very Brazilian and every per-
ceptive visitor knows that
racial relations are not clearly
defined in that society. The lesson is
especially striking for North Americans
and Europeans, who are used to a con-
tventional black/white (or at least non-
white/white) dichotomy. That polariza-
tion was institutionalized in U.S. racial
segregation, a polarity that Europeans,
unused to home-country contact with
nonwhites in the modern era, instinct-
ively understood.

But Brazil, like most of Latin
America, is different. In the Caribbean
and Latin America the European colon-
isers left a legacy of multiracialism, in
spite of early attempts to enforce racial
endogamy, i.e., the prohibition of mar-
rriage outside the same racial category.
Multiracial meant more than two racial
categories—at a minimum, three. The
mulatto and the mestizo became the
"middle case," with considerable num-
bers attaining free legal status, even
under slave systems. The result was a
system of social stratification that dif-
fered sharply from the rigid color bifur-
cation in the U.S. (both before and after
slavery) and in Europe's African
colonies. There was and is a color (here
standing for a collection of physical fea-
tures) spectrum on which clear lines
were often not drawn. Between a "pure"
black and a very light mulatto there are
umerous gradations, as reflected in the
scores of racial labels (many pejorative)
in common Brazilian usage.

This is not to say that Brazilian
society is not highly color conscious. In
fact, Brazilians, like most Latin Ameri-
cans, are more sensitive to variations in
physical features than white North
Americans or Europeans. This results
from the fact that variations along the
color spectrum, especially in the middle
range, are considered significant
because there is no clear dividing line.

In sum, Brazil is multiracial, not
biracial. This makes its race relations
more complex than in the U.S. and
more complex than most Europeans
expect. The most important fact about
this multiracial society, from the stand-
point of those wishing to study it, is
that until fifteen years ago there were
virtually no quantitative data with
which to analyze it. Between 1890 and
1940 neither the Brazilian govern-
ment nor Brazilian social scientists
considered race to be a significant enough variable
to justify recording it in the national
census. Even when the race was later
included, as in 1950 and 1960, until
the 1976 household survey (PNAD)
there were no data by race on income,
education, health, and housing. There
were limited data on marriage, fertility,
and morbidity.
**Table One**

**Racial Composition of the Brazilian Population**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Branco (White)</th>
<th>Pardo (Brown)</th>
<th>Preto (Black)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Fiola 1990.)

"Pardo" is often taken to mean "mulatto" in Brazil but not always. It is also sometimes used to refer to other mixed-bloods.

Discussion about Brazilian race relations was therefore invariably based on "soft" data. History and anthropology were the two main intellectual approaches used. Historians dwelt on laws, travelers' accounts, memoirs, parliamentary debates, and newspaper articles. They avoided researching police records, health archives, court records, personnel files, and other sources from which they might have constructed a time series. When they did consult such sources, it was usually to study slavery. They seldom studied race relations in the larger society. The telling anecdote remained the accepted form of evidence. Nonetheless, historians did not hesitate to draw conclusions about the historical nature of race relations. But to do so they had to lean heavily on "qualitative" evidence.

Anthropologists produced a rich literature describing many dimensions of relations among and within distinguishable racial categories, often emphasizing the subtle distinctions. Inevitably, however, their picture remained particularistic. They could not tell us whether race made a macro-difference in educational attainment or income or professional advancement. They were not, after all, sociologists. We cannot consult their monographs for statistics on which to base verifiable judgments about relative social welfare in Brazil.

Sociologists, demographers, economists, and political scientists, from whom we might expect such analyses, were disarmed. They had no data. The government collected no information, and analyses made virtually no effort to generate their own. Why?

The answer lies in the way Brazilians have looked at their own society. We begin with certain facts about that society in the last century and a half. First, as we have seen, it was multiracial. There was no clear-cut racial line, either legally or in social practice. For someone from the U.S. or South Africa (or virtually any European colony in Africa), the chief defining feature was the lack of a "descent rule." Racial category was not defined exclusively by ancestry but by a combination of factors, including physical appearance, apparent station in life, and, to a limited extent, ancestry. This contrasts with the U.S. or South Africa, where race was defined by descent and certified in legal records. The latter were then used to enforce racial endogamy with such laws being declared unconstitutional only in the U.S. in 1967. No such laws existed in modern Brazil.

Second, despite the lack of a clear "color line," Brazilian society was based on an explicit belief in white superiority, although not white supremacy. The distinction is crucial. To understand it we must go back to the colonial era.

Although Portuguese racial attitudes in the colonial era need more study, we can say that white stood at the apex of the social scale and African at the bottom. But the Portuguese in Brazil differed from the English in North America. In the English continental colonies, the colonists transformed the social superiority into a doctrine of moral superiority (later white supremacy) and institutionalized it in legalized rules enforcing racial endogamy. This structure hardened after the Civil War into the Jim Crow system which became easy to enforce because of the rigid biracial categorization that had become fixed long before abolition. It was also reinforced by the rise of "scientific racism," which came to dominate U.S. and European academic and elite circles after the mid-nineteenth century. These "scientific" theories purported to prove, by physical, historical, biological, or behavioral evidence the superiority of whites. This prejudice was later to produce a politically significant backlash in the U.S., as white guilt—the product of a religious perfectionism and a philosophical egalitarianism, both absent in Portuguese America—led white U.S. citizens eventually to accept racial integration for an African-American minority one quarter the size of Brazil's.

Brazil never had the option, at least after the mid-colonial era, to enforce racial endogamy or its implicit biracial assumptions because too many persons of color (primarily mixed bloods) had entered free society—by birth or manumission. Relatively few had penetrated the top of society (the exact pattern of such mobility cries out for research and analysis), yet the moral and social legitimacy for drawing a sharp color line was already lost. Enforced racial endogamy and segregation were practical impossibilities.

To deal with this reality, the Brazilian elite had developed an assimilationist ideology to rationalize their de facto multiracial society. Although they believed in white superiority, as could be clearly seen in the parliamentary debates over the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, they did not express the same deep fears of being overwhelmed demographically (and eventually politically) by nonwhites as did their U.S. counterparts. This is ironic because by the mid-nineteenth century the nonwhite proportion of the population in Brazil was far larger than in the U.S. (see Table 1).

This de facto assimilationist ideology faced a severe chal-
lenge when the doctrines of scientific racism struck Brazil, especially after 1870. How could the Brazilians reconcile their multiracial society and its implicit assimilationist assumptions with the “new truth” that white was not only absolutely superior but that it faced a mortal challenge from what white supremacists in North America and Europe called “mongrelization”? 

The Brazilian elite offered an ingenious response. They turned on its head the basic assumption of the white supremacists. They accepted the doctrine of innate white superiority, but they then argued that in Brazil the white was prevailing through miscegenation. Instead of “mongrelizing” the race, the racial mixing was “whitening” Brazil. Miscegenation, far from a menace, was Brazil’s salvation. Because they had no means of proving this scientifically, Brazilians simply asserted that Brazilian experience substantiated their claim. It gained its most famous rationale in Gilberro Freyre’s claim— that the unique cultural legacy of the Portuguese had turned Brazilians into a new race (which in practice had precious few dark skinned at or near the top).

This assimilationist ideology, commonly called “whitening” by the elite after 1890, had taken hold by the early twentieth century, and continues to be Brazil’s predominant racial ideology today. In effect, the Brazilian elite argued that Brazil, unlike the U.S. to which they frequently (and unfavorably) compared it, had no racial problem: no U.S. phenomena of race hatred (the logical product of the white supremacy doctrine), racial segregation, and, most important, racial discrimination. In a word, Brazil had escaped racism. It was on the path to producing a single race through the benign process of miscegenation. The unrestrained libido of the Portuguese, along with their cultural “plasticity,” had produced a fortuitous racial harmony. Brazil, thanks to historical forces of which it had not even been conscious, had been saved from the ugly stain of racism.

The implication of this ideology was that color did not matter in Brazil; racial difference was on its way to extinction. Leading Brazilian scientists in the early twentieth century freely predicted that their country was headed toward total whiteness. In a paper presented in London in 1911, the Brazilian anthropologist João Batista de Lacerda (1911) estimated it would take no more than another century. Upon returning to Brazil he was attacked for being too pessimistic.

In practice, the assimilationist assumption led the government to take a revealing step: it omitted race from the census. Although race had been included in the census of 1872 (the first) and of 1890, it was omitted in 1900 and 1920 (there was no census in 1910 or 1930), only reappearing in the 1940 census. From 1890 to 1940, therefore, the basic data collection ignored racial categories in the New World country that had received more African slaves than any other.

Because there were no data, there could be no discussion of the facts of race relations. Exactly how did relations among people of different color proceed? Even if the color spectrum was blurred, even if there was no legally enforced racial endogamy, even if there was no segregation, was race—despite all the subtleties of its definition—insignificant in Brazilian life? Could the largest slave population in the New World (total abolition came only in 1888, latest in the Americas) have left no legacy of racial antagonism?

The Social Reality: 1890–1976

How could slave master and government violence—amply
documented by Brazilian historians—have been transformed
into such a benign scene? Historians have by and large avoided
even investigating the question. One can count on the fingers of one hand the Brazilian authors who have done serious research on postabolition race relations. It is as if the topic of race ceased to have any relevance in Brazil after slavery ended in 1888.

Yet evidence for such research is readily at hand. Virtually
every court record, police blotters, personnel file, driver’s
license, and voter’s registration included a racial category.
Newspaper stories have routinely identified African-
Brazilians (whites don’t need identification). There have even
been separate beauty contests for mulattos. In truth, Brazil

An old ex-slave, a 1925 pencil drawing by Brazilian artist
Lasar Segall.
has remained a highly race conscious society. Popular music, television, folklore, humor, and literature are saturated with reference to race. For anyone who has lived in Brazil in this century, there can be little doubt that awareness of racial categories is a staple of everyday life.

But historians have focused virtually all their attention on the institution of slavery and its abolition. Even race relations (in the broadest sense) before abolition have come in for little attention. The all-important topic of free coloreds in slave-holding Brazil, for example, is largely unresearched and unanalyzed. Yet it is the key to understanding the emergence of the most important feature of modern Brazilian race relations: its multiracial nature. A prime example is the attempt to explain how the middle racial category emerged in Brazilian history. The U.S. historian Carl Degler pointed to the "mulatto escape hatch" as the essential difference between North American and Brazilian race relations. Yet when it came to explaining why this "escape" developed in one society and not the other, he chose to emphasize, in what was necessarily a speculative manner, the inferior status of women of the slave-holding class in Portuguese America and therefore of their supposed inability to prevent acceptance (or even legitimation) of their husbands' illicit mixed-blood offspring.

From the historians we have only a few glimpses of Brazilian social reality after abolition. Nevertheless, from other sources we know that race mattered greatly. One cannot read the tortured poetry of the late nineteenth-century symbolist poet João da Cruz e Souza without feeling his anguish over the pain of being black. One cannot read the novels of Lima Barreto without being moved by the hypocrisy and contempt with which a talented and ambitious mulatto was treated by early twentieth-century Rio de Janeiro society. One cannot read without shock the graphic accounts of the brutal suppression of the all-black enlisted men's 1910 rebellion against the still standard practice of whipping in the navy or the accounts of relentless police raids against African-Brazilian religious cults in the Northeast in the 1920s. In this context one is not surprised to read that one of the first groups to suffer repression at the hands of the dictator Getúlio Vargas's police after the coup of 1937 was the fledgling Frente Negro Brasileiro.12

There can be no doubt that color correlated highly with social stratification in Brazil. No sensible Brazilian would have denied this in 1900, and no sensible Brazilian would deny it today. The question is why.

The predominant answer from the elite and from the social scientists has been a simple application of the assimilationist thesis (Nonwhites languish far down in the "social" hierarchy, it is argued, because of class, not race. They are the victims not of discrimination but of their disadvantaged poor socioeconomic background. That, in turn, stems from a combination of factors: the legacy of deprivation under slavery; the resulting disadvantage vis-à-vis the European immigrants who streamed into Brazil after abolition; the liability of being concentrated in the poorest sector (the countryside) of the poorest region (the Northeast). This has combined to weaken the African-Brazilian in the increasingly competitive capitalist economy. It is therefore not surprising, by this logic, that African-Brazilians are disproportionately represented at the bottom of the economic and social scale.

The solution, by this reading of the problem, is a logical extension of the assimilationist thesis. Nonwhite poverty will decline as welfare increases.

We thus face an interesting paradox when looking at post-1888 Brazilian society. On the one hand, the elite succeeded in imposing its assimilationist ideology, expressed not only in official census policy but also in the academic research, as we shall see below. On the other hand, Brazilian society exhibited in its writers and its artists, especially the African-Brazilianists, a social structure that bore the marks of something deeper than mere class. Furthermore, on the functional level—police reports and personnel records—the elite was always careful to track racial categories.

**THE DEBATE OVER RACE:**
1890–1976

The assimilationist ideology of "whitening" for the last century permeated the rhetoric of politicians, social philosophers, and literary mandarins. It has also been common currency among social scientists. It reached its apogee in the widely read writings of Oliveira Vianna, the lawyer-historian who produced an extended apologia for the supposedly superior role of the "Aryan" in Brazilian history. He was echoed in the words of Fernando de Azevedo, doyen of Brazilian sociologists, who in his preface to the 1940 census described Brazil's future thus:

If we admit that Negroes and Indians are continuing to disappear, both in the successive dilutions of white blood and in the constant process of biological and social selection, and that immigration, especially that of a Mediterranean origin, is not at a standstill, the white man will not only have in Brazil his major field of life and culture in the tropics, but be able to take from old Europe—citadel of the white race—before it passes to other hands, the torch of western civilization to which the Brazilians will give a new and intense light—that of the atmosphere of their own civilization.14

Against these prophets of a whitening Brazil there arose a band of whi articulate dissenters in the 1900–1930 era. In the face of the formidable prestige of North Atlantic scientific racism, these dissenters had the courage to denounce the doctrine of white superiority, as well as white supremacy (the latter having long been an anathema Brazil). Such writers as Manoel Boririm and Alberto Torres directly challenged racist doctrine.15 In so far they defended Brazil against the chau...
of racial degeneracy they were welcomed. But they had little effect on undermining the underlying elite faith in whitening. Even the pioneering anthropologist Edgar Roquette-Pinto, who sought to promote the environmentalist concept of "culture" in refutation of the prevailing scientific racism, made little dent on the academic world's underlying endorsement of whitening.

The most interesting voice on this dialogue was Gilberto Freyre, a Northeast-born sociologist-historian-writer who produced the apologia par excellence for the virtues of miscegenation. He argued eloquently, often in response to Oliveira Vianna, for the beneficial and creative effects of the Portuguese colonizer's mixture with the Indian and African. In the 1930s and 1940s he applied with great skill the precepts of his antiracist mentor, the Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas (with whom he had studied), to refute the now waning claims of scientific racism. But in the end Freyre's eloquence served primarily to reinforce the whitening ideal by showing how the overwhelmingly white elite had acquired valuable cultural assets from their intimate mixing with the non-European, especially African. For both Brazilians and non-Brazilians, Freyre became the high priest of racial assimilation in the Portuguese-speaking world. He has remained to this day the intellectual talisman to whom the Brazilian elite turns when refusing any suggestion their society might be racist.

It should be clear why the whitening ideology led politicians and academics alike to believe that race merited little attention either in data collection or in formal discussions about their society. Indeed, one might ask whether their eagerness to ignore race might have masked a fear of facing an obvious doubt: with Brazil's huge nonwhite population (65 percent in the 1890 census) how could they be so certain it would whiten? Might it not go in the opposite direction? In any case, to control the collection of data was to control the society's knowledge of itself. That, in turn, meant control of the nation's public policy agenda.

The indifference to race as a variable gained strength also from explicitly antiracist social scientists who concluded, on the basis of their (primarily anthropological) field research, that race, as it operated in the North American context, had no comparable role in Brazil. One of the earliest was the U.S. sociologist Donald Pierson, whose research in the 1940s on the heavily African-Brazilian region of Salvador, Bahia, led him to stress the fluidity of color lines and the mobility of the mulatto. The most outspoken of these researchers was the U.S. anthropologist Marvin Harris, who early in the 1960s argued that Brazilians were so inconsistent in their application of racial categories that no meaningful pattern could be established. This was a skeptical extreme that went beyond the more scholarly, respectable concept of "social race," which he and Charles Wagley had elaborated in the early 1950s in their explanation of Brazilian reality.

But in his hyperbole Harris had merely lapsed into the standard Brazil

This mentality dies hard in Brazil. In preparing for the 1980 census, authorities attempted once again, despite the easing of military rule, to omit race from the official count. Only vigorous protest from demographers, academics (a new mood and a new generation had emerged, as explained below), African-Brazilian militants, and elements of the press forced a reconsideration. Officials backtracked, allowing the inclusion in the 1980 census of two questions about color in the 25 percent sample.

In 1983 census researchers in the Central Government Institute (the IBGE) produced a highly revealing analysis of this data, the first ever collected on race as a variable in the labor force. The results showed a clear pattern of discrimination against African-Brazilians. The President of IBGE refused to allow publication of the study. It did not appear until two years later, on the decision of a new president.

This establishment mentality—shared by virtually all politicians, most technocrats, and many academics—provoked three main lines of dissent: (1) the "São Paulo school" led by anthropology professor Jose Flavio; (2) African-Brazilian militants; and (3) a new generation of (virtually all white) social scientists, especially demographers.

The "São Paulo school" was the label given to the Paulista anthropologist Jose Flavio and his students and fellow researchers, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Octavio Ianni. Their work grew out of a UNESCO-sponsored research project that was the
Bastide published a detailed "study project" on "racial prejudice in São Paulo." They laid out the guidelines for an ambitious opinion survey, but they took care to qualify their document as on "a purely abstract level." There is no record the project was ever carried out.

Fernandes went on to become the best known and most influential Brazilian academic critic of the domino of Brazil's "racial democracy." He coined the memorable phrase that "Brazilians exhibit "the prejudice of having no prejudice." He became the most authoritative Brazilian voice arguing that race was a significant variable in determining a Brazilian's life chances. Yet neither he nor any of the São Paulo school conducted empirical research to document the message for which they became famous.

The politically motivated dismissal of Fernandes, Cardoso, and Ianni from their University of São Paulo teaching posts in 1968 precluded further research. And there can be no doubt that the cloud of repression imposed by the military after 1968 made field research on race relations virtually impossible. Not only was the race omitted from the 1970 census, but government censorship precluded any criticism in the mass media of the image of Brazil's "racial democracy." The U.S. government's Inter-American Foundation, which had made grants to several African-Brazilian communities (for consciousness raising and social activism), was unceremoniously expelled from the country.

Interestingly, much of the left, although bitterly opposed to the military regime, also regarded the question of race as strictly secondary. Whatever might appear as racial discriminations was, by this view, a result of socioeconomic stratification. A revolutionary attack on the capitalist system was the key to achieving social justice, and nonwhites would benefit more or less automatically from the adoption of more egalitarian policies. Racism, according to his view, was simply not an independent variable.

Holders of this were not dupes of the Freyre myth, properly speaking, but rather devotees of an economicistic world view. Economic injustice rules the capitalist world, and attacking it would lift all boats, whatever their color. In truth, these intellectuals may have been more deeply influenced by the myth of racial democracy than they would like to admit. But the rationale for their position differed significantly and must be seen as such.

The second group to challenge the establishment doctrines of assimilation through "whitening" were the African-Brazilian militants. These were the black and mulatto Brazilians who not only said racial discrimination was pervasive but also rejected outright the alleged white superiority that had underlain the assimilationist consensus. They argued implicitly that African traditions were as valuable as European traditions. These voices were tiny in number. Their strains could be heard occasionally in the nineteenth century and again in the 1920s and 1930s, when an African-Brazilian press and African-Brazilian political movement arose, centered primarily in São Paulo. It was snuffed out during the Estado Novo...
(1937–45) but reappeared after 1945 in the person of its best-known spokesman, Abdias do Nascimento. The return of authoritarianism in 1968 once again silenced the African-Brazilian militants, who resurfaced with the gradual political opening of the late 1970s.

The relative lack of militant African-Brazilian protest in twentieth-century Brazil, in the face of now-documented discrimination, is a phenomenon worth studying. How can it be explained? One reason is the whitening ideology, which operated to co-opt mulattos. A second reason is a corollary of the first. Because there was no legal segregation, there were no parallel nonwhite institutions, such as the all-black Protestant churches which in the U.S. furnished most of the leadership for the civil rights movement.

In the late 1970s a new generation of African-Brazilians—small in number but outspoken in their militancy—arose to contest in an unprecedented way the “myth” of Brazil’s racial democracy. In several major cities, primarily in the industrialized Southeast, they organized protests against police brutality and mistreatment at the hands of public agencies, as well as discrimination in the job market and in public places. The movement enjoyed a flurry of publicity in the late 1970s and early 1980s and provoked greater interest among foreign academics than their Brazilian counterparts. The militants never enjoyed broad support in the African-Brazilian community, although they argued that their potential support went deep. The movement was bedeviled by factionalism and a barrage of animosity from the political and cultural establishment. The latter termed them “un-Brazilian,” “racist,” and mindless imitators of the U.S. civil rights activists.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the militants’ political movement, they were significant as a social phenomenon. It was one expression of a wave of African-Brazilian consciousness stronger then had ever appeared in twentieth-century Brazil. It could be seen in the outpouring of African-Brazilian literature, much of it published in modest editions at the author’s expense. It could be seen in the highly militant African-Brazilian action groups within a leading national labor confederation and among domestic employees in São Paulo. It could be seen in the increasing willingness of prominent blacks and mulattos (especially in the arts and entertainment) to speak out about their experiences of discrimination.

Yet it would be rash to argue that African-Brazilian protest has had any significant impact either on the prevailing assimilationist ideology or on social behavior (although the fact that our earliest data dates from 1976 makes documented discussion of trends impossible). It is true that the 1988 Constitution (the eighth since 1924) for the first time in Brazilian constitutional history outlawed racism, declaring that “the practice of racism constitutes a crime that is unenforceable and without stature of limitation and is subject to imprisonment according to the law” (Art. 5, XLI). But the necessary enabling law has never been passed, and Brazilian civil rights lawyers are finding it difficult in practice to establish a legal basis for their criminal complaints.

It should be added that African-Brazilian militants today regard their battle as only in its preliminary stages. One of their greatest challenges is the fact of the pervasiveness of the assimilationist ideology. It has penetrated into every layer of Brazilian society. Militant African-Brazilians see their country’s ambiguous racial terminology as their greatest obstacle to creating solidarity among nonwhites. They have appropriated the Portuguese term negro as their identifying label—a term meant to proclaim the oneness of preto and mulatto. They challenge nonwhites to “assume” their true color, directing their ire above all at those who believe they can “whiten” themselves by “correct” attitudes and behavior. The latter are disparaged as the negros de alma branca (blacks with a white soul), or the non-whites who have fallen for the concept of “social race” articulated by the anthropologists.

The final group dissenting from the assimilationist ideology is the new generation of (almost entirely white) social scientists, intellectuals, and social activists who have become convinced that racial discrimination is a pervasive reality in Brazil. It was inevitable that this revisionist initiative would require a full-scale attack on Gilberto Freyre, as the leading spokesman for the myth of “racial democracy.” It was delivered by a young São Paulo historian. These new dissenters include demographers, journalists, social workers, and labor union and church activists who have had the courage to denounce both racial discrimination and the assimilationist ideology that befogs public discussion of race relations in Brazil. They, along with the African-Brazilian militants, form the backbone of the historically most serious challenge to establishment practice and ideology.

1976: SOME BRAZILIANS DISCOVER A RACE PROBLEM

The National Household Survey (PNAD) of 1976 marked the first time the Brazilian government had ever collected and published data on employment and income by race. The results showed unmistakably that race was an independent variable in determining life outcomes. Suddenly, all the previous generalizations about race relations had become obsolete. Researchers could no longer get by with citing anecdotal evidence. Now there was hard data. The “class vs. race” thesis had been put to the test and found wanting. When education, age, and sex were controlled, race turned out to be the only explanation for significant variations in income (see Table 2).

In fact, the disparity grew with educational attainment. This data seemed to refute the social race hypothesis. The more the nonwhite approximated what the Brazilian elite assumed to be the ultimate noninheritable marker, i.e., education, the greater the income disparity vis-à-vis the white. The pattern reappeared in the data from the 1980 census and the 1982 PNAD.

What could one conclude about these findings? Most important, racial discrimination did exist despite the absence of the descent rule and despite the absence of legal segrega-
tion. In short, the absence of the key markers of institutionalized racism in the U.S. did not mean the absence of systematic discrimination. Second, mulatos did better than blacks, in general, in earnings. Within an overall pattern of discrimination, therefore, multiracialism still operated. Exactly how remains to be explained.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1976 PNAD</th>
<th>PAROS</th>
<th>PRETOS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiprofessional</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>76.4</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Oliveira et al. 1985.)

What has been the effect of these revelations? Minimal. Perhaps we should not expect much in the short run. But this data has given ammunition to the dissenters—the African-Brazilian militants and the white iconoclasts and activists. It was much in the air at the Constituent Assembly that drafted the 1988 Constitution. And it is much cited by the activists who are fighting for change at the level of unions, courts, employers, and the media.

Social scientists tell us that the data base on Brazilian race relations is still very thin. There is much more we need to know about health, housing, education, family structure, etc. Little of this is covered in the bare bones questionnaires of the census data. Indeed, researchers have had to fight even to get access to the data already collected. Much of the most important information has never been published and is available only on tapes, which the census bureau refused to release for years and then only at great cost to users. Official policies have been so obstructionist that a group of researchers have organized a pressure group to force the census authorities to release future data (the 1990 census is yet to be undertaken) on a timely and accessible basis. Even more interestingly, activists have organized a campaign to convince African-Brazilians to respond accurately when the census enumerator asks their race. The objective is to counter the “whitening” ideology by getting mixed-bloods not to identify themselves as white, which would distort the census data.

The fact of the matter is that the new facts about racial discrimination in Brazil have yet to register significant impact upon the elite, the politicians, or the scholarly community. In a word, the Brazilian establishment still does not believe their society has a racial problem. Gilberto Freyre, too Florestan Fernandes, still dominates enlightened Brazilian public discussion. The antiracist article in the Constitution of 1988, like the Affonso Arinas Law of 1951 (which outlawed racial discrimination in public accommodations), is rhetoric, not a societal commitment. The efforts of such progressive state governors as Franco Montoro in São Paulo and Leonel Brizola in Rio de Janeiro (his first term) to move against racial discrimination have largely aborted. Their successors sabotaged their initiatives, sometimes blatantly.

What is more interesting from the standpoint of this paper is the lack of reaction among academics. The occasion of the centenary of abolition in 1988 was an important indicator. That would have seemed the ideal opportunity to do a stock-taking of progress in race relations in the century since the end of slavery. Instead, there was a flood of self-congratulation as befiting a racial democracy that had allegedly escaped unscathed from the trauma of slavery. Brazil even witnessed the scene of the imperial heir of Princess Isabel, the benefactress of the “Golden Law” of abolition, receiving obsequious thanks from an awed delegation of black and mulatto Brazilians.

Militant African-Brazilians sought to make their case against the myth of racial democracy in 1988. But they were largely drowned out by the civic ceremonies celebrating Brazil’s genius in having liquidated slavery without such trauma as the U.S. Civil War.

No social scientist rose to the challenge to produce an in-depth portrait of contemporary Brazilian race relations. We are still without any comprehensive, well-documented overview based on the post-1976 data. The Brazilian academic community has been notably slow to assimilate, or even to acknowledge, the new reality.

**Conclusion**

It must be stressed that there is still not consensus among the Brazilian elite, or even among Brazilian social scientists, that Brazil suffers from significant and systematic racial discrimination. Yet evidence to prove it is rapidly accumulating. What matters, however, is how Brazilian society reacts to that information. That, in turn, depends on two factors.

The first is whether African-Brazilians come to see their life situation as being determined to a significant degree by racial discrimination. If so, will they translate this consciousness into collective action? In doing so, they could become politically powerful because they are virtually half the population (and because illiterates, who are disproportionately numerous among African-Brazilians, have recently been enfranchised).

The second factor is whether Brazilians choose to accept the facts about discrimination and are prepared to take remedial action. In short, will they honor their country’s commitment to democracy, which can never be realized under conditions of racism?

Finally, will Brazilian social scientists take the lead in acknowledging and documenting the facts about racial behavior in their country? And how will they choose to act on that knowledge? Their response will have much to do with the fate of democracy in Latin America’s largest and most misunderstood multiracial society.
Notes