

The African Diaspora: Brazil and the United States

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Resumo

A diáspora africana foi impulsionada pelo comércio de escravos que desmantelou velhos padrões de desenvolvimento histórico e social na África e criou, sob significativa coação, um complexo conjunto de novas histórias, novas culturas, novas sociedades e novos grupos étnicos/raciais nas Américas. Estas novas histórias e sociedades foram moldadas pela interação de vários fatores importantes: a natureza da economia colonial e da necessidade de trabalho escravo; a população dos europeus residentes comparada à de escravos africanos; as regiões da África de onde os africanos escravizados foram retirados; a taxa de sobrevivência dos nativos americanos em uma determinada região; e em alguns casos, a religião e outras peculiaridades culturais do país colonizador. Em cada colônia, o valor de cada variável foi diferente, criando uma série de equações sociais complexas e uma fascinante mistura de semelhanças e diferenças na paisagem racial do hemisfério ocidental. Minha apresentação vai comparar a Diáspora Africana para o Brasil e os Estados Unidos, e seu legado em ambas as nações modernas.

Palavras-chave

Brasil; Diáspora; Escravidão; Estados Unidos da América; Sociedade.

Abstract

The African Diaspora was driven by slave trade that shattered old patterns of historical and social development in Africa and created, under significant duress, a complex array of new histories, new cultures, new societies and new racial/ethnic groups in the Americas. These new histories and societies were shaped by the interaction of several key factors: the nature of the colonial economy and the need for bound labor; the population of resident Europeans relative to that of enslaved Africans; the regions of Africa from which enslaved Africans were drawn; the survival rate of the Native Americans in a given region; and in some cases, the religion and other cultural peculiarities of the colonizing country. In each colony, the value of each variable was different-creating a host of complex social equations and a fascinating blend of similarities and differences across the racial landscape of the western hemisphere. My presentation will compare the African Diaspora to Brazil and the United States-and its legacy in both modern nations.

Keywords

Brazil; Diaspora; Slavery; Society; United States.

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Introduction

Since the late 1800s, the term “African Diaspora” has been applied to the forced migration of millions of enslaved Africans into Europe, the Americas and Asia between 1441 and the 1880s. As such, the African Diaspora is a fact of history central to the complex process of creating the modern world. But what does the Diaspora mean today, particularly to Africans and persons of African ancestry? And, if sub-Saharan Africa is an enormous metaphorical “tree” and the Diaspora embodies its metaphorical “branches”, the relationship between the “tree” and its branches—and between the “branches” themselves—is denied by some, celebrated by many and, perhaps, largely misunderstood by most.¹

This presentation to The International Conference of the Graduate Program in Letters at UNESP-Rio Preto, Brazil, is derived from a similar paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Humanities Festival held in Barbados in March 1977. At that time, many years ago, I spoke of the relationship, with its many similarities and differences, between the children of the Diaspora in the United States and their kinsmen in the Caribbean. Today, I am honored by the opportunity to explore the Diaspora broadly, with a somewhat sharper comparative focus on African Americans and Afro-Brazilians, at your fine institution.

The African Diaspora

By the time Jamestown (Virginia) was settled in 1607 and the British colonization of North America commenced, the forced migration of Africans to the Americas had been underway for more than a century—and the forced migration of Africans to Europe had been in progress for more than 160 years. This traffic in human beings began as a “trickle” in September 1441, when Antam Goncalves, a young Portuguese captain, kidnapped nine Africans near the Rio del Oro along the West African coast. With the blessing of the Portuguese king and the Pope, comparatively small numbers of Africans soon began to appear in Portugal, some of whom were re-sold into Spain, southern France and the various city-states occupying the Italian peninsula. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (1453) cut-off western European access to the slave-hunting grounds in eastern Europe and central Asia, Africa became the alternative source of bound labor and the flow of Africans into Europe increased to between eight and nine hundred persons per year by 1470. Within a generation, the complexion of European slavery—an institution which re-emerged in the Mediterranean region in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—changed, according to Basil Davidson (1980), from predominantly white to predominantly black.

Still, by the 1400s, the labor shortage in Europe caused by plagues and warfare in the late medieval period was being reversed and, as a result, the preconditions for a large-scale expansion of the institution of slavery did not exist. Rather, European contact with and colonization of the Americas triggered a sequence of historical events that would transform four continents, i.e., Africa, Europe, North and South America, and would increase the demand for and the flow of Africans into slavery in distant lands. The proximate causes of this transformation were greed, religious intolerance, the evolution of racism, warfare and disease. Its beneficiaries would be the European societies involved directly or

¹ See “The African Abroad or the African Diaspora” (HARRIS, 1993) and *The Making of the African Diaspora in the Americas, 1441-1900* (THOMPSON, 1987).

indirectly with slave trade and colonization. Its victims, according to David Brion Davis (1984), would be the native peoples of both the Americas and Africa.

Having long been subject to enslavement themselves by their Muslim neighbors, the Spanish and Portuguese assumed that it was neither immoral nor unethical to enslave people of other races, even those belonging to other European ethnic groups. This attitude was stated with chilling clarity by Christopher Columbus himself who wrote, following his initial contact with the Tainos of the Bahamas, the following entry in his journal on October 12 and 18, 1492:

They are well built, with very handsome bodies and very good faces; their hair coarse, almost like the silk of a horse's tail, and short... they are the color of the Canary Islanders, neither black nor white... It appeared to me that these people were very poor in everything... they have no iron. They bear no arms, nor are they acquainted with them... They ought to be good servants and of good intelligence... I believe that they would easily be made Christians, because it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, I will carry off six of them at my departure to Your Highnesses, in order that they may learn to speak.²

Unfortunately, this seemingly inexhaustible supply of enslaved or enserfed labor lacked immunity to common European diseases and began to die-off in staggering numbers. The perceived need to replace a dwindling Native American labor force caused the "trickle" of Africans flowing into Europe, the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic islands to become a "flood" of Africans surging across the Atlantic. Consequently, the African population in the New World increased as the Native American population declined and, by 1522, there were sufficient unhappy Africans in Hispaniola (the modern location of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) to stage the first recorded African slave insurrection in the Americas. By 1540, roughly 10,000 enslaved Africans were arriving in the New World each year.³

Most of the Africans enslaved and transported to Europe or the Americas were born in sub-Saharan West Africa, primarily in a region stretching from modern-day Senegal to modern-day Angola, up to several hundred miles inland. Before European contact, a succession of powerful kingdoms and empires (e.g., ancient Nok, medieval Ghana, Mali, Songhay) had emerged in the Western Sudan, i.e., the inland savannah regions of West Africa. Large scale trading networks were established within sub-Saharan Africa and Muslim North Africa, and these empires grew wealthy, highly sophisticated, powerful and populous—as did the coastal trading cities and inland states of east Africa. However, in the tropical forest regions along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea and to the south, hundreds of smaller and less powerful, but nonetheless highly structured and sophisticated societies existed in comparative peace with one another and with their natural surroundings, e.g., Benin, and the coalescing kingdoms of Bantu-speaking people in the Congo and Angola regions. As with the Native American empires in the New World, these large scale African social and political formations would ultimately be destabilized and destroyed by European contact—while the smaller scale societies would be exploited as sources of slaves.

As in most agricultural civilizations, various forms of servitude could be found throughout Africa. With few exceptions, these systems of servitude were more akin to serfdom than to slavery—and those who were debtors, war captives, et al., were most likely to find themselves subject to bondage.

² See *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account* (1993) and *The Conquest of Paradise and the Columbian Legacy* (1990).

³ See *The Black Diaspora* (1995) and *The African Slave Trade* (1980).

However, while servitude in Africa was benign in relative terms, servants were usually “outside” the kinship structures that lent cohesiveness and shared social identity to African societies. The servant might marry into this structure, making his/her offspring a part of it, but he/she would remain in a lower or marginal status. People so classified and situated were often deemed “less valuable” and often became “disposable”. Such individuals were particularly vulnerable to kidnapping by or sale to the Europeans throughout the slave trade period.

The Portuguese developed, through trial and error in the 1400s, the practice of preying on the weaker African societies and conducting business with the leaders and merchants of the stronger African states. What could not be foreseen initially were the dramatic increase in the demand for slaves in the 1500s and the extent to which enslaved Africans would enrich and strengthen Europe and, correspondingly, the extent to which their loss would impoverish and weaken Africa. After the fall of Songhay (September 1591), there was no longer a strong, centralized empire in the Western Sudan and African societies throughout West Africa became increasingly “at risk” with respect to the depredations of the Europeans. In this context, hundreds of fragmented, often quarrelsome societies—even with a total population in the tens of millions—were no match against one large state with a population only half as large.⁴

In the 1530s, the Portuguese began experimenting with the cultivation of sugar cane in northeastern Brazil. Native Americans were used as slave labor, initially, but, after repeated epidemics struck in the 1560s and 1570s, large numbers of enslaved Africans were imported as the backbone of the Brazilian plantation labor-force. After 1600, sugar plantation colonies were established throughout the Caribbean, triggering another tremendous upsurge in the slave trade. By 1640, roughly 40,000 enslaved Africans were arriving in the Americas each year. By 1740, the annual rate of slave importation had risen to 100,000—with most enslaved Africans bound for Brazil or the Caribbean. This “Atlantic System”, according to Mintz (1985); Klein (1986) and Thompson (1987) transformed the European political economy and created colonies that would evolve into the modern nations of the Americas. On the other hand, the vast regions of West Africa affected directly by slave trade of this magnitude were thrown into the chaos of war, depopulation and the evermore rigid structures of European influence and control that prefigured colonialism.

Estimates of the number of Africans who reached the Americas alive range from 9.5 million to over 20 million. Roughly 45 percent flowed into Brazil; 40 percent into the Caribbean. Another 10 to 12 percent were imported by the Spanish mainland colonies, with the remaining 3 to 5 percent reaching North America. For every African who reached some other part of the world alive, it has been estimated that between one and two other Africans died as victims of or in resisting enslavement in some way. Thus, allowing for high mortality rates in resisting enslavement in Africa and on the Middle Passage (i.e., the voyage to the Americas), at least 50 million Africans may have been impacted by slave trade between 1441 and the late 1800s. Exact figures may never be known due to poor or lost records, smuggling, and historical bias. However, historians agree that approximately one-third of all enslaved Africans were victims of kidnapping (primarily women and children), another third were war captives (primarily adult

⁴ See *The African-Caribbean Connection: Historical and Cultural Perspectives* (1990); *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (1986) and *Stand the Storm: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (1985).

men), and another third were victims of judicial, religious or simply business transactions.⁵

As the Diaspora unfolded, Africans were delivered to two broad categories of American colonies. One, the “non-settler colony”, was essentially an exploitative European economic enterprise in a non-European part of the world. The European population of “non-settler” colonies was usually small relative to the size of the indigenous and/or enslaved population. The classic examples of such “economic” colonies were the Caribbean islands whereon persons of African descent were usually 90 percent or more of the total population.

Conditions of enslavement were often brutal in such non-settler colonies. Heavy slave imports were needed to off-set high slave mortality. Young adult males were the slaves of choice (usually two males to every one female were imported). Large scale revolts were frequent and, if a backcountry region existed, the formation of maroon societies was common—with Palmares in Brazil representing the most impressive example. Furthermore, the small number of whites at times allowed for the emergence of an intermediate class of free blacks and/or mulattoes. In addition, “non-settler” colonies, given their economic purpose, were typically one-crop or one-commodity economies and, therefore, dependent on the “mother country” to a greater or lesser degree. Once again, the Caribbean example is useful in that, with so much land committed to sugar cultivation, there was insufficient arable land available on which food for colonists and slaves could be grown.

As a result, the West Indian islands often depended on Europe or other New World colonies for food and other necessities of life. In the truest sense, these societies were fundamentally “artificial”.

In contrast, “settler” colonies represented efforts to establish permanent, more or less self-sufficient societies of transplanted Europeans outside the geographic boundaries of Europe. “Settler” colonies had to sustain themselves, which typically necessitated the cultivation of both staple crops for survival and commodity crops for sale. As havens for “adherents to unpopular religions or political movements”, or merely to adventurers and the displaced European poor, such colonies eventually attracted and retained enormous European populations. The conditions of enslavement in “settler colonies” were neither better nor “milder” than those prevailing in “non-settler colonies”, only different. Slave mortality was lower. Enslaved Africans were usually a minority in the population, e.g., there was a ratio of roughly one enslaved black person to two free/white persons in the antebellum American south. With no more than one third of the population enslaved, the number of bondpersons was sufficient to meet moderately heavy labor demands, without being too large to control effectively. Furthermore, a society in which the actual or potential slave-owning group represented two-thirds of the total population could also maintain its (European) racial and cultural identity.

Each type of colony served the interests of different groups of Europeans. None, in the long-term, served the interests of non-Europeans. The growth of such colonies dispossessed the indigenous populations, promoted the enslavement of Africans and altered the natural ecological balance as well (through deforestation, the introduction of new plants and animals, diseases, et al.). However, “non-settler” colonies, because they existed to produce profit, were far more important to the European ruling and upper classes than were

⁵ See *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (1982) and *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1982).

“settler” colonies. Of course, there were numerous mixed models and exceptions. For example, widespread racial mixing in Spanish America produced, according to Klein (1985) and Thompson (1987) societies in which the majority population was neither white nor African nor Native American—and in which there were large free colored or mestizo groups. Brazil followed this pattern, but produced both a large mulatto population and an even larger slave population in the sugar-growing northeast and, later, the coffee-growing south, with enslaved Africans and free people of color scattered literally throughout that vast country.

This tremendous diversity, both with respect to the many African societies impacted by slave trade and the many different types of slave societies produced in the Americas meant that the African Diaspora was many distinct but related (and often inter related) experiences, not merely one.

Slavery and freedom

After several unsuccessful attempts to establish colonies in North and South America in the late 1500s, James Fort (later renamed Jamestown) was founded on May 13, 1607 in the Chesapeake Bay region of Virginia.

Conditions in the temperate woodland zone of North America were not conducive, initially, either to the development of large scale plantation agriculture or even to the growth of major urban centers such as those of Spanish America—which depended to some extent on the labor of enslaved Africans and a growing class of free persons of color. Still, labor was needed in North America to clear and cultivate land, build dwellings and other structures, and to defend and expand settlements. Because there were seldom enough settlers for this purpose, most early colonies sought desperately to find free, indentured or enslaved laborers.

In 1619, a Dutch frigate with a predominantly English crew landed at Jamestown “about the last of August” (KLEIN, 1985, p. 71) and sold twenty Africans to the colonists. These Africans were the first introduced into a British North American colony and, with their arrival, the history of the African American branch of the Diaspora begins.

While the legal framework of slavery had been constructed in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies over a period of several generations, the legal status of “slave” — as distinct from that of servant or serf—did not yet exist in the British colonies. Consequently,

the negroes were legally but colony servants, and a disposition to recognize them as such seems apparent...they were put to work upon public lands to support the governor and other officers of the government; or... they were put into the hands of representative planters closely connected with the government in order to separate them from one another...Some of these negroes received wages and purchased their freedom, and the length of servitude seems to have been dependent on the time of conversion to Christianity (KLEIN, 1985, p. 79).⁶

Despite the early arrival of Africans, the institution of slavery grew slowly in North America. Because of a labor surplus in Europe and wars throughout the seventeenth century, the initial labor needs of the fledgling North American and Caribbean British colonies were met more often through the

⁶ See, also, “A History of Slavery in Virginia”. In: *Early Studies of Slavery by States*, v.1(1972); *Jamestown, 1544-1699* (1980) and *Raleigh and the British Empire* (1962).

importation of bound white laborers than through the enslavement of Africans. White indentured servants were plentiful and relatively cheap through the 1660s and constituted the bulk of the bound labor force in the early colonies. In 1662, the creation of the Royal African Company, followed by Bacon's Rebellion (1676) in Virginia, simultaneously discouraged indentured servitude and promoted the growth of slavery. The resolution of this conflict also created a more or less permanent class of poor backcountry whites who would press for the opening of new western lands for settlement which necessitated the removal of Native Americans from those lands. In both cases, these European colonists came to conceive of their future and that of their descendants as unfolding in North America, i.e., as settlers, not as sojourners.⁷

In the end, three fundamental characteristics distinguished slavery in the Americas from earlier forms of human bondage:

1) those enslaved became chattel, i.e., property, not people—a degree of dehumanization or “social death” unknown in earlier historical periods;

2) enslavement was perpetual, i.e., slave status was inherited from one's parents and could be bequeathed to one's children (one could be born and die a slave); and

3) slavery was racial, i.e., slavery in the Americas was considered, by the 1700s, a status suitable only for Africans and persons of African descent.⁸

Still, in British North America, African slavery remained a marginal institution in a collection of rather marginal colonies and the black population in grew very slowly until the eighteenth century. For example, there were 3,000 enslaved African Americans in all of British North America by 1660 and only 28,000 by 1700.

However, after 1700, the African population began to grow and its growth was swift and alarming since, along with huge importations of Africans, the African American population achieved natural population growth between 1730 and 1750, i.e., an excess of births over deaths—and was the only major African population in the Americas to do so. Thus, by ca. 1760, there were 325,000 African Americans in British North America and, by 1800, after the beginning of large-scale cotton cultivation in the 1790s, there were over 1 million African Americans. And, despite the end of legal slave trade in 1808, there were nearly 4.5 million African Americans by 1860.

Most enslaved Africans were concentrated geographically in the “south”, where tobacco, rice and indigo were “cash crops”. This was a hemispheric rather than an American pattern, observable in Brazil: simply put, as one moved toward the equator, both the sheer number of Africans and their proportion in the total population of a particular colony increased. In the more northerly regions of North America, e.g., New England, slavery was not a significant institution. In the middle colonies, where plantation agriculture was not practiced, most slave-owners possessed fewer than ten enslaved African Americans. However, where commodity crops could be grown profitably through the use of intensive gang labor and plantation agriculture, land and slaves came to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. For example, only about 20 percent of all white families owned enslaved African Americans in the 1700s—and only 10 percent by 1860—

⁷ See *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (1993) and *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (1974).

⁸ See “Brazilian and United States Slavery Compared”. *Journal of Negro History*, VI (1922); *Who is Black: One Nation's Definition* (1991); “Affirmative Action and American Racism in Historical Perspective”. *The Journal of Negro History*, 84 (1999) and “The African Diaspora and the ‘Black Atlantic’: An African American Perspective”. In: *Negro History Bulletin*, 60 (1997).

in contrast to slave-holding patterns in the Caribbean and Brazil. Consequently, through the colonial and ante-bellum periods, most white Americans did not own enslaved African Americans—and those who did owned comparatively few, but had power and wealth far out of proportion to their numbers.⁹

On the other hand, in Brazil, slavery could be found throughout the country, although distributed unevenly across its many geographic and economic regions, and a much higher percentage of the population owned enslaved Afro-Brazilians. As in the United States, however, the major land- and slave-owners in Brazil held, according to Klein (1985) a disproportionate share of wealth and power—and used these assets to protect slavery.

The evolution of “racial” slavery in the Americas was also shaped definitively by two loosely related factors common to all colonial slave societies: the presence of Africans who were not enslaved; and the presence of persons of mixed African/European (and sometimes Native American) ancestry. Brazil and the United States differed most in these respects.

In what were becoming “color-coded” societies, with rather definite statuses assigned to each racial/color group, persons of African ancestry who were not enslaved were a troublesome anomaly. According to Klein (1985), by the late 1700s, sizeable free black and free colored populations could be found in Latin America. For example, 399,000 (28.5 percent) of the roughly 1,399,000 persons of African descent in Brazil were classified as “free colored”. Even more significantly, 650,000 (or 70.5 percent) of the roughly 920,000 people of color in mainland Spanish America were so classified. Furthermore, somewhat smaller, but still significant, groups could be found in the Caribbean, e.g., 212,000 (or 15.9 percent) of more than 1,300,000 people of color in this region were free. In contrast, free persons of color were a small minority (32,000, or 5.3 percent, of 607,000) in British North America until after the American Revolution and the “First Emancipation”, i.e., the gradual abolition of slavery in the “north” between 1780 and 1825. However, between 1800 and 1860, this segment of the African American population grew to represent 10 to 15 percent of all African Americans.

In the United States, white Americans tended to view the presence of free people of color as a problem that required some sort of resolution. Most often, whites sought to subordinate and marginalize free blacks through discriminatory laws, outright mob violence, et al.—and even undertook to remove them from the United States through a variety of colonization schemes designed to protect slavery in the expanding “Cotton Kingdom” of the early 1800s. The perception of free people of color as a menacing and alien presence was epitomized in the goals of the American Colonization Society (founded 1816) and, even more graphically, in the creation of a U. S. colony in Africa (Liberia) in the 1820s to which free blacks could be “returned”. However, the vast majority of free people of color rejected colonization and the aims of its supporters—and chose to engage in the struggle for abolition and full civil rights in the United States. Their role would be central to that struggle.

In Brazil, by 1822, over two-thirds of the total population of the country was, according to Leslie Bethell and José Murilo de Carvalho (1989), black or mulatto. Roughly 1.1 million, or 30 percent, of the black and mulatto majority was enslaved. In other words, instead of being a small and despised minority as in the United States, the free black or free colored population was the majority or near majority population in Brazil.

⁹ See *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (1993); *U.S. Bureau of the Census. Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (1960).

The other complicating factor was racial mixing and the rapid and virtually inevitable emergence of racially intermediate groups. Since freedom and bondage were racially constructed status classifications, the definition of what constituted membership in each racial group was of more than passing importance—and varied depending on how persons of mixed descent were viewed in each slave-holding society.

It is sufficient to note that different societies throughout the Diaspora addressed this phenomenon and the attendant “problem” of racial classification in radically different ways. Most societies developed both a “color line”, with the most important distinctions being between those who were “white” and those who were not, and a “color spectrum” with one or more classifications between black and white (and “red”). By the time North America was being colonized, Latin America was becoming predominantly “brown” (i.e., Native American and European, with some African admixture) and the Caribbean was as becoming predominantly, and Brazil significantly, “black” — with several intermediate categories. Although miscegenation and the growth of mixed racial groups could not be prevented, the legal existence of these groups was seldom recognized and, in the United States, persons of African ancestry (if their African-ness was detectable), to whatever degree, were all classified as black. In other words, in the United States, the system of racial classification was based on a “color line”, not a “color spectrum”, and how and where that line was drawn varied over time. Only since the early 1900s has the “rule of hypo-descent”, or the “one drop rule”, been applied consistently.

These factors, i.e., the presence of free persons of color and racially intermediate groups, often overlapped. Some white parents freed and provided in various ways for their black American offspring. Some African Americans of mixed parentage, while still held in bondage, were given the advantages of education or training in the trades—which often facilitated freedom through self-purchase. Consequently, while being racially mixed and being free were not highly correlated, it has been estimated that roughly half of the free persons of color in the United States (by the early 1800s) were of mixed racial ancestry.

In Brazil, the mulatto or “middle group”, subdivided into many different sub-categories, came to constitute a distinct social caste—or, at least Brazilians behaved as though it was in certain circumstances. Much as in the U. S., many African Americans are convinced that lighter skin conferred privileges and advantages. However, in the U. S.—and in Brazil as well—color may actually be a “distinction without a difference” in that the conditions of persons of African descent did not vary significantly based on color, although promoting the idea that color did make a significant difference may have been an effective means to divide persons of African descent from within.¹⁰

Thus, the African Diaspora delivered Africans into the jaws of a type of slavery, as it evolved in its many New World incarnations, that would involve a permanent and absolute loss of political and civil liberty for which there was no historical precedent. The legacy of this type of slavery can still be found throughout the Diaspora.

The Legacy of the Past

¹⁰ See *Racial Conditions* (1994).

Today, there are over 35 million African Americans in the United States—or roughly 13 percent of the U. S. population. According to the Brazilian government (2006 Census), despite heavy European immigration in the late 1800s and early 1900s, over half of the national population may have some African genetic heritage, i.e., there are over 13 million “blacks”, or 7.5 percent of the total Brazilian population and over 80 million Brazilians classified, informally, as Pardos (or “brown”), representing roughly 43 percent of the total population.

In both countries, slavery ended several generations ago, but its legacy is most visible in deep and enduring objective inequalities between racial groups—i.e., in employment, earnings, wealth, educational opportunity and attainment, power and representation, *et al.* However, the meaning of this legacy is constructed somewhat differently in each nation.

For example, in Brazil, these significant inequalities exist alongside the popular construct of Brazil as a “racial paradise”, a country in which racial distinctions belong to the distant past. Consistent with this construct, if there are objective differences between racial or color groups, those differences are attributable to class, not color, in a society in which wealth is maldistributed and upward mobility is limited. That this construct does not explain the facts particularly well is, perhaps, less important than the tenacity with which large segments of Brazilian society adhere to it and behave accordingly. In other words, the “racial paradise” may be a myth—as black Brazilians have argued loudly—but it certainly serves, according to Howard Winant, a purpose.

In the United States, a much newer version of this myth—of color-blindedness, of being post-racial—has become quite popular since the end of the Civil Rights era and, particularly, after the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the country in 2008. Well-meaning liberals, angry conservatives and outright racists have embraced this myth for widely divergent reasons ranging from wishful thinking to arguments that deny the need for racial or redistributive social justice. However, this version is also at odds with the facts since the vast majority of black Americans, notwithstanding a few notable exceptions, have inherited the same legacy of deep and structural inequality that can be found in Brazil. Perhaps, the most important differences are that these inequalities are far more widely acknowledged in the United States, that more black Americans reject this myth and are willing to express that rejection consistent with the long tradition of black political activism. Still, what is most troubling, in both societies, is that what is most obvious is also what is often denied most adamantly.

There remains the troubling suspicion that, in both countries, neither self-interest nor the market place nor the protection of white privilege are entirely adequate as explanations of the persistence and magnitude of racial inequality so many generations after the end of slavery. Something remains unexplained. As Hudson and Hine-Hudson found in studying American racial attitudes, a significant minority of white Americans still identify rather intensely with the virulent racial attitudes of two centuries ago and that they cannot construct a positive racial identity for themselves unless it grows out of the attribution of a negative racial identity to African Americans and often other persons of color.¹¹

We simply cannot rule out or minimize the role of racism itself. As Werneck stated in Brazil in 1855, plumbing the irrational depths of racism in his time:

¹¹ See “A study of the Contemporary Racial Attitudes of White and African Americans”. **The Western Journal of Black Studies**, 23 (1999).

The slave is not only an agent of labor and of production... One must be ignorant of the human heart to think so. According to Werneck (1972), the slave is an object of luxury, a means of satisfying certain vanities and certain vices of the nature of man... the slave offers the master a certain pleasure of command and authority, which exists in the human heart, we know not whether for good or evil.

The legacy of slave trade and slavery lives on in these attitudes—that some of us can only feel “elevated” when others of us are diminished—and in the objective inequalities that limit the life chances of millions of person of African ancestry in our two countries. As more than a century has demonstrated, this legacy will not vanish through a simple process of social evolution. It must be rooted out. In my view, the challenge facing your country and mine is how to take the next and long-delayed steps toward achieving true freedom and equality.

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