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Introduction

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH on racial dynamics in Brazil identifies the myth of racial democracy as comprising in large part the national common sense on “race.”¹ This myth provides the cognitive framework for understanding a great deal about attitudes toward racial issues in present-day Brazil and perhaps for most of the twentieth century. Gilberto Freyre, a Brazilian social scientist, is credited with popularizing the ideas behind Brazil as a racial democracy among elites beginning in the 1930s.² Confronted with the period’s scientific racism, which posited the existence and unbridgeable nature of distinct human races, the superiority of a white race, and that mixed blood created degeneracy, Freyre proposed something quite different. He believed instead that “cross-breeding” produced hybrid vigor in humans and thereby heralded a bright future for the otherwise condemned dark Brazilian nation.³ His statements were bold when read against the backdrop of Jim Crow U.S. and even Nazi German emphases on white racial purity. Through emphasizing a special character and an uncommon flexibility of Portuguese colonizers that made possible extensive miscegenation, Freyre claimed that Brazilians of three races—Africans, Europeans, and indigenous—had mixed and were giving birth to a new race constituting a new world in the tropics, a Brazilian “meta-race,” a *moreno* (an ambiguous brownish color) people.

This new race would flourish as an ethnic or racial democracy, where “Men [sic] regard each other as fellow citizens and fellow Christians without regard to color or ethnic differences.”⁴ Freyre championed “the broad, though not perfect opportunity given in Brazil all men [sic], despite race or colour, to

assert themselves as full Brazilians.”⁵ This view on “equal opportunity” coexisted, however, in a society that was decidedly hierarchical in nature, where dramatic social inequalities were rarely questioned; rather, they seemed almost naturally preordained.⁶ Nonetheless, through this Freyrean ideological framing, miscegenation became the motor behind Brazilian racial dynamics and the foundation on which the *idea* of racial democracy was constructed.⁷

According to this perspective, the type of violent and virulent racism and separatism common in the Jim Crow United States was impossible in Brazil. The potential boundaries of racial groups were said to have blurred, and particularistic ethnic and racial classifications yielded to a more universal national identification. Unlike the United States, where stubbornly ascribed and/or asserted ethnic and racial group identities determined national organizing principles, Brazil supposedly transcended these rigid racial categories and many of their attendant consequences. What in other societies were incompatible social segments were united in Brazil to form the basis of national belonging.

In sum, Freyre suggested that *mestiçagem*, or racial mixture/miscegenation, was the essence of Brazilianness and was strengthening the national community into a meta-race.⁸ He predicted that there would be “a growing lack of difference on the part of a great number of Brazilians—a tendency to consider themselves *moreno* not only a white *moreno*, as before, but the *pardo*⁹ in various degrees of brownness, from light to darkest, through the effects of racial mixing, and even the *preto*—a *amorenamento* [browning].”¹⁰ This vision of racial mixing creates the foundation for Brazil as a racial democracy, especially primed for the dominance of a racially ambiguous or mixed type. Munanga explicates this connection: “From the ideal of a mixed people . . . the myth of racial democracy was gradually elaborated . . . We have a mixed origin and, today, we are neither *pretos* nor *brancos* but, yes, a miscegenated people, a *mestiço* [mestizo] people.”¹¹ Hence, it would appear that, according to Freyre, Brazil’s racial democracy has two central ingredients: (1) the construction of a metaracial Brazilian type resulting from the blurring of racial boundaries through miscegenation and (2) the broad “though not perfect” acceptance of persons of all skin color types as full and equal participants in the benefits of citizenship in the Brazilian nation.

This seemingly innocuous understanding of racial dynamics in Brazil would appear to suggest that skin color is relatively unimportant in the lives of Brazilians, that they may have moved beyond the problem presented by prejudice and discrimination based on racial characteristics. It may even sug-

gest a type of color-blind society. Some have gone as far as to claim that it implies a racial paradise scenario in Brazil.¹² Indeed, this mid-twentieth-century positive view of Brazilian racial dynamics led the United Nations to look to Brazil in the aftermath of Nazi racism and during the reign of Jim Crow in the United States for an alternative model of how race could be lived. To that aim, in 1950 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) funded an extensive exploration of the “enchanted” nature of race relations in Brazil in order to share it with the world.¹³

Needless to say, the prestigious social scientists of the UNESCO group did not find a racial paradise in mid-twentieth-century Brazil. Although they did find that the three “racial stocks” had “mingled and mixed to form a society in which racial tensions and conflicts are especially mild,” these researchers also documented racial prejudice and the disadvantaged position of individuals of varying degrees of African ancestry.¹⁴ They described, for example, starkly negative attitudes toward *negros*,¹⁵ whose physical features were “universally considered ugly,”¹⁶ and reported that much of the studied region of northern Brazil was characterized by remnants of a *branca* aristocratic class. Membership in this class was closed to “the Negro, the dark *mestiço*, and even those who have Negro ancestry or marked Negroid features.”¹⁷ In another studied area, Minas Velhas, the research documented that “residential segregation actually occurs . . . [along with] overt exclusion of Negroes from the Social Club.”¹⁸

Notwithstanding these findings, one of UNESCO researchers’ central theses continued to suggest that prejudice and discrimination based on race were subdued in Brazil. However, this thesis must be understood relative to the United States, which was their yardstick case characterized by legalized segregation, discrimination, and overt racial violence. They posited that in Brazil class was the most important stratifying factor and that physical features associated with race or ethnicity combined with other factors, such as education level, occupation, economic situation, and family connections, to give people their social position in Brazilian society.¹⁹

Regardless, these UNESCO findings of racial prejudice and discrimination were not given much attention at the time in Brazil. A military dictatorship had risen to power in the 1960s soon after the reports were published, and the new regime was unreceptive to criticism of the Brazilian nation. Although not as brutal as some of its South American counterparts during approximately the same years (e.g., Argentina and Chile), this authoritarianism would last

into the early 1980s. During its waning years, the dictatorship loosened its hold just enough to allow civil society to think more freely and organize. In this climate, social movement actors rose from many corners of that society and demanded a voice in the nation's affairs. Among them were *negro* movement participants who strongly rejected the view of Brazil as a nation where skin color was unimportant. In stark contrast to the sunny belief that Brazil was a racial democracy often propagated by the Brazilian state,²⁰ these activists knew that racial discrimination and prejudice were a part of their daily lives and that the picture many elite and state actors painted of Brazil was a deleterious myth.

According to a growing critical vision, this elite framing of the myth of a racial democracy constituted a denial of the daily experiences of discrimination and prejudice suffered by persons of varying degrees of African ancestry. As such, the myth itself became a target, and *negro* movements began to organize against it.²¹ Their struggle was not merely to correct a distorted understanding of racial dynamics among the elite and by the Brazilian state that had long constituted the official race story but also to address the common understanding of race among everyday Brazilians. The romanticized myth of racial democracy was believed to have thoroughly colored the societal fabric of Brazil, penetrating deep into the psyche of the general common sense.

According to *negro* movement actors, the perceived embrace of this myth by the general population plagued progress toward racial equality in three important ways. Primarily, they held that a majority of Brazilians, including nonwhites, denied the existence of racial discrimination. Social movement actors secondly believed that the myth therefore hampered antidiscrimination mobilization: If people did not believe in the existence of racial discrimination, surely they would not mobilize for its eradication. Lastly, the myth was said to restrict the formation of positive racial identification among Brazilians of varying degrees of African ancestry.²² In essence, the myth of racial democracy was believed to severely limit the possibilities of the advancement of nonwhite Brazilians.

At the same time that *negro* movements began to organize more openly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, social scientists also began to directly challenge the myth of a Brazilian racial democracy. Similarly suggesting that the Brazilian mind-set was characterized by a fundamental denial of the existence of racial discrimination, social demographers Carlos Hasenbalg and Nelson do Valle Silva published quantitative analyses demonstrating the correlation be-

tween nonwhiteness and disadvantage.²³ Other social scientists followed suit, and the published work on racial inequality in Brazil grew. This literature documents disadvantage in diverse areas—income, education, labor market, and marriage market, and so on.²⁴ Standing on this platform of evidence, some researchers and many *negro* movement actors heralded the death of the racial democracy myth.²⁵ They had conclusively proven that skin color constituted an independent factor creating disadvantages for Brazilians of varying degrees of African ancestry and statistically refuted the fiction that Brazil's history of miscegenation resulted in equality.

The importance of this proof cannot be overestimated: It continues today to provide crucial impetus and backing for race scholars and social movement actors.²⁶ Brazil is no longer considered a paradisiacal counterexample to the United States in terms of race, and it is no longer believed to have found the key to moving beyond race through miscegenation. Once considered a hopeful alternative, merely blurring the boundaries of blackness and whiteness is no longer seen as a viable strategy in and of itself to fight racial discrimination. In fact, as I will discuss later, the opposite soon became the guiding belief: Only through clarifying and strengthening a dichotomously structured classification scheme in *negro* and white through fomenting race consciousness and robust racial identification could progress be made.²⁷

Given the research of the last decades regarding the lack of racial democracy in Brazil, one might assume that the Freyrean myth has been necessarily expurgated. However, some question whether the newer characterization of myth was even correct. Was the myth of racial democracy about denying the existence of racial discrimination, and did it in turn foster that denial among the majority of Brazilians? There is no doubt that Brazilian political elites boasted of existent racial democracy, at times heralding a level of congeniality, equality, and oneness between individuals of varying skin color unmatched anywhere in the world.²⁸ But can the *sensus populi* regarding the significance of skin color variation be reduced to a strategic lie or ignorance-laden empirical description? Do elite interpretations and discourses, such as Freyre's or even those of contemporary social scientists, correspond to popular majority belief systems and the understandings of everyday Brazilians?²⁹ An assumed correlation between elite and nonelite interpretations has been commonplace, resulting in a thesis of Brazilian ignorance, i.e., that Brazilians are blind to racial discrimination.³⁰ However, it is possible that there is in fact a significant disconnect between the elite perspective and that of the nonelite.

What is the essence of this myth as understood by *everyday* Brazilians? Moreover, what types of attitudinal stances are born of such a myth? Herein lays the crux of contemporary debate among social scientists to which this book hopes to contribute.

In addition to the above alluded movement actors and social scientists whose ideas constitute the dominant stance in the literature and discourse concerning Brazilian race politics, there is another group of social scientists who resist reducing the set of ideas known as the myth of racial democracy to a pernicious deception.³¹ These scholars, perhaps in large part more anthropological in orientation, also recognize and document discrimination and prejudice in Brazil. However, rather than blame the myth of racial democracy for fostering a denial of widespread inequality, they suggest that the myth acts as a utopian ideal for which Brazilians yearn and against which they measure reality. As stated exemplarily by Sheriff, “[Racial democracy] summons the collectively-held notion of the moral force of a shared heritage, a common family, a unified nation. Racism is repugnant. It is immoral. It is, above all, un-Brazilian.”³² Some scholars posit, then, that this utopian ideal may act as an incentive to construct a more equal Brazil.³³

This alternative view of the myth of racial democracy might be compared, albeit imperfectly, to the “American’s Creed” or “American Creed” in the United States.³⁴ This creed amounted to an early statement of values and principles, like democracy, freedom, equality, and justice, that Americans espouse and hold dear. However, the everyday reality of millions of Americans throughout the history of that nation has fallen decidedly short of these ideals. The creed, nonetheless, is neither blamed nor discarded. Similarly, Americans have been socialized into believing the Horatio Alger myth that suggests that with hard work anyone can “make it.” This is certainly not true; structural impediments have confounded even the hardest of workers throughout American history. However, instead of framing the American Creed or the Horatio Alger myth as pernicious lies, insistence on the values espoused in them can and have formed the basis of dialogue and struggles for inclusion.³⁵ Might the same be true of the racial democracy myth in Brazil? Does the myth buttress racial inequality, or could it actually help in the struggle to challenge that inequality?

To more thoroughly investigate the question of the essence and effects of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil, researchers need to hear from all strata of Brazilian society. Unfortunately, however, the beliefs and attitudes of a great number of people to whom this conversation pertains have largely

been left out of the debate. There has been an absolute lacuna of public opinion research on racial attitudes in Brazil.³⁶ The assumed common sense of racial democracy has thus been studied mostly through localized ethnographies like those of the UNESCO project and more recently by important field research, including Twine's popular in-depth portrait of racial attitudes in a rural Brazilian community in the 1990s and Sheriff's ethnography of an urban favela, or shantytown.³⁷ While these have contributed significantly to the social science literature on racial dynamics in Brazil, they are limited methodologically in their ability to speak directly to the attitudes of the general public. Addressing this limitation, this book explores contemporary large-sample attitudinal surveys that may uniquely capture the racial common sense of everyday Brazilians.

Will a focus on public opinion research, as opposed to elite discourse or ethnography, settle debates on the nature of this myth? It will not. However, missing this large piece of the puzzle certainly hampers our understanding of racial issues in Brazil. The importance of using survey methods to study Brazilian racial attitudes is made apparent by the aforementioned prominent Brazilianist social scientists Carlos Hasenbalg and Nelson Silva. They claim:

With the exception of elections research, the academic literature on race and politics in Brazil has been developed without the benefit of knowledge of the general public's attitudes on matters of race relations. We know much more about what the elite think about these matters, whether they be black or white, than we know about the general public. The best example of this is the overused ideology of racial democracy, an idea invented by intellectuals and appropriated by the government—which made it the official story of race relations in the nation. It has been presumed to constitute the common sense about race in the population. Yet the ways in which this ideology is translated into concepts and attitudes among white and black Brazilians continue to be largely unknown.³⁸

Addressing that research gap, this book captures the racial common sense in Brazil through three major surveys of racial attitudes conducted from 1995 through 2002: the 1995 DataFolha national sample survey of racial attitudes, the 2000 CEAP/DataUff survey of racial attitudes in the state of Rio de Janeiro, and the 2002 PESB national social survey.³⁹

In addition to helping understand more fully racial attitudes in contemporary Brazil, it is also my hope that this book illuminates through comparison the changing nature of racial attitudes in the United States. The United

States is actually in the midst of important changes in racial understandings, as evidenced by the institutionalization of multiracialism in the 2000 census through adopting the “mark one or more” races format. Prior to that, for most of the twentieth century, individuals of European and African ancestries in the United States were officially identified as either of a white or a black race, but never both. The census change, along with the growing size of the U.S. Latino population (now second only to whites), has led some to claim that the United States is becoming more like Latin America in terms of racial dynamics.⁴⁰ That Latin Americanization includes such phenomena as increased focus on racial ambiguity and mixed racial parentage influenced by greater rates of racial and ethnic intermarriage and Latin American immigration to the United States. Hence, a more thorough understanding of Brazil could aid in anticipating attitudes and dynamics that may develop in the United States.

Furthering this counterpoint, it is worth noticing that just as the United States seems to be moving in the direction of Latin American racial dynamics, Brazil seems to be heading in the opposite direction. Seemingly tracing a path back through U.S. history, Brazil is experimenting with single-race understandings of racial group membership, or monoracialism, as opposed to multiracialism. For example, many institutions of higher learning in Brazil are instituting affirmative action legislation; and, rather than using the mixed-race category of the Brazilian Census, they are opting for a single-race *negro* versus white classification scheme to identify recipients. If the idea of racial democracy in Brazil exalts racial mixing, it is understandable that this attempt to “unmix” the population for race-targeted intervention has already created much debate, an issue I delve into later. Regardless, it appears to be the case that racial dynamics in the United States and in Brazil are like two ships passing in the night, one showing signs of movement toward mixed-race framings and the other toward single-race identification. Sociologist G. Reginald Daniel uses the metaphor of “converging paths” to describe these dynamics.⁴¹ If this is the case, a contemporary comparison is crucial.

In addition, this book seeks to clarify issues that will help us better understand not only the United States, but many Latin American countries as well. Colombia, Cuba, Venezuela, and Ecuador are just a few of the countries in that region with populations of varying degrees of African origin, whose citizens therefore contend with similar issues. As in Brazil, there has been a lack of data that capture racial attitudes of the general public in these countries. Hence, the importance of the large data sets that are becoming available in

Brazil cannot be overestimated as a means of shedding light on other similar Latin American contexts.

To these ends, the Brazilian racial common sense as framed by the myth of racial democracy is in need of further study to gain a deeper and, most importantly, representative picture. I begin this exploration in Chapter 2 by commenting on the attitudinal complex itself as regards its value as an object of study. I lay out three basic perspectives that dominate the general literature on the study of racial attitudes: group conflict theories, sociocultural theories, and social identity theory. Although differing in important ways, all three perspectives appear especially apt, I argue, for studying dynamics in societies robustly divided along racial lines and characterized by strong subjective racial identification that I label “racialist” contexts.⁴² In contrast I call forth an alternative conceptualization of racial commonsense understandings called “antiracialism” that may better frame a context of weak racial subjectivity and in which the population embraces racial ambiguity.⁴³ Debate continues regarding the more adequate framing in Brazil, and I lay out how the anti-racialist and racialist perspectives have alternatively held sway in twentieth-century Brazilianist race scholarship. I then briefly propose a way to reconcile and conceptualize the differences between these two competing framings through taking into account variation in levels of racial “groupness.”⁴⁴ I hold that the general literature has not adequately considered the variable salience of racial group boundaries in part due to its reliance on the U.S. case, where black and white racial group boundaries tend to be uniformly robust and historically have appeared “natural and immutable.”⁴⁵ Lastly, I introduce at the end of this second chapter the data I employ in my analyses.

In Chapter 3 I address more directly the central analytical concept used in the analysis of public opinion on racial issues—the racial group. Racial attitudes are most generally and simply understood as the opinions and perspectives of racialized individuals, members of differing racial groups, on racialized issues. Hence, to study racial attitudes in Brazil, I first need to explore the nature of racial boundaries in that context and delineate its bounded collectivities. This first empirical chapter draws on extensive data on racial identification, both self- and other-classification, as well as classification of self and others in comparison to photographs, a very unique methodology, to say the least. Seeking to understand racial boundary dynamics, I examine issues of the degree of consistency of interviewer- versus self-identification, the degree of loyalty individuals show toward the category in which they self-classify, and

the preferences individuals reveal for alternative category schemas. Through this examination I show that the boundaries of racial formations in Brazil continue to be quite tenuous, multiple, and overlapping and may be resistant to the concept “racial group.” I conceptualize this dynamic as variation in the levels of “groupness.” This understanding of racial identification in Brazil as exhibiting lower levels of groupness will form the basis of much of my argumentation in subsequent chapters.

After exploring and mapping racial boundaries in Brazil, Chapter 4 is an empirical look at the assumed content of those boundaries: culture. Researchers note that racial group subjectivity in Brazil has historically not been considered very robust at the same time that newer classification trends suggest the increasing salience of the racially affirmative term *negro*. Importantly, some even propose the census adoption of that category to unify nonwhites. I argue that to understand the effects of a possible change in census labeling, it is necessary to take into account a central element the label is believed to enclose—*negro* cultural specificity. I explore four areas that speak to the state of “*negro* culture”: ethnic self-classification, *negro* cultural repertoires, perceptions of ethnic distinctiveness, and perceptions of common ancestry. My findings suggest that, partly through a process of nationalization, many African-derived cultural elements were transformed into symbols of national identity. Hence, identification with these symbols is not clearly delineated along racial lines. I conclude that the absence (or weak state) of an exclusive set of *negro* cultural symbols may condition the *negro* label’s ability to unify nonwhite Brazilians.

Chapter 5 is truly a core chapter in this book. In it I address a specific result that the literature claims flows from the Brazilian racial common sense: a denial of racial discrimination in Brazil. The myth of racial democracy and a denial of racial discrimination have been intimately linked most forcefully and repetitively during the last two decades of the twentieth century. In this chapter I ask, Do Brazilians actually deny racial discrimination? It is a straightforward empirical question that many survey items address. I look, for example, at Brazilian explanations of racial stratification, and I also examine differences between white and nonwhite explanations of that stratification. My findings strongly contradict the literature at every turn. A majority of both white and nonwhite Brazilians identify the important role of discrimination in that society, and I offer data that suggest they may have done so consistently since at least 1986.⁴⁶ Hence, I argue against a facile conceptualization of the myth of racial democracy as constituting a denial of racial discrimination.

Chapter 6 is the first of two chapters that explore the posited consequences of the myth of racial democracy on antiracism strategies. Scholars of Brazilian racial dynamics have long asked why, in a country so clearly stratified along color lines, the Brazilian *negro* movement has struggled at mobilizing a constituency.⁴⁷ Frequently offered explanations include the aforementioned denial of racial discrimination and/or a resistance to unified *negro* identification. I explore this question and report surprising results. First, Brazilians do recognize a clear basis for *negro* mobilization (*negros'* rights are not equally respected in Brazil), and they overwhelmingly express support for that mobilization. Furthermore, a majority of Brazilians express willingness to participate in antiracism activities and many even to become members of antiracist organizations. Color is not generally a significant determinant of these attitudes. Instead, age most decisively predicts attitudinal stances (a negative relationship to support for antiracism). With these unexpected findings, I attempt an alternative framing addressing the *negro* movement's issues with mobilizing a constituency.

Chapter 7 explores consequences of the Brazilian racial common sense for the question of race-targeted policy initiatives. In a context that has been characterized as gripped by a denial of racial discrimination, one would think that race-targeted policy would have little chance of enactment. However, Brazil is in the midst of an affirmative action boom. Dozens of Brazilian universities now employ a racial quota system to redress the historical exclusion of nonwhites from the realm of higher education. How did this dramatic shift occur? What do ordinary Brazilians think about these policies? What factors are associated with the varying opinions that Brazilians hold? I find, contrary to predictions drawn from general framings, that there is significant support for race-targeted intervention in Brazil, including by white Brazilians. In addition, I find that social class appears most strongly associated with that support. Hence, I offer a revised understanding of the effects of the myth of racial democracy on antiracism.

Chapter 8 examines how state actors in charge of administering affirmative action in Brazil are opting for a dichotomous *negro* versus white scheme for sorting beneficiaries, even though that society has historically embraced racial ambiguity. What are the consequences of adopting a dichotomous classification in a thoroughly multiracial society? Will this strategy prove efficient for sorting beneficiaries from nonbeneficiaries? I find, for example, that there is significant disagreement as to who qualifies as nonwhite and who as white in terms of both self- and other-classification. In addition, almost half of the mixed-race sample opts for whiteness when constrained to black and white

terms. Finally, a strong majority of a national sample of Brazilians rejects multiracials as candidates for *negro* racial quotas. Results point to the possible unintended exclusion of many multiracial individuals from beneficiary status whether through self- or other-elimination.

In Chapter 9 I continue to explore the adoption of racial dualism for affirmative action policies but this time in terms of its symbolic consequences on shifting identification trajectories. In contrast to the United States, where fewer than 3 percent of the population self-classified as mixed race in the 2000 census, almost 40 percent of Brazilians did so in its 2000 census. Will Brazil's adoption of de jure dichotomous classification in *negro* and white for the distribution of scarce resources affect how individuals choose to self-classify? Chapter 9 addresses that question and documents, for example, through a split ballot survey that the mere mention of quotas for *negros* nearly doubles the percentage of a national sample choosing that term. I argue, then, that the adoption of inclusionary race-targeted public policy will have a race-making effect in the direction of traditional white versus black dynamics in the United States.

Finally, in my conclusion in Chapter 10, I briefly summarize my analyses and argument and lay out their importance for both racial theorizing and public policy debates in Brazil. My findings tend to contradict dominant perspectives on race in Brazil, and I attempt to explain these counterintuitive results. A good portion of the explanation may be methodological in nature. As noted, the Brazilian context has suffered from a lack of public opinion research on racial attitudes. The result has been a disconnect between elite interpretations of the Brazilian racial understandings and the actual common sense as lived by the masses of poor Brazilians, *negro*, white, and in between. My hope is to help bridge that gap and present a more bottom-up, representative picture. In addition, the reliance on general theories of race that have been unduly influenced by one central case, that of the United States, has also hampered comparative social research. Those theories carry embedded within assumptions about the nature of racial dynamics, especially regarding the robust nature of boundaries in black and white, that compromise their application in racially ambiguous contexts like Brazil. I argue for taking seriously the challenges that the Brazilian case presents for the comparative study of race. Rather than trying to force round pegs into square holes, a comparative, two-way conversation will most benefit the social scientific study of the legacies of race.