovated the open registry of race and color by not limiting the classification choices of Brazilians to the four categories (white, black, yellow [Asian], and *pardo* [mixed-race, light-skinned black]) traditionally used to describe the populace and instead leaving the race field “open” to subject self-identification. Quite surprisingly, when left on their own to determine how they would be racially classified, Brazilians divided themselves into 135 different color categories (Silva, 1996: 82):9

Ninety-four percent of respondents spontaneously adopted the categories white, light, tawny, *moreno* [which can be translated as “brown,” “tan,” “dark,” or merely “dark-haired”], pardo, and black, while the rest were divided among the 129 other respondent-chosen classifications. Among the 6 dominant categories, 47 percent of Brazilians identified themselves as white and 32 percent described their color as *moreno*. Previously, when offered only surveys with the traditional “closed” category choices that did not include *moreno*, 55 percent of the same respondents declared themselves white, 34 percent pardo, 8 percent black, and 3 percent yellow.

The formidable Brazilian color gradient was quite a serious problem, since it rendered “any serious attempt at a quantitative analysis of race-based social stratification almost impossible” (Skidmore, 1992: 52). In order to standardize problem areas of rampant variance and ambiguity, the IBGE formally adopted the use of the *pardo* category to describe not only light-skinned or mixed-race blacks but also, with the publication of its 1980 national census data, all multiracial individuals not classified as white, black, or yellow.

Almost two decades later the Datafolha Institute conducted what the newspaper called “the most complete and authoritative scientific and journalistic investigation of color prejudice in Brazil,” published in book form in 1995 under the title *Cordial Racism* (Turra and Venturi, 1995). Even though
they reported a more than 50 percent drop in the 135 categories of race and color revealed by the 1976 IBGE survey, Datafolha researchers still bemoaned their “complete inability to decipher the true color of Brazilians.” Having also been allowed “open” self-classifications of race and color, respondents to the 1995 Datafolha survey identified themselves in terms of 62 categories. Forty-three percent of a national sampling of Brazilians described themselves as moreno (in different variations of light and dark), 39 percent as white, 7 percent as black, 1 percent as yellow, 1 percent as mulatto, and 6 percent as pardo, this last category being of special interest because 42.45 percent of Brazilians identified themselves as such on the “closed,” four-category race/color item of the 1991 IBGE national census report (IBGE, 1996; Turra and Venturi, 1995).

The novelty of the Datafolha investigation was not merely the large number of Brazilians who called themselves moreno but also their stark rejection of the pardo classification. As Turra and Venturi (1995) observed, “Nobody wants to be called pardo” in light of the veritable “can of worms” opened by the word. For that reason, the Datafolha researchers concluded that the IBGE color definitions were “outdated” and suggested that the term “pardo” be replaced by “moreno” in the Institute’s official census questionnaires (Turra and Venturi, 1995; Silva, 1996). However, according to Silva’s analysis of the race and color data collected by the 1976 survey, such a substitution would not make any ambiguous categories clearer and would lead to even more problems because “in Brazil the term ‘moreno’ can be used to describe almost anyone except blonds and redheads.” In Silva’s view, the introduction of a nebulous category such as “moreno” would undoubtedly open another “can of worms” given that the very same individuals who had so liberally and diversely classified themselves using the 135 descriptions mentioned in the 1976 survey did not find it difficult to place themselves in earlier surveys when limited only to the traditional categories of black, white, and pardo.

As these and other investigations prove, it is no small task for Brazilians to adopt a rigid and standardized system of biologically based racial classifications, making it, therefore, legitimate to ask, “Who is black in Brazil?” However, before our analysis becomes entirely paralyzed by ambiguities, it is necessary to note that the question arises only when we are charged with classifying subtle color gradations and intricately mixed ancestry. One must remember that identifying blacks and pardos in Brazil has never posed any great difficulty and in all national censuses (except for those of 1900, 1920, and 1970, when the race/color category was omitted) the two groups maintained an unquestionably strong statistical presence and visibility. Indigenous populations, in contrast, were registered separately only in the 1991 census, published in its entirety in 1996. Before then they were classified as pardos.
In light of the historical invisibility of native groups in the country’s official registries and their awkward assimilation into the “pardo” category by the IBGE, one would be justified in wondering who is indigenous in Brazil, but absolutely no one does because Native Americans are quite distinct and very clearly identifiable both physically and culturally. Not even among those who are minimally informed does one question which group in Brazil has been historically stripped of its land and physically decimated since the arrival of Portuguese colonizers. With the same ease that we can openly identify who is a member of an indigenous tribe on the basis of his or her biological phenotype, we also intimately relate natives to the physical and symbolic violence they have always suffered in Brazil, which shows that their racial identity can also be defined on the political and sociocultural plane. Using the same logic, I ask, who is still wondering if the black population is identifiably unique and frequently the victim of racial discrimination in Brazil now that we have witnessed their plight, officially recognized by the government (through declarations made by Presidents Cardoso and Lula), and heard confessions of their mistreatment by society through the comprehensive research conducted by Datafolha (Turra and Venturi, 1995)?

One can argue that indigenous groups in Brazil did not undergo a process of miscegenation as intense and complex as that which is visible among blacks and their descendants. No respondent in either the IBGE or the Datafolha survey classified him or herself as indigenous, and therefore natives were excluded from the “complex web of racial terminology” uncovered by these major national studies on racial identity. We would not dispute the fact that socio-geographical isolation and the infrequency of “race mixing” among indigenous populations and their black and white counterparts solidified society’s view of Native American ethno-racial identity as recognizable, unique, and autonomous. And if this argument is plausible—if there are no doubts about the identity of indigenous groups given their singular abstention from our celebrated Brazilian miscegenation—why have they remained invisible in demographic censuses for so long? Why have they also not appeared in the statistical data on violence gathered by the Movimento Nacional de Direitos Humanos (National Human Rights Movement—MNDH)?

The MNDH’s 1997 figures on reported homicides showed that of the 11,852 victims documented by the survey, 811 were black, 633 white, 337 moreno, and 86 pardo. Classifying these murder victims in terms of “white” and “nonwhite” according to the criteria of social scientists Carlos A. Hasenbalg and Nelson do Valle Silva (1983), a startling 1,234 homicide cases were shown to have involved nonwhite victims, almost double the number of white victims identified in the study.

Despite their invisibility in official statistical data, the ethno-racial identity of indigenous Brazilians is never questioned. However, the existence of true
blackness and black identity is incessantly debated, regardless of the strong and constant presence of Afro-Brazilians in official censuses throughout all of our nation’s recorded history of national demographic surveys and the documented statistics of racial inequality published by highly respected private institutions such as the Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Sócio-Econômicos (Intersindical Department of Socioeconomic Studies and Statistics—DIEESE). As incredible as it may seem, in stark contrast with their recognition of indigenous identity, Brazilian intellectuals declare themselves unable to decipher who is black in Brazil, even though the police, the justice system, public and private employers, the media (especially television), and other social groups and institutions can instantly identify blacks when physically or symbolically attacking them, denying them jobs for which they are qualified, and punishing them more severely than their white counterparts for committing crimes of equal or comparable gravity (Adorno, 1995; DIEESE/INSPIR, 1999; Araújo, 2000).

When one analyzes the MNDH records of police violence and homicide cross-referenced with data in which the victim’s race is identified, one notes a clear racial pattern among targets of police brutality and murder. Data on uniformed police violence and “unofficial” police affiliated death squads show that law enforcement officers have no trouble identifying blacks (Table 1). Police officers and death squads accused of homicide seem to differentiate between whites and nonwhites without any ambiguity and also most frequently choose blacks as their preferred targets. According to the MNDH numbers provided in Table 1, federal government police apparatuses (military and civil police) kill three times more blacks than whites. If one aggregated all homicide victims identified as black (105), pardo (4), and moreno (33), the total would be 142 police killings of nonwhites and only 33 murders of whites. Unofficially affiliated police death squads and other criminals demonstrate the same capacity to identify and kill blacks.

Responses to a 1997 Datafolha survey confirmed that in the city of São Paulo blacks fear the police much more than whites, especially when they
have been previously stopped, questioned, and searched by law officers. According to Datafolha, 34 percent of whites interviewed had been stopped and searched by the police while 46 percent of pardos and 48 percent of blacks had received this treatment. Furthermore, black and pardo respondents reported incidences of physical aggression perpetrated by police against them at a rate of 14 and 12 percent respectively, each more than double the 6 percent of whites with the same complaint (Folha de São Paulo, June 2, 1997).

The figures cited above show clearly that a victim’s race is one of the strongest variables determining susceptibility to police violence and that blacks are a favorite target easily identified by their aggressors. Black Brazilians are killed by police at a rate of three times that of whites. Therefore, though it may prove difficult to determine who is black biologically because of the ambiguities of miscegenation, this identification is rather simple and often fatal for blacks on the social front. In other words, while we are unable to prove the scientific or biological existence of the black race, it is a certainly a social reality, one that, when manifested at its worst, serves as a determinant of homicide.

Given that Brazil is a country defined by race (Schwarcz in Guimarães, 1997: 235) and color is of fundamental importance to one’s social identity and legitimate positioning within the nation’s societal structures (Guimarães, 1997; Hasenbalg and Silva, 1983; Hasenbalg, 1979; Silva and Hasenbalg, 1992), why is it so difficult to tell who is black in Brazil? What is the great challenge in identifying a major ethno-racial group in a country where race and color are so critical and so prominent in its inhabitants’ lives? Answering these inquiries would lead back to the complexities and intricacies of the main question who is black in Brazil, which is not easily answered even when one considers the data presented above. At the very core of the question is a need for Brazilians themselves to recognize precise boundaries and draw clear lines between races, and this, according to all experts and specialists in the field of race relations, has proven especially difficult. Black movement groups at the end of the 1970s attempted to establish a bipolar black-and-white classification, counting as black anyone identified as pardo or mixed (MNU, 1988). This approach was not widely adopted, even among the black and mestizo masses. Curiously, however, though Brazilian society as a whole insisted on adhering to its multiracial self-classification, the black movement’s attempt at a simpler, more politically relevant definition seemed to resonate among some of the principal academics and social scientists in the field of race relations, generating one notable adaptation of the black movement’s classification model.

In their exhaustive research and writings on race realities in Brazil, Hasenbalg and Silva devised a bipolar categorization system and identified all their subjects as “white” or “nonwhite.” This classification method was important, because their research and figures from the IBGE’s various sur-
veys indicated that there were no significant socioeconomic differences among blacks and pardos but both groups differed tremendously from whites (Silva, 1996).\textsuperscript{16} They also found that racial discrimination in Brazil was used as “an instrument for the competitive elimination of certain social groups in the distribution of material and symbolic benefits, most obviously resulting in the great advantage of whites over nonwhites” (Hasenbalg and Silva, 1983: 144). In other words, Brazilian racism does not distinguish between blacks and pardos, and the multiracialism apparent in our vast color continuum cannot be synonymous with racial democracy when lighter-skinned pardos find themselves in no better socioeconomic or political situation than ordinary blacks (DIEESE/INSPIR, 1999).

In Brazil one does not witness any considerable number of blacks and pardos playing active roles in visible areas of the public sphere save popular music and football, two spaces that they have traditionally occupied and in which racism seemingly has not impeded the recognition of their competence and talent. In the Cardoso administration, a government that claimed great sensitivity to racial discrimination in Brazil, there was not a single black or pardo cabinet member. An important exception was the president himself, who in lighter moments would joke that he was “a little mulatto, with one foot in the kitchen” (an idiomatic reference to slave history and Brazilian culture in which the domain of black female domestic servants and their pardo children is the kitchen while white heads of household, fathers of these illegitimate offspring, rule the parlor) \textit{(Folha de São Paulo, May 31, 1994)}.\textsuperscript{17} The current president, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, however, has made some advances in this area, appointing three black cabinet members: Gilberto Gil, minister of culture; Marina Silva, minister of the environment; and Matilde Ribeiro, special secretary for the promotion of racial equality.\textsuperscript{18}

In June 1998, 110 years after the abolition of slavery in Brazil, one of the nation’s high courts appointed the first-ever black federal judge, Carlos Alberto Reis de Paula, to preside over the Supreme Labor Tribunal. Five years later, on June 25, 2004, the highest court in the land, the Supreme Federal Tribunal, named its first black justice, Joaquim Benedito Barbosa Gomes. The Brazilian Congress had its greatest black membership from 1995 to 1998, with 13 out of a total of 594 legislators (Alberto, 1997: 24). Sadly, academia fares no better in its dearth of nonwhite leadership, pardo professors being rare in public federal universities and black ones practically nonexistent.

Regardless of the “ambiguity” of Brazilian race and color classifications to which academics, pundits, and intellectuals continually allude and in spite of the seemingly infinite “variety of color and race terms utilized by the general populace to describe itself” (Hasenbalg, 1997b: 67), the racial stratification of power and prestige in Brazil is very well defined and extremely
rigid. Many identifiable privileged social spaces are occupied and reserved exclusively for whites, and other easily recognized and much less favorable places are deemed suitable only for the black and mestizo masses. Brazilians are also aware of positions, functions, professions, knowledge, lifestyles, and social strata historically dominated and appropriated by whites (mostly of the male gender and bearing specific physical characteristics considered ideal). Perhaps this is the reason there is so much doubt about who is black in Brazil, especially when determining those who should benefit from affirmative action or where there might be some sort of gain or advantage to being thus identified. Since blacks have always been viewed as unequal, disadvantaged outsiders, it is difficult to identify them in a context of perceived power and privilege. As a result of this racialized delimitation of desirable social places and positions, deemed only appropriate or rightfully belonging to whites and excluding blacks and mestizos almost entirely, it has become natural to associate superiority and social and material privilege with “the white world.” Consequently, in an effort to better their lot in society, blacks actively seek to “lighten” themselves and their descendants both socially and physically by way of racial self-denial, miscegenation, and intermarriage, accepting with little question society’s negative view of blackness and attempting to counteract their exclusion and negative image through an ever-increasing approximation to whiteness, at the grave risk of psychological damage provoked by rejection, self-hatred, and identity fragmentation. This is perhaps one of the most perverse aspects of racism in Brazil—the perpetual quest of the victim of racial discrimination to achieve an unattainable equality of the races through racist means (Souza, 1983).

Through these sociopolitical lenses it is quite possible to identify blacks in Brazil. They are the “brown people” so virulently despised by television’s Caco Antibes (a famous character in a long-running Brazilian comedy series) and referred to by thinly veiled racialized codes that all viewers clearly recognize and understand. They are also the same black members of Brazilian society that intellectuals and academics have long admitted are racially discriminated against. However, now that the implementation of public policies specifically geared to their advantage is being discussed in an effort to ameliorate the damage caused by said discrimination, some of the same social scientists who brought to the forefront studies that concretely proved that blacks are disadvantaged have begun to question who these blacks are, given their racial impurity and the country’s inscrutable grades of miscegenation. Now that the establishment of special quotas for black student admission into Brazil’s free and prestigious public universities is being proposed, professors can no longer tell who these new students should be.

It is impossible to answer the question who is black in Brazil not because Brazilians cannot identify blacks but because, when faced with the task of
defining racial boundaries and admitting our society’s tremendous discrimina-
tion against those excluded from the inner sanctum of racial privilege, we
inevitably fall back on the comforting myth of racial democracy and offer mis-
ccegenation and multiculturalism as definitive proof and symbols of our sup-
posedly harmonious race relations. This myth of racial democracy, shrouded
in the mantle of illusions such as the belief that racial mixture has made it
impossible to tell groups apart, thus bringing an end to color distinctions in
Brazil, is quite seductive and overwhelming. And with the elimination of color
boundaries and affirmation of a Brazilian “moreno-ness” we would arrive at
the utopist “meta-race” theorized by Gilberto Freyre, the principal proponent
of the myth of racial democracy (Silva, 1996).

From a biological perspective, IBGE and Datafolha research indicates
that the existence of a multiracial Brazilian society cannot be denied. How-
ever, one must not be too overwhelmed by the astounding 135 colors
and races mentioned in the 1976 and 1995 surveys, since 94 percent of the
respondents from both studies classified themselves within six principal
categories (Silva, 1996; Turra and Venturi, 1995). But, as previously men-
tioned, group relations on the political and socioeconomic planes are quite
different, and power and prestige in Brazil are distinctly racialized. Blacks
and pardos are not represented equally in all social strata, nor does one wit-
ness multiracialism in all areas and levels of interaction. Socially, racial
lines are clear and rigid, with whites occupying the top echelons of power
and privilege, actively excluding their black and pardo counterparts from
these spheres and thus denying them any advantages or benefits therein.

Unfortunately, it is almost inevitable that “biological racial mixture” will
be confused with “sociological racial interactions” (Hasenbalg, 1997a:
237), and this mistake often generates the greatest illusion. Social relations
magically become identical with celebrated and idealized biological reali-
ties, and the diversity and multiplicity born of miscegenation lead one to
believe the empirical falsehood that politically and socioeconomically all
colors and races are equally and proportionately divided. The confusion
has also been fueled by the black movement’s attempt to integrate the two
categories “preto” (black-skinned) and “pardo” into the politicized and
socially amalgamated classification “negro” (black), given that some acad-
emics treat sociology and biology identically and now, as demonstrated by
the words of political scientist Fábio Reis (1997: 229), seem to find it dif-
icult to describe anyone: “It is quite difficult to accept the criterion that has
been adopted and affirmed by the black movement in which they join under
the negro rubric all mestizos and pardos. Saying that anyone with one drop
of black blood is black means the same as calling anyone with one drop of
white blood white.”
Reis goes even farther in his rejection of the black movement’s efforts to establish a more unified and simplified definition of blackness, calling it “a misguided attempt at mimicking North American standards of race relations.” U.S. blacks, however, are defined/identified as such by biological criteria that they accept and choose to maintain (Gilliam, 1997: 68), while members of the black movement in Brazil seek to define their race in political and socioeconomic terms. The black movement, for example, wholeheartedly rejects the myth of a Brazilian racial democracy, which is based on biological miscegenation criteria, in contrast to the U.S. model of accepting racial classifications born of perceived biological differences. Pardos in Brazil are grouped with blacks because of shared realities of racial discrimination and not merely as a result of their having “a drop of black blood.” As demonstrated by Hasenbalg and Silva’s (1983) research, the more significant and powerful common denominator among blacks and pardos is sociological racism, not biological bloodlines, and therefore the two can be most reasonably united in the social effort to form one black racial group.

Another seductive aspect of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil is the promise that the elimination of biological race and color differences through miscegenation automatically erases all sociological race discrimination. How can one discriminate against those who do not exist? If it is impossible to identify biologically who is black, it also becomes implausible that discrimination can occur against blacks socially. This myth of racial democracy renders all blacks invisible, negating their very existence and stripping them of their uniqueness and humanity. Thus, it reinforces the most fundamental aspect of racism—the dehumanization of the racially oppressed (Santos, 1996).

Nevertheless, the appeal of the myth is so powerful that, although it has been debunked by even the notoriously inert and myopic government and successfully challenged by notable experts in the field of race relations, it still manages to blind some social scientists who earlier pioneered research on the discrimination of blacks and pardos in Brazil but now claim to be unable to identify their own study subjects. They can no longer tell who is victimized by racism in Brazil because these groups might surpass their present status as mere objects of study, benefit from some sort of “affirmative action policy,” and one day dispute the hegemonic dominance of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural elite of which the scientists are prominent members.

CONCLUSION

In light of the statistics and data available from public and private sources of research, one cannot question the existence of vast inequalities between blacks...
and whites and the racism perpetrated against blacks in all areas of Brazilian society. Nevertheless, a frank public debate on racism in Brazil remains taboo, complicating tremendously any discussion of policies that would be created specifically to address present manifestations of the historical and institutional harm inflicted upon blacks. Since it is now impossible to deny that blacks in Brazil have been greatly disadvantaged in favor of whites (Adorno, 1995; Araújo, 2000; Cardoso, 1997; DIEESE/INSPIR, 1999; Fernandes, 1972; Hasenbalg, 1997; 1979; Hasenbalg and Silva, 1983; MJ/MRE, 1996; MNU, 1988; Oliveira et al., 1998; Santos, 1997; Silva and Hasenbalg, 1992; Souza, 1983), some seek to negate the racial singularity and uniqueness of black discrimination victims that make them eligible to benefit from programs promoting greater access to power and privilege. New arguments to convince Brazilians of the needlessness of these policies and their inability to be effectively applied are constantly introduced while hands are thrown up in frustration over the supposed futility of solving the country’s race problems.

In Brazil we are not race- or color-blind, but many choose not to see racism and its virulent effects on the lives of blacks. Statistics prove that there is no insurmountable difficulty in establishing a functional and standard system of racial classification in Brazil because we voluntarily classify ourselves as black, white, pardo, yellow, and indigenous when interviewed by census officials and are also easily identified as such by fellow citizens, the police, and the justice system. We have no problem knowing who is black, pardo, white, yellow, or indigenous but categorically refuse to acknowledge racial discrimination and the universal or individualized programs necessary to counteract its ravages upon our society and collective conscience.

The question we should ask ourselves is not who is black in Brazil but what sort of society we want to build in this country. Do we prefer to remain formally blind to racial identity while tacitly accepting the existence of prejudice against blacks and other groups, or will we instead acknowledge a discursive consciousness of racial identity and actively fight against discrimination? The myth of racial democracy considerably limits any serious or realistic discussion of racism and racial identity in Brazil because it encourages the maintenance of a dangerous status quo in which dysfunctional race relations cannot be identified, commented upon, or denounced. In this manner black and pardo youth will not stop dying prematurely, the police will continue to kill an outrageously disproportionate number of blacks, and any data collected by watchdog organizations alerting us to these realities will be rejected or simply ignored. Should we choose to base our society and social relations upon a myth, we will indeed continue to live together in our biological plurality, meanwhile suffering through frightfully unequal racial interactions on the social plane.
NOTES

1. In 2001 some nationally circulated newspapers even hired an editorial specialist on race in Brazil to produce monthly commentaries on the subject. For example, the Correio Brasiliense, the most important and widely read newspaper in the nation’s capital, hired as its monthly editorial commentator on race matters Sueli Carneiro, doctor of education from the University of São Paulo and director of the Geledés Institute of Black Women.

2. It may be premature to assert this, but there are strong indications that the race issue in Brazil has been definitively added to the country’s political agenda, having featured visibly in the electoral platforms of all major 2002 presidential candidates. Many of the contenders, including then presidential hopeful Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, proposed strategies to fight racism and promote the inclusion of blacks in areas of power, prestige, and leadership through affirmative action programs and the implementation of quotas for black students in federal public universities, which are traditionally the best schools in the nation.

3. According to the University of São Paulo professor Kabengele Munanga (1996: 215), in April 1994 a state minister of education declared during his opening statements at the Fourth Afro-Brazilian Congress that discrimination against blacks in Brazil was not racial but based on socioeconomic factors, officially ratifying the country’s supposed racial democracy.

4. Through its creation of the Palmares Cultural Foundation in 1988, the administration of President José Sarney (1985–1990) initiated a break with the government’s official discourse on race. While the foundation occupied itself principally with cultural matters, it had as one of its main objectives the economic and political security of blacks in the Brazilian social context. Though the organization’s pursuit of this end did not explicitly reveal its opinion on the existence of racism and racial inequality, it informally acknowledged a need to address these problems.

5. This seminar, which took place in July 1996 at the University of Brasília, was organized by the Department of Human Rights of the Ministry of Justice’s Secretariat on Rights and Citizenship. The university was the first federal public university in Brazil to establish admissions quotas for black students (in 2004).

6. The concept of the myth adopted here is elaborated by Hasenbalg (1996: 237): “The use of the word myth to describe the idea of ‘racial democracy’ refers to the nature of the concept as an illusion or deception and seeks to point out the vast distance between the reality of the existence of prejudice, discrimination, racial inequality, and its denial on the discursive plane. This notion therefore does not correspond with the narrative definition of myth used in anthropology.”

7. In 2002, as a result of intense lobbying and pressure applied by black movement groups, then-presidential candidate Luís Inácio Lula da Silva promised in his televised electoral campaign to implement quotas for blacks in public universities. Two years later, as head of state, Lula sent to the Brazilian congress a legislative bill that mandated that 50 percent of all federal public university admissions be reserved for public high-school graduates, blacks, members of indigenous groups, and the disabled.

8. The debate on race and color in Brazil is not new to Brazilian intellectuals and has been active for more than 100 years. At the end of the nineteenth century, the opinions of scientists in the field of race studies played a fundamental role in the elaboration of racist social policies that excluded blacks and their descendants from participating in the burgeoning free market in Brazil, considering them racially inferior to white immigrants, who received government-funded support for enterprise and agriculture. As a result of this debate and the influence of the intellectuals of the day, the Brazilian government on June 28, 1890, issued Decree Number 528, which legalized the immigration of whites to the country and expressly prohibited the entry of Africans and Asians (see Santos, 2002; 1997).
9. The IBGE’s 1976 survey registered the following terms used by survey respondents to describe their race/color: chestnut, Gaelic, white, dark white, slightly white, whitish, pinkish white, yellow, yellowish, burnt yellow, yellowing, browned, reddened, blue, navy blue, Bahian, very white, very light, very dark, yellow-white, honey white, brownish white, pale white, burnt white, freckled white, dirty white, whitey, bronze, bronzed, black Indian, white Indian, Cape Verde, coffee, café au lait, cinnamon, cinnamonish, light chestnut, dark chestnut, chocolate, copper, tinted copper, coffee-colored, cinnamon-colored, milky, golden, pink, firm colored, Creole, waxy, polished, whitened, dark, darkish, jambo, orange, lilac, blond, light blond, blondish, marine, a little yellow, a little white, a little black, honey, mestizo, miscegenated, mixed, brownie, bronzed brown, cinnamon brown, chestnut brown, light brown, very brown, pardo brown, purple brown, red brown, wheat-colored brown, mulatto, black, blackie, pale, burned, pardo, light pardo, Polish, barely light, barely brown, black-skinned, whitening, almost burnt black, beach-burnt, sunburned, regular, tinted, rose, burnt rose, purple, redhead, Russian, redbone, toasted, wheatish, muddy, green, and red.

10. The 1995 Datafolha survey registered 62 respondent-identified race and color categories. The 11 most popular terms, utilized by more than 90 percent of the study subjects, were yellow, white, light, dark, moreno [brown], light brown, dark brown, mulatto, Negro [black], pardo, and preto [black-skinned].

11. The sequence of national demographic surveys and publications (every ten years) was broken twice, in 1910 and 1930, when for political reasons no federal census was taken in Brazil. The country remained uninformed about its racial composition during the decades of 1910 and 1930, with no survey at all, and in the 1970s and 1980s, when the military dictatorship omitted the race/color item from the census questionnaire, alleging that it was racist to include it. Demographic statistics from the 1960 census were published only in 1978 (Berquó in Turra and Venturi, 1995: 40–41).

12. The color/race classification criteria adopted in previous censuses were not uniform. In 1872 the population was divided into freemen and slaves, and the terms used to categorize them were white, black, pardo, caboclo [white-indigenous mix], and mestizo. In 1890 the classifications were white, black, caboclo, and mestizo.

13. Rosane Freire Lacerda (1998) highlighted three factors that promoted the invisibility of the violence against indigenous groups in print and televised news media: (a) the difficulty of local access to information, (b) anti-indigenous local government bodies, and (c) the proliferation of bigoted and stereotypical images of native populations.

14. The Movimento Nacional de Direitos Humanos (National Human Rights Movement MNDH) created a database on homicides in Brazil to register the fatalities reported in print and televised news in 26 federal districts. This article refers to figures from 1997.

15. Brazilian news outlets normally do not report the color or race of individuals involved in their articles. Of all the incidents recorded in the MNDH 1997 database, only 15.75 percent of the cases specified the victim’s color. Of a total 11,852 registered homicides, 82.25 percent involved victims of unspecified racial origin (MNDH, 1998).

16. Although some specialists on Brazilian race relations reject this bipolar “white” and “nonwhite” classification, it still is utilized by many respected experts in the field. Others who do not adopt the Hasenbalg-Silva model have recognized the effectiveness of binary categories and devised their own. Guimarães, for example, uses “whites/blacks and mulattos” and “black/nonblack” (1992; Castro and Guimarães, 1993). Even though Sansone (1996) has criticized what he calls “a hypothetical racial polarization of Brazil,” he still uses terms such as “the black-mestizo population” and “the black-mestizo masses” to group blacks in one ethno-racial category. Furthermore, the tendency to amalgamate the categories “black” and “pardo” is not limited to academia. Ex-vice president Marco Maciel (1997: 21) declared that Brazil is “the largest African nation outside the African continent,” and such a summation would not have
been possible without joining blacks and pardos in one group. Some journalists at the nation’s most important newspapers also unite blacks and pardos under one racial classification, thus estimating the Afro-Brazilian population at 45 percent of the nation’s citizenry (Folha de São Paulo, August, 23, 1998). For more information on racial categorization in Brazil, see Skidmore (1992), Sansone (1996), and Gilliam (1997).

17. Edson Arantes do Nascimento (Pelé), the most famous black man in Brazil (named athlete of the century), was special minister of sports during the Cardoso administration from January 1, 1995, to April 23, 1998.


19. Access to power and prestige is not only gendered but also requires physical perfection, since rarely does it accommodate the inclusion of disabled persons. Nevertheless, race appears to be the most influential determinant of social placement and stratification. The IBGE 1998 survey revealed that white women with 12 or more years of formal education who live in the southeastern and northeastern regions of Brazil on average earned less money than white men of similar backgrounds, but they still earned more than black men and women of identical circumstances (Folha de São Paulo, August 23, 1998). Another investigation on the Human Development Index, conducted in 1997 by historian Wânia Sant’Anna and Federal Fluminense University political economics professor Marcelo Paixão, demonstrated that “the standard of life among blacks in Brazil resembled that of residents of Zimbabwe and Lesotho, two of the poorest nations in Africa. . . . While average Brazilians, black and white, ranked at 63rd place worldwide in terms of standard of living, the poorest ones—principally black—came in at 120th place (Folha de São Paulo, November 2, 1997).

20. Caco Antíbes was a popular character on the television situation comedy Sai de Baixo, which aired on Sunday nights from March 31, 1996, to March 31, 2002, on the Globo Network, the largest, most widely viewed, and most powerful network in Brazil.

REFERENCES

Adorno, Sérgio

Alberto, Luiz

Araújo, Joel Zito

Cardoso, Fernando Henrique

Castro, Nadya and Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães

Da Matta, Roberto

DIEESE (Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Sócio-Econômicos)/INSPIR
(Instituto Sindicato Interamericano pela Igualdade Racial)
Fernandes, Florestan

Gilliam, Angela

Guimarães, Antonio Sérgio Alfredo

Hasenbalg, Carlos A.

Hasenbalg, Carlos A. and Nelson do Valle Silva

IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística)

Lacerda, Rosane Freire

Maciel, Marco

MJ (Ministério da Justiça) and MRE (Ministério das Relações Exteriores)

MNDH (Movimento Nacional de Direitos Humanos)

MNU (Movimento Negro Unificado)

Munanga, Kabengele

Oliveira, Dijaci Davi, et al.

Reis, Fábio Wanderley
Sansone, Lívio
Santos, Ivanir dos
Santos, Sales Augusto dos
Silva, Luís Inácio Lula da
Silva, Nelson do Valle
Silva, Nelson do Valle and Carlos A. Hasenbalg
Skidmore, Thomas E.
Souza, Jessé (ed).
Souza, Neusa Santos
Turra, Cleusa and Gustavo Venturi