

# Rethinking Brazil's 'Racial Democracy'

A discourse of the mixed race experience and inter-racial unions

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The invalidity of Brazil's notion of a 'racial democracy' is a commonly discussed theme of contemporary race studies in the context of this racially fluid and complex country.

Sociologist Maria Root analyzes this mode of thought perpetuated by Brazilian society which asserts that racism does not exist in Brazil:

Prior to the emergence of the Black consciousness movement in Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s, pervasive miscegenation and the "mulatto escape hatch," combined with the fact that Brazil has never known anything comparable to Jim Crow segregation, had helped to perpetuate the myth of racial democracy (Root 1992).

During the ISP process I personally observed Brazilian informants using the explanation that "frequent racial mixing" should be equated with the absence of racism. Interviews consistently revealed that many Brazilians believe that the large mixed race population illustrates racial equality. In the past three months I have been reading various works discussing the phenomenon of inter-racial relationships in Brazil which provide a current perspective of racial mixing in the country. As a mixed race individual (who affirms a multi-racial identity embracing all ethnicities), I have also been considering the differences between the mixed race experiences in the United States compared with this experience in Brazil. Many scholars of racial and ethnic studies have revealed the falsities of the 'racial democracy' utilizing various theoretical frameworks; here I reflect on and demystify this notion within the context of the mixed race experience and inter-racial relationships in Brazil.

The mixed race individual in the United States is often marginalized and not accepted (or not fully accepted) by the individual's respective ethnic groups. This is in part due to the rigid racial barriers which exist in the U.S. as reflected by the country's social groupings and racial categories of the census and other official forms. It was not until the 2000 census that the U.S. allowed citizens to mark more than one racial category. This was in fact a change instigated by a movement of individuals who raised the question of accurately representing the mixed race population in America. The reality that the option of choosing more than one racial category on

the U.S. census prior to 2000 indicates that mixed race individuals are a rarity in the country. A September 2000 issue of *Newsweek* published an article entitled “The New Face of Race” which described the phenomenon of racial mixing in the states. I have read and collected articles similar to this in recent years which illustrates that the issue of racial mixing is a relatively new subject which concerns and interests the American people. After three months in Brazil, I have never seen an article of this nature nor could I find such an article in São Luis’ public library. This absence of media coverage would seem to indicate that racial mixing is common in Brazil and is also reflected in their census categories which include a ‘pardo’ (mixed, brown or mulatto) category. By identifying these differences in recent modifications of racial categories of the census and media attention it can be concluded that racial mixing is considered and discussed more by the American people than by Brazilians because it is an occurrence present in the public eye.

In my personal experience, I have never experienced any racist behavior but have never felt completely comfortable in any mono-racial social group (including an only white group or only Japanese group). The mixed race individual is often forced to ‘choose a side’ – a decision which can often lead to rejection by the neglected ethnic group. A friend of mine who is the daughter of a black father and white mother grew up with mostly white friends and was ridiculed for this by black peers. These peers would ask her why she “talked white,” dressed white,” and “acted white.” She was called a ‘traitor’ and ‘oreo’ – labels which were painful and confusing for her. In addition to marginalization and personal attacks of self-esteem, racial ambiguity also leads to interrogation in the U.S.: People ask questions such as “So what are you anyway?...What’s your background?...your nationality?” This type of questioning often reinforces the feeling of a need to ‘choose’ which can consequently lead to further alienation by the neglected group. Whereas in the U.S. a racially ambiguous person is somewhat of a rarity,

an individual in Brazil who is a descendent of European, Indian and African ancestors is not considered unusual in any capacity.

In speaking with ‘moreno’ Brazilians (individuals with darker skin and hair, often with phenotypically African features) I found that these people do not experience or perceive this type of marginalization that occurs with mixed race individuals in the United States. It is apparent that the size of the “mixed” population in Brazil is large, cited as approximately 40% by IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) and thus racial ambiguity is not questioned as it is in the states. What appears to be acceptance of the mixed race individual in Brazil is also illustrated in their previously discussed census form which I was able to view at the IBGE center in São Luis, Maranhão. The ‘pardo’ category is unique to Brazil. The imposition of such a category on U.S. forms would certainly be reacted to with shock and incomprehension – Americans would not be able to justify the need for a category a ‘mulatto’ category on the census. Yet the self-labeling of ‘pardo’ in Brazil is perceived as common and Brazilians often refer to the large mixed race population with pride. From an initial consideration it seems logical to conclude that the substantial number of mixed race individuals in Brazil demonstrates the high frequency of interracial relationships and thus an absence of racism. I have discovered this mode of thought with disturbing frequency among both Brazilians and Americans – a myth of Brazil’s racial paradise which is perpetuated at the global level. This thought process fails to acknowledge the true history of miscegenation in Brazil and the current state of race relations (including inter-racial marriages) in Brazil.

It is true that miscegenation occurred with frequency in Brazil’s past but it must be acknowledged that this mixing did not occur on a basis of equality. Maria Root cites:

Early Portuguese settlers in Brazil were primarily single men, so interracial unions with African slaves were a common and necessary means of increasing the population, in the United States, settlers came in family units, so although interracial unions did occur in the United States, their frequency and meaning were quite different from in the Brazilian case. (Root 28)

So it can then be concluded that the relationships which gave rise to this large mixed race population were not based on any form of equality as suggested by the term ‘racial democracy.’ A clear historical difference between settlers of the U.S. and Brazil accounts for the respective racial mixing (or lack thereof) in these two countries. Brazilian settlers used African women as a tool to satisfy their sexual desires and to serve the necessity of augmenting the population. The “mulatto escape hatch” often referred to by academics was born out of this white male master-black slave relationship. The lives of mulatto children of the white slave master were generally improved over that of their black mother. British anthropologist Peter Wade identifies Brazilians’ negation of the reality of this history:

The ideology of mixedness is flexible enough to encompass claims that the past is a history of mixture which has undone any racial or ethnic purity. Hence blacks are the same as everyone else and have no grounds for complaint since they suffer no discrimination as blacks. (Wade 1993)

This ideology fails to identify the inequity that remained central to this “history of mixture” as it occurred and resulted in Brazil’s current racial spectrum. Both history and current statistical information regarding the stratification of black and white populations in all conditions of life are ignored in this view that discrimination does not exist along racial parameters. Statistics regarding the status of inter-racial marriages in Brazil further reveals the invalidity of the ‘racial democracy.’

The notion that this so-called democracy continues to exist is dependent on the stipulation that racial mixing still occurs with frequency in modern Brazil. The reality is, however, that a great majority of marriages in Brazil are endogamous (marriage between two people of the same color or race) which demonstrates that the miscegenation which created the current shades of Brazilians was largely a historical phenomenon of institutional slavery. A major newspaper of São Paulo, *Folha de São Paulo*, published an article entitled “Casamento reflete discriminação racial: No Brasil, as uniões entre pessoas do mesmo grupo de cor ou raça correspondem a 77,4% das relações conjugais” (Marriage reflects racial discrimination: In Brazil, the unions between

people of the same color or race corresponds to 77.4% of marital relations). This article described a study completed by social scientist José Luis Petruccelli of IBGE based on numbers from PNAD (National Research for Domicile Patterns). The study concludes that approximately three fourths of all marriages in Brazil are endogamous: whites with whites, pardos with pardos and blacks with blacks. For Petruccelli, the statistics of these marital unions expose the racial discrimination suffered by Brazil's black population. He asserts, "This extremely high level of endogamy shows the racial barriers which persist. Brazilian society is still very racist." The black population exhibits the highest rate of endogamy (84.3%), followed by whites (75.6%) and pardos (72.4%). It can be theorized that this reality of a high rate of endogamy within the black population is a reflection of their isolation due to socioeconomic condition and lack of social mobility. Clearly the inter-racial marriage rate of 22.6% disproves the notion that 'frequent racial mixing' is a reality in Brazil today. It can then be inferred that the large 'pardo' population of Brazil is derived from the historic need for white slave masters to increase the population. This miscegenation involved the overt sexual exploitation of enslaved black women – a far reality from a racial paradise.

The *Folha* article also discussed the perception of black-white inter-racial couples in Brazil. One interviewed married couple affirmed that their relationship is always a challenge to validate in public, "We always have to prove that this is not a casual relationship but a serious marriage." They describe their relationship as being constantly subjected to prejudice. When they are together people often assume that the black husband is a "porteiro" (janitor, doorman). People at first do not realize that they are a married couple which implies that such a couple is, contrary to common belief, a rarity in Brazil. Sociologist France Twine discovered in her research:

In contrast to what I expected there was a pattern of resistance to interracial marriage among Euro-Brazilians of all socioeconomic positions. Euro-Brazilians resisted mestiçagem by actively discouraging family members from establishing families with Vasalians of predominant or salient African ancestry (Twine 98).

We see then that not only are inter-racial relationships in Brazil uncommon but the family can also disapprove of them. This demonstrates the perpetuation of racist thought and consequent lack of validation of inter-racial relationships. In my three weeks in São Luis, Maranhão, I lived in a poor and predominantly black neighborhood. I observed that the few white members of the community would be found socializing together. Although black and white men would be seen playing dominos together on occasion, I never saw any inter-racial couples in the neighborhood. The couples I did observe would often wander the streets together or sit outside on the steps of their houses but these pairs were generally of a similar skin color. There was only one instance when I saw an inter-racial couple in São Luis, the state with the largest black population in Brazil. A white male and black female were embracing as they waited for a bus in the city center and I noticed that some of the surrounding people fixed their gazes on this couple as in disbelief. My personal observations then agree with both Petreccelli's study and the comments of the interviewed couple: inter-racial couples in Brazil are a rarity.

The inter-racial relationships that are apparent in the media are ironically a racial reversal of historical miscegenation. Brazilian black men who have achieved success (often soccer players and entertainers) are commonly seen with white women. The March 1999 issue of *Raça*, a Brazilian magazine targeted toward Afro-Brazilians, ran an article and debate entitled "Por que eles preferem as loiras?" (Why do they prefer blondes?). This feature explores this phenomenon of black men's preference for blond women. It would seem that a society in which all races existed in equality that inter-racial relationships would exist independent of socioeconomic status – but clearly the black population does not subsist at the socioeconomic level of the white population. The *Raça* article identifies that it is the improved financial status of black men is a

factor which enables them to date blond women. The individuals involved in the published debate conclude that a Brazilian black man would not have this option to date blond women if they were poor – in effect money enables the negation of black identity. The theories these people propose to explain black men's preference center around the idealization of the white female in contemporary Brazilian society. The article includes a discussion which notes that all the presenters on television are blondes: Xuxa, Angélica, Hebe, Camargo and Ana Maria Braga. In my personal observations of Brazil I noticed this blaring over representation of white women on television and have yet to see a black female who occupies a similar status in the entertainment/media world even remotely close to Xuxa. In 1990 the *New York Times* published the article "Brazil's Idol is a Blonde and Some Ask 'Why?' ". The article addresses a parallel issue to black men's preference for blondes and the socioeconomic inequity which persists in these subsequent inter-racial relationships (only famous/wealthy black men marry blonds). Xuxa, in the *Times* article herself demonstrates complete ignorance of how her idealization is detrimental to the black identity, "Children like Snow White, Cinderella, Barbie...when they see me close to them it's as if the mythical person has become reality." She does not comprehend that Afro-Brazilian men, in some circumstances, negate their black identity and do not consider black women beautiful due to a preference developed during childhood and adolescence for white women. One participant of the *Raça* debate commented:

The role the media plays in the self-esteem of the black male. The blond television celebrities, the blond dancer...he grows up with this...the media puts this in the black child's mind that he is a second class citizen. During adolescence, what is the standard of beauty that he has? It's not going to be anything like his own appearance! The standard of beauty is blond with green eyes.

The issue of self-esteem and the media's responsibility is often identified in race studies of Brazil as being partly responsible for the perpetuated oppression of the black population. In a true 'racial democracy' no specific group defined by race (e.g. white females) would be idealized

by the media and consequently favored by the general population. This is the unfortunate reality of Brazil where black males appear to prefer white women.

Another factor which contributes to the under representation of black female-white male inter-racial relationships can be attributed to the continued societal marginalization of black women. Two of our professors (of the School for International Training) comment on how black women, especially in the Northeast of Brazil are forced to subsist in the poorest conditions of life. Professor Henrique Cunha cites the factors of region, gender, race and class which all contribute to this reality of Afro-Brazilian women (Cunha 2000). Educator Valdeci Nascimento identifies the fact that black women receive the lowest income of any sector of Brazil's population, approximately 76% of Brazil's minimum wage of \$75 U.S. (Nascimento 2000). The influence of media should again be considered in its portrayal of black women which evidently contrasts the image of white women. The *Folha de São Paulo* published another article in November of 2000 entitled "Without Contrast, Brilliance and Color: 'The Denial of Brazil' discussing the participation of blacks in TV." This article cited presented statistics which demonstrated that of the approximately 180 black actors in Brazil soap operas, the most common roles were female domestic employees (71), slaves (66), and criminals (11). These compounded factors of the reality of socioeconomic status and media portrayal of black women are additional factors which result in the lack of black males' preference for black women – adding the potential impact of racism it is even less likely that a white male would prefer a black woman. This nebulous web of societal status and media images assists in explaining the absence of inter-racial relationships in Brazil as well as why the relationships that do exist are primarily black males with white females.

Brazil's 'racial democracy' has been deconstructed frequently in the analysis of Brazil's race relations. The rare mixed race individual in the United States who suffers from alienation by his or her various ethnic groups may easily slip into a false notion that the large mixed race

population of Brazil signifies equality of the races. This idealization of Brazil, however, is clearly disproved by an examination of both the history of miscegenation and statistics of inter-racial marriages. The racial mixing of the country's past was never based on relations of equality and analysis of contemporary Brazil reveals the rarity of racial mixing due to continued marginalization of the black community (especially women) and the persistence of racist sentiment reflected in family values and the media.

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