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The Brazilian system of racial classification

Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães

Michael Banton's text belongs to the long tradition of European social sciences which rejects the conceptual use of the term 'race' in sociological analyses. His work is also linked to the school – this time a minority – that uses individualist and logico-analytic methodologies, largely shunning historical, structuralist or holistic analyses. The real novelty of his approach, though, resides in bringing the natural concept of 'colour' to the centre of sociological analyses of the kinds of social differentiation and hierarchization that arise from the encounters between distinct peoples and cultures.

However my comments in this short text will not address any of these aspects head on. Instead I shall concentrate on clarifying what seems to me to be the weak point of the empirical example used by Banton in his argument, namely, the Brazilian system of racial classification, which, according to the author, is based not on race but on colour, by which he means skin colour or tone.

To allow the reader to follow my comments, it is worth briefly recalling what we know about the Brazilian system of racial classification, a topic systematically studied by sociologists and anthropologists between the 1940s and 1970s (Frazier 1944; Pierson 1945; Hutchinson 1952; Wagley 1952; Zimmerman 1952; Azevedo 1953; Fernandes 1955; Bastide and Berghe 1957; Harris and Kottak 1963; Harris 1970; Sanjek 1971; Nogueira 1985), with the aim of deciphering its classificatory principles.

From 1872 onwards the Brazilian census classified the 'colours' of Brazilians on the basis of the theory that *mestiços* 'revert' or 'regress' to one of the 'pure races' involved in the mixture – an ideology that shaped both common-sense and academic knowledge at the end of the nineteenth century. The 1872 census, for example, created four 'colour groups': white, caboclo, black and brown (*branco*, *caboclo* (mixed indigenous-European), *negro* and *pardo*). These groups were always defined by the same formula: Colour group = members of a pure race + phenotypes of this race in the process of reversion (Guimarães 1999).

In the white group, for example, there were, in Oliveira Vianna's definition (1959, p. 45), 'pure whites and the phenotypes of whites (Afro-Aryan and Indo-Aryan *mesticos* in reversion to the white type)'. Only the brown (*pardo*) group evaded the law of reversion to original types, since, for Vianna, it amounted to a residual category: 'The group of *pardos* or *mulatos* was constituted by those Afro-Aryan *mestiços* whose particular skin pigmentation meant that they could not be incorporated into any of the originary races, thereby forming a group apart, perfectly distinct from the other groups' (Vianna 1959, p. 45).

In other words, the Brazilian 'colours' took into account not only skin tone but other physical features that defined the 'pure races' (principally hair, nose and lips). Sociologists of the 1930s, though, in their theoretical disdain for 'race' and the theories of whitening that informed the census's racial categories (labelled 'colour' and constructed in response to the question: 'what colour are you?'), undertook original field research to decipher the structure of this classification and the meaning of the colour terms used in everyday life by the Brazilian population. They did so with the prior knowledge – gleaned from the studies of folklore, social history and sociology that preceded them, whose landmark text was *Casa Grande e Senzala* (Freyre 1933) – that Brazil had no colour line and an individual's social status could thus alter the way in which he or she was racially classified by others. This initial phase of studies resulted in the syntheses produced by Harris (1970) and Sanjek (1971), according to which: (1) Brazilian colour groups do not adhere to any descent rule, meaning that children of the same father and mother can have different 'colours'; (2) the most important physiognomic criterion, aside from skin colour, is hair texture, though the shape of the person's nose and lips is also important in terms of designating 'colour'; (3) there are at least nine or ten main 'colour' names – some designated by colours (white, black), others by racial types (*morena*, *sarará*); (4) this form of classification is intentionally ambiguous, since it enables adaptation to different social situations or reference to people of different social status.

This pattern of social classification by 'colour/race' is undoubtedly distinct from the system found in the United States, openly identified as racial and structured along colour lines based not on the individual's physical appearance but on his or her origin (Nogueira 1985) or biological ancestry, forming a descent group through precise rules, a system Harris called hypodescent. More recently, though, from the 1990s onwards, the Brazilian system began to present two new features, identified by among others Harris et al. (1995), Maggie (1996) and Fry (2000): first, the term 'race' reverted to being directly

employed both by the official census (the question becomes: ‘what colour/race are you?’) and by journalists and the public in general; second, the terms ceased to be generically stretched by the social position of individuals and became applicable to people with the same physical features, irrespective of their social class – for example, it became commonplace for a middle-class educated ‘mulato’ to be called ‘black’.

Recent research by IBGE (2008) conducted in six Brazilian state capitals shows that, comparing the situation with what post-war sociology taught us, something has changed in the Brazilian population’s perception and meaning of ‘colour’, although many things remain the same at the start of the twenty-first century (see Table 1). First of all, as we have seen, there has been a shift towards an explicit reference to race insofar as the category investigated by IBGE itself, for example, is labelled ‘colour/race’ rather than just ‘colour’ as in the past. But skin colour acquires even more importance than before, perhaps, in the definition of ‘colour/race’, followed by ‘physical traits’. As before, the individual’s social status, measured by the item ‘socioeconomic origin’, remains important, but factors such as ‘family origin and ancestors’ and ‘tradition and culture’ now play even more of a determining role. So what do these changes tell us?

My hypothesis is that the Brazilian ‘colour’ system (or ‘colour/race’ system, to be more precise) is losing the almost exclusive relation it once had to the ideology of whitening (Skidmore 1974; Ventura 1991; Schwarcz 1999), which allowed ‘colour’ to be more easily modified by social status and more closely related to physical traits considered characteristic of racial types in the process of becoming white (primarily but not exclusively finer hair, thinner lips and finer nose). Further research is needed to verify this hypothesis. But whatever the case, I wish to emphasize the point that Brazil never had a social classification system in which ‘colour’ represented skin colour alone.

Table 1. Aspects used by Brazilians aged 15 and over 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
Socioeconomic origin	27.0
Political/ideological option	4.0
Other	0.7

Source: IBGE (2008).

Such a system could be easily dichotomized into whites and non-whites (dark, brown, black) without taking into consideration the social position of individuals or their relative position on a spectrum of physiognomic and social whitening. Much of Banton's argument is rooted in this equivocation. Indeed I suggest that such a system of classifying individuals by skin colour, if it exists, prevails only in western European countries where the anti-racist struggle succeeded in definitively blocking any reference to race.

In summary: one of Banton's central arguments is based on the assumption that the colour terms used in Brazil and Latin America are not racial. They are based on skin colour, or on a colour scale, but not on a colour line. Although it is widely accepted that there was not, at least until very recently, a colour line in Brazil, Latin America, or even in the British Caribbean, the falsity of this assumption is almost self-evident when Banton cites Stuart Hall in support of his argument, specifically when the latter writes that in his native Jamaica in the early 1950s, 'anybody in my family could compute and calculate anybody's social status by grading the particular quality of their hair versus the particular quality of the family they came from and which street they lived in, including physiognomy, shading, etc. You could trade off one characteristic against another.'

What makes colour in Brazil a racial term is precisely the fact that the physiognomic traits used by racialists to distinguish different human races became convoluted with the original European system of classification based on shades of skin colour. The absence of a colour line in Brazil does not imply the absence of racial classification either logically or sociologically. If racialized categories of colour did not evolve towards a colour line in Brazil, this is probably due to the underdevelopment of any closed system of classification like the racial descent groups of the United States. Class, status and other hierarchal distinctions, more open to transgressions, were more important to the colonizers of the Caribbean and Latin America, a development better explained perhaps by the demographic imbalance between the Europeans and the conquered peoples rather than differences in the religion and culture of the colonizers. The fact is that despite an initial flirtation (1870–1920) with racism among Brazilian and Latin American intellectuals, race was systematically negated by the majority of the continent's intellectuals and inhabitants (most of whom were of mixed origin) in the modern nations that emerged in the 1930s. This meant that the term colour was the only acceptable way left to refer to and systematize racial origins and all the odious racial imagery that still persisted.

No doubt the processes of class formation and differentiation that followed the construction and economic development of Latin America's modern states promised to leave the colonial and racial

past behind. No doubt too that the opportunities which people of African and Amerindian origin have had in the construction of the new nations enabled racial categories to become more flexible and impeded the formation of a colour line. But the proof that this process did not annul the racial meanings associated with colour was the persistence of the ideal of whitening via miscegenation throughout the entire twentieth century. These were the main sociological grounds for the resurgence of race in political mobilizations and public policies when class formation faded in the 1990s. Without the inclusion of racial components in Brazil's colour system, the racial mobilization of the 1980s and 1990s could not have emerged. Explaining this emergence by resorting to the thesis of cultural imperialism is unconvincing. However this is another topic.

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