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JCB-30 A first look at race relations

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

On our ship bound for Rio our dinner companions were a young couple who had just spent six months in the American South. "Our country has nothing like your racial problems. We have no racial prejudices," they assured us. "But", looking past us at the dark-skinned man with his blond wife at a nearby table, "there are some things we just don't like." The Brazilian couple who showed us the sights of Rio when we first arrived spent the evening extolling their country's lack of racial prejudice. Later the wife pulled Barbara aside to ask her how she could stand living in Africa "with all those black men!"

The great mixture of skin colours and facial features is everywhere apparent on the streets and athletic fields, at the beaches and corner lunch stands, on the busses and in the movie houses. It is not at all evident in private clubs, the higher priced restaurants and in the upper grades in school. Waiters, sales clerks and bank tellers are seldom black but it is the colour of many domestic servants, street cleaners and garbage collectors. "Race" is seldom part of an election campaign (a local politician told me that if any candidate for office used this issue the voters would turn against him) but there is only one black skinned person in the Brazilian Congress. There are no racial restrictions to voting but most black Brazilians can't vote.

White Brazilian men seem to favor dark complexioned mistresses but prefer white wives. A popular Brazilian song is "O teu cabelo nao nega" (literally, "Don't let your hair negate") which in effect tells mulato girls not to worry about straightening their kinky hair because "we love you any way". We were told a beautiful girl, no matter what her colour, can go as far as she wants and, after a pause, "sometimes even to the altar". Male cariocas were pleased when a "mulata" was crowned beauty queen of Guanabara, their state. But they were equally relieved when a white, green-eyed girl was selected as Miss Brazil; they did not want their country represented as non-white. They have the same ambiguous feeling about the prize-winning Brazilian film "Black Orpheus"; they are very proud that a Brazilian film should win such recognition but unhappy that it presents a black Brazil to the world.

More black than white in a favela schoolroom, more white than black at the Clube Brasília

Publically and often, Brazilians emphasize that racial prejudice is not a Brazilian disease but privately they will admit that some prejudice exists and can usually relate incidents where a black Brazilian, a Negro North American or a black African has had trouble getting accepted in a restaurant, hotel or club.

Is racial accord a myth?

North Americans who arrive expecting Brazil to be a racial paradise are often disillusioned when they encounter attitudes of prejudice or acts of outright discrimination. They conclude, some with great satisfaction, that Brazil is as prejudice-ridden as the United States But this is not true. Racial prejudice exists in Brazil but doesn't manifest itself in the kind of public discrimination we have in our South or even in as much private discrimination as occurs throughout our country.

There are historical reasons for this; the forefathers of our nation and of Brazil had quite different attitudes toward the black man in his role as slave.

Slave owning was a new institution for settlers in the United States. There was no body of law or custom to regulate master-slave relations; existing religious and legal codes didn't accept slavery. In order for slavery to become palatable to the American conscience slaves had to be considered less than human. A Negro was considered inferior therefore because he was a slave.

In counterdistinction, slavery was an old and accepted institution to the Portuguese settlers of Brazil. It is estimated that in the mid-1500's over 10% of Lisbon's population were black African slaves. Slavery had long been an established fact among the Moors who had controlled and exerted such an influence over the Iberian peninsula. Just as the Portuguese themselves were for a time slaves to the Moors so they considered that the black Africans were slaves also by accident of time and place. In the sight of God the Catholic Portuguese realized that slaves were human beings and free souls; that their enslavement was not automatic proof of racial inferiority. There were Iberian legal codes which covered the rights of slaves although these were not often closely followed.

While considerable miscegenation took place during slavery both in North and South America, in our South the white man seldom looked on his coloured offspring in the same way he did his white. Laws in Southern states did not recognize the father of coloured children nor his responsiblity toward them. And a moral code which forbade polygamy made it incumbant on the father to think of his off-colour children as more Negro than white, and thus racially inferior. A man was either white or Negro, and Negro ancestry counted far more than the white.

Brazilians, on the other hand, have never been afraid of "race mixing". White Portuguese colonizers fraternized with both the Amerindians and their Negro slaves. Polygamy of a sort was widely condoned in the paternalistic fazendas and the white father's offspring of whatever colour were generally welcomed in some degree into the larger family. White ancestry was far more important than black so that any white blood automatically raised the child a level higher than his dark parent.

Therefore while slaves lived a harsh life in Brazil they were more protected by law, more respected as a family unit and had a greater opportunity to gain their freedom than those in the United States. In the States in the early 1860's there were as yet six times as many slaves as freed Negroes. At about the same time in Brazil there were more freed Negroes than slaves (some scholars estimate that the freed men outnumbered the slaves three to one).

Economics dictated the differences between the end of slavery in Brazil and in the United States. At the time of its abolition in Brazil in 1888 the largely agrarian society had arrived at a point where slavery was expendable; slave-produced crops were no longer

feasible. In our South the exact opposite was true; the invention of the cotton-gin made slavery invaluable for economic growth. Chief opponents of the end of slavery in Brazil were the large slaveholders who demanded reimbursement for the financial capital they had invested in slaves. When they didn't receive any indemnification they helped in the bloodless overthrow of the Brazilian monarchy and created an independent republic....vastly different than the economic pressures which helped to force our country into a bloody war.

With the end of slavery, a common problem

But in one thing there was great similarity between the two countries. The end of slavery found the freed man with little security and few possibilities of bettering himself. Most black Brazilians whose slave ancestors had little education or money when freed are still on the same treadmill of no money - little education, little education - no jobs - no money. There is free public primary education (where there are enough classrooms and teachers) but there are few public secondary schools and private schools cost much more than the laboring class can afford. And unless the child of a poor family can get through secondary school there is little liklihood that he will ever have a better job than his father. Negro Brazilians are still mostly menial laborers, favelados (slum dwellers) with little hope for the future.

Of course, the degree of opportunity varies with the region and locality. In the poverty-stricken North-east (Bahia, Pernambuco, Sergipe, Alagoas, Paraiba, Cear and Rio Grande do Norte) once the home of rich sugar cane plantations with large slave holdings, job and educational opportunities are very limited. In the Middle-east, with the industrial triangle formed by Brazil's largest and fastest-growing cities, Rio, Sao Paulo and Belo Horizante, there are more schools and more employment than anywhere else in the country. There is also a vast difference in opportunity between the cities, mostly along the Atlantic seaboard, and the small rural communities. The interior, although opened up to some extent with the building of Brazilia, is still to a very great extent undeveloped.

The cities have attracted more and more of the poor from the interior and the Northeast who are looking for food, jobs and opportunity. The cities can't hope to deal adequately with the resulting congestion. It is estimated that 1/3 of Rio's population of $3\frac{1}{2}$ million live in some 300 favelas. In a crash program five of the favelas have been moved into housing provided through the Alliance for Progress and plans are under way to move two more. This far behind in housing and sanitation, there is at least as large a lag in providing education and jobs.

Social distinctions: class rather than race

The almost exclusively white upper class still performs a paternalistic role in relation to the lower classes, but it is a social relationship,

wealthy to poor, educated to illiterate, rather than one of white to black. A few dark-skinned Brazilians, educated and well-to-do, have been accepted as members of the upper and middle classes. They stress that the reason there are not more is due to the lack of education and wealth, not to the colour of their skins. You don't see dark faces in the better restaurants or in political office because they lack the necessary money; they don't vote because they can't read and write; they don't become waiters or better because they lack the social education, "They don't even know where to put the fork on the table!"

Therefore in Brazil today it is the poor who are discriminated against, whatever their colour. There is a tremendous and almost unbridgable gap between the lower and the middle class. And the lower classes, the favelados, are far from being all black. People of all skin colours live closely together in the favelas and get along very well with each other. As a Brazilian friend has put it, "There is complete freedom on the bottom rung of the ladder".

While poor Brazilians are not necessarily black, most black Brazilians are poor and they form the bulk of the population in most urban favelas. Yet there is no evident feeling of separateness among these black Brazilians. They do not see themselves as victims of race. They do not band together in black societies to work for better conditions. What struggling they do against the social order (and it isn't much) is done usually through a favela organization or a union. Dale Bailey, a USIS man in Brazilia, has written his doctorial thesis comparing slave novels of Brazil with those of the United States. He points out that there is no novel of racial protest in Brazil. The angry young men here are angry about unjust social conditions. A group of students in Minas Gerais expressed it, "Your problems are racial, ours are economic and educational."

It does seem however, that the higher the class the more evident is racial prejudice. White Brazilians, for instance, when they talk of hiring help, advise against the hiring of a very dark skin. "The blacker they are, the more irresponsible, lazy and untrustworthy they are. You may not believe it but it is true." A Rio woman's organization has prepared a booklet on Brazilian custom for newcomers to the country. It advises on the hiring of a maid, "According to your own personality, you may prefer the slow, easy-going coloured Brazilian. Or you may be happier with the fast working and more efficient Portuguese."

On identification cards, Brazilians are described in one of four ways: branco, moreno, pardo and preto. "Branco" means white and "Moreno" indicates a swarthy complexion with European features and straight hair. "Pardo" is a polite word for "Mulato" and indicates a person with a dark complexion and kinky hair. "Preto" is black. Brazilians

I have quizzed about the terms have found the first three favorable but the last harsh and ugly. They find "escuro" a more polite word to indicate darkness. Only "preto" was considered a racial term, the others are "only descriptive". They insist that no judgements of inferiority or superiority are implied by such terms; the words are "only conceptions of colour and not of race". Yet they indicate that the most preferred categories are "branco" or "moreno" and affirmed that a light-skinned Brazilian would be offended if called "pardo" and incensed if called "mulato" or "preto". But a black Brazilian would take no offence in being labelled "branco" or "moreno".

For there is an emphasis here on "whitening", a term which means moving up on the social scale. A dark skinned person "whitens" when he marries lighter, or acquires education, wealth, or good family connections.

Perhaps the very fact that a black man can "whiten", that he can be accepted with almost no trouble once he crosses the bridge of education and connection, makes Brazil more tolerant than any other country in the world with a similar mixture. Very little of their prejudice has been translated into overt discrimination. They have great crushes on their athletic heroes, many of whom are black. And while they react negatively to any overseas image that pictures Brazil as Negro, they do think of their country as a mixed-racial state and are very proud of the fact. Their laws and behavior patterns point them away from racism and where they become aware of it they are ashamed and usually seek to eliminate it. A tolerant attitude and social conditions have made this position easy for them.

Social revolution- a threat or promise?

The upper and middle economic classes of Brazil are mostly white and perhaps the black Brazilian represents a far-off threat. As yet there haven't been any appreciable number of dark Brazilians able to compete with them for the better things in life. With industrialization and social reform, however, this threat will come closer and may create more overt discrimination than there has been in the past. Already in industrial São Paulo, where there has been a large influx of migrants to work in the factories there are indications of racial discrimination. Whether it is the competition for jobs or the fact that many non-Iberian Europeans and North Americans have settled there, or both, is not yet clear, but it is there that Brazil's claim of being non-racial will be put to its biggest test. Just a few days ago an article in the Correio de Manhã told about a football player and a singer who had been refused rooms in a São Paulo hotel because "nao ser permitida a permanencia de gente de cor nas dependencias do hotel" ("It is not permitted for people of colour to stay in this hotel"). Similar items pop up often enough to indicate a possible trend.

Is this the direction of Brazil's future? Or will the breakdown of Brazil's class society, a backbreaking aim in itself, open the way for a far more mobile democratic society? Time will tell.

Sincerely yours,

James C. Brewer

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Picture of Club Brasília courtesy of Manchete

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