

# Race in Latin America

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## Abstract

Race has long been a primary cleavage in Latin American societies, where people of African, Indigenous, and European origin have been present in large numbers. Although they have promoted race mixture as central to their national identities and often denied racism and racial discrimination, racial hierarchies have also been prominent features up until the present. Today, most Latin American countries have declared themselves multiculturalist and have begun to recognize their black and indigenous populations, largely in response to minority social movements and as these societies have begun to democratize. At the same time, the academic literature on the subject has blossomed.

Social distinctions and ethnic hierarchies based on phenotype, ancestry, and language have been prominent features of social life throughout the Western Hemisphere for more than 500 years. Since 1492, Europeans' incursions into the Americas brought them into contact with the native peoples of the continent, whom they would soon decimate through war and disease or would enslave or subject to various forms of servitude and harsh labor systems. Facing the growing labor demand in these rapidly expanding economies, the decimation of indigenous labor from disease and war with prohibitions against enslaving them, the Spanish and Portuguese would enslave and forcibly transport millions of Africans to the Americas for nearly 400 years, up to the nineteenth century. Fully 15 times as many Africans—11 times in Brazil only—were brought to Latin America compared to the United States.

The region's racial complexity increased further through the extensive mixture of Indians, Africans, and Europeans and a racial hierarchy, with Europeans at the top and blacks and indigenous peoples at the bottom. Race mixture would become a central concern in the nineteenth century with the new independence of these republics with elites concerned that their large nonwhite populations would doom national development and thus sought ways to whiten their population. By the mid-twentieth century, as race science was becoming discredited and openly racist societies were becoming

global pariahs, many Latin American elites turned their race mixture into virtues, with a new ideology of *mestizaje*. Although the elites moved from centuries of explicit racial domination toward seeking harmonious race relations, social hierarchies based on race, color, and language have nonetheless persisted, as various analysts have shown (Flórez *et al.*, 2001; Ñopo *et al.*, 2007; Patrinos & Psachoropoulos, 1994; Telles and Steele, 2012).

Today, most Latin American countries have recently declared themselves multiculturalist. With this multiculturalist turn, many Latin American countries have begun to constitutionally recognize ethnorracial distinctions and disadvantages and discrimination suffered by indigenous and Afrodescendants. Brazil has even instituted social policies to redress minority disadvantages on a large scale; other countries are doing so to some extent. Multiculturalism has also been accompanied by a growing consciousness of ethnic diversity and the adoption of ethnorracial identification in the censuses of nearly all Latin American countries, yet vast inequalities remain. In the next section, we go through a general history of race in the region in general but note that exceptions among the 20 or so countries in the region, did sometimes exist. In addition, we refer to race (or racial) and race and ethnicity (or ethnorracial) alternatively, for reasons we discuss later.

## A SHORT ETHNORACIAL HISTORY

### COLONIZATION, INDEPENDENCE, AND WHITENING

Throughout the colonial period, the biological reproduction of whites was generally constrained by the high sex ratio among Spanish and Portuguese colonists because their immigration to the Americas was, for the most part, largely male. Spanish and Portuguese males, seeking to escape poverty in Europe, came to the New World in search of wealth; in contrast, the English settlement of the United States tended to be more family oriented, beginning with many families that were escaping religious persecution. In Latin America, the result was a relatively small, and mostly male, European population; they, and their *criollo* descendants, were oriented toward resource extraction economies, fueled by a large black, indigenous, and mixed race population. The paucity of white women led to high rates of mixture among nonwhite women and white men, especially lower-class white men whose status reduced their marital prospects but whose whiteness gave them access to nonwhite women (Martinez Alier, 1974; Telles, 2004).

Although the idea of race came into being in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, systems of domination and power, based partly on ancestry, were clearly present before that. During much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Spanish colonial authorities became concerned with

mixture and the large nonwhite populations, and established a system of *castas* (literally, castes), which defined the proportion of Spanish blood that people carried. Spanish royal edicts mandated that subjects be taxed and assigned trades and offices according to their *casta*. The *casta* system was not a unified, coherent system throughout Spanish America because each Audiencia could introduce local *casta* regulations. However, they often used phenotype or skin color or other phenotypic markers as genealogies were rarely available except in the most elite families. Spaniards and their “pure-blooded” descendants were clearly aware of their privileged status as they were given full legal and social rights, which granted them access to elite jobs, schools, occupations, and various economic opportunities. Whiteness also bestowed pureblood Spaniards with honor and pride; even lower class whites treasured their racial purity as their “most precious and inalienable asset, an inheritance which entitled them to unquestioned legal superiority over non-whites.” (Andrews, 1980, p. 18) Whiteness also became a valued property in the marriage market for both whites and nonwhites, allowing the former to maintain high status for their children and permitting the latter higher status for themselves and especially their children (Acuña Leon & Chavarria Lopez, 1991; Martinez Alier, 1974).

Eventually, Spaniards began to deploy the term *raza* (literally, race) instead of *casta*, especially in reference to persons of full or partial African ancestry (Martinez, 2009). However, local elites began to suspend *casta* laws with Spain’s liberal constitution of 1812 making Spain and its colonies a single nation, and these laws everywhere would fall with the independence movements of the 1820s, when most people (except slaves) became formally equal before the law. Moreover, as generations of race mixing made castes unsustainable and as mercantile capitalism expanded, feudal-like ideas about lineage were gradually replaced by informal discourses about physical appearance (Graham, 1990; Martinez, 2009). The movement out of one *casta* and into another, often associated with changing professions, seems to be early evidence of Latin America’s substantial racial fluidity, which continues into the present.

In the early nineteenth century, Latin American elites set out to create independent nations out of the remnants of the old Iberian colonies in the New World; they often debated extensively about how to incorporate indigenous and black people. Their concepts of nation were built largely around ideas of race and mixture, motivated by concerns over their large nonwhite populations. Until the late nineteenth century, Latin American societies were predominately rural and mostly nonwhite (Andrews, 2004).

Often fearing dissension from their nonwhite populations, Latin American elites often sought to include them in vital areas such as the military but limited them from becoming part of the elite and middle classes. In their

fighters for independence and during civil wars, as in Gran Colombia and Cuba, many criollo (American-born descendants of Spaniards) leaders sought alliances with nonwhites, largely because they perceived them as essential in the fight for independence from European powers. Thus, they sometimes promised nonwhites citizenship and freedom in the new nations, although often as racial subordinates. Later wars in the nineteenth century also involved slaves and indigenous persons who enlisted in the hope of being freed, or acquiring land.

Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery, in 1888, and had by far the largest slave population. Moreover, its independence period was much different from that in Spanish Latin America. In 1821, Brazil became independent from Portugal but it remained a monarchy headed by the son of the Portuguese monarch, who had previously fled Portugal in advance of Napoleon's army. Because of this relatively smooth transition, it had no significant war of independence with the great losses of life seen in the former Spanish republics. As the exception to a relatively warless nineteenth century, the Brazilian monarchy entered the bloody Paraguayan War of 1864 to 1870, and promised manumission (freedom from slavery) to its largely slave army recruits. By that time, although, most of the descendants of Africans had been freed, a significant African-born population was still largely enslaved, as the slave trade ended in that country only in 1850 (Andrews, 2004).

From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, Latin American elites became increasingly concerned that their often large nonwhite populations might imperil national development, largely in response to contemporary scientifically endorsed ideas of a biological white supremacy (Helg, 1990; Skidmore, 1976). To be modern like Europe and the United States, they thought that a white (or nearly white) population was essential. Early pseudo-scientific theories that linked race to intelligence had turned their large nonwhite populations into liabilities. Nevertheless, the neo-Lamarckian ideas about the mutability of race and constructive miscegenation in which white genes would predominate in successive generations gave these elites hope that their populations could be whitened (Skidmore, 1976; Stepan, 1991). Countries like Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Uruguay, Venezuela, and (southern) Brazil also succeeded in attracting European immigrants to meet their whitening goals but most other Latin American countries such as Peru, and Colombia largely failed, despite their efforts (Fitzgerald & Martín, 2014; Larson, 2004).

## MESTIZAJE

By the 1930s, leading thinkers in many Latin American countries (clearly not all) would turn the previous racialist thinking of whitening on its head, with their innovative nation-building ideas of *mestizaje*. Scientific racism, the basis for whitening strategies in Latin America, began to come under fire in the early twentieth century in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. Its scientific undoing was largely at the hands of anthropologist Franz Boas, who argued that so-called racial differences were rooted not in biology but rather in culture. Moreover, Boas had a tremendous influence in Latin America as he trained arguably the most important thinkers of the new *mestizaje* discourse in Brazil and Mexico: Gilberto Freyre and Manuel Gamio (Telles & PERLA, 2014). Through such thinkers, the scientifically backed but increasingly discredited ideas of whitening began to lose support in favor of progressive ideologies that viewed race mixture as positive. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Brazil touted itself as a racial democracy, which could be contrasted with the horrors of explicitly racist regimes in the United States under Jim Crow, South Africa with Apartheid and Nazi Germany. *Mestizaje*, referring to both biological and cultural mixture, had become a central trope for understanding ethnicity, race, and nation in much of Latin America; it continues to be used as a point of contrast with the United States.

In contrast to whitening, *mestizaje* would put a positive spin on the region's biological and cultural mixing by glorifying it as central to the nation (although not necessarily discarding the scientifically endorsed ideas of white biological supremacy). Latin American elites would often claim that *mestizaje* signaled racial harmony; at the same time, they promoted the idea that Latin America was morally superior to a racially segregated United States, although instances of *de jure* racial exclusions were not entirely absent in twentieth century Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Latin American societies did not face the "American" dilemma of ethn racial injustice in a country that deemed itself the archetype of democracy and egalitarianism. However, they could ensure a racial hierarchy (although not US-style segregation) because they were generally authoritarian and black and indigenous people were widely accepted as inferior.

More than just ideologies of race and ethnicity, *mestizaje* ideologies would present racial mixture as an essential feature of these new nations and of a national peoplehood, as they sought to proclaim that race and nation were coterminous. Elites sought to create visions of the nation as homogeneous; in these visions, national or *mestizo* identities would seek to replace the previous ethn racial identities (Knight, 1990; Telles, 2004; Wade, 1993).

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1. Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Panama had *de jure* segregation at about the same time, though not at the level of the United States. Also, there were instances of explicit racial exclusions as in the case of the revocation of citizenship to West Indians in 1940s Panama and anti-Chinese movements in 1920s Mexico.

Their narratives presented Brazilians, Mexicans, and other national subjects as metaraces that fused white, indigenous, and (sometimes) black blood and/or culture; now, mestizos or mixed-race persons would be considered the ideal or prototypical citizens (Knight, 1990; Mallon, 1992; Skidmore, 1976; Whitten, 2004). Mestizo identities would appeal to many in the population, even those who would often be seen as, and otherwise identify themselves as, indigenous, black, and mulatto (de la Cadena, 2000; Telles and PERLA, 2014). On the other hand, mestizaje has also been criticized for erasing black and indigenous peoples from the consciousness of the general population, effectively leading to their cultural and statistical genocide (Bonfil Batalla, 1990; Nascimento, 1979).

Nevertheless, mestizaje ideologies varied within the region from strong mestizaje ideologies in Mexico and Brazil to those that continued to explicitly promote whitening, most notably Argentina (Graham, 1990; Telles & Garcia, 2013). Moreover, mestizaje tended to stress indigenous and European admixture and downplay or ignore African contributions, although the latter were clearly recognized in Brazil and Cuba (Telles & PERLA, 2014).

Mestizaje has become a widely shared Latin American experience. At the level of racial classification, racial categories are certainly numerous and classification is often ambiguous and fluid across these categories than in the United States (Telles, 2004; Telles & PERLA, 2014; Wade, 1997). There was arguably greater actual racial mixture in Latin America simply because of its lopsided sex ratio among its colonizers and the region's near absence of legal prohibitions against intermarriage that were common in the United States (Cottrol, 2013). Today, black–white intermarriage is clearly higher, at least, in Brazil than in the United States (Telles, 2004). Perhaps more importantly, the presence of mixed-race categories and large numbers of people identifying themselves as such demonstrates the widespread popularity of mixed-raced identification and the fact that mestizaje has become established in Latin America (Telles, 2004; Telles & Flores, 2013). As a lived experience, Wade (2005) also shows how mestizaje is reflected in family relationships and friendship networks. Mestizaje is also apparent in its cultural form, as in religion (Andrews, 2010; Telles, 2004), music (Sansone, 2003; Wade, 2005), and literary expression (Bost, 2003; Martínez-Echazábal, 1998; Miller, 2004).

An ideology of mestizaje has also been consistent with a social scientific tradition in Latin America which has emphasized class and treats race as an epiphenomenon of class or as a distraction from class cleavages and class struggle (Altria, 2004; González Casanova, 1965). According to various scholarly traditions in Latin America that derive from the Marxist, Weberian, Mertonian, and Bourdieuan traditions, stratification and mobility are based mostly on class origins and the class structure (Altria, 2004). Indeed, current studies of mobility in Latin America tend to ignore the influence of race

(Behrman, Gavira, & Székely, 2001), whether for reasons of theory or data availability.

#### THE MULTICULTURAL TURN

The contexts for understanding race and ethnicity in much of Latin America are rapidly changing in what is often called the multicultural turn. This has occurred in the context of an economic transition and growing democratization. The domestically focused economic model of industrial growth of the 1980s, based on import substitution, seems to have run its course; now Latin Americans are involved in neoliberal and globalized models of economic development, which have exposed these countries to greater external pressure and scrutiny, including the monitoring of human rights norms by private international organizations and UN human rights committees, legislation, and forums (Telles, 2004; Van Cott, 2000).

In a rapid transition taking less than three decades, nearly all Latin American countries are now considered representative democracies, in contrast to only 4 of the 19 in the mid-1970s (Mainwaring & Perez-Linan, 2013). As part of their democratization process, more nations are officially recognizing the identities, dignity, and rights of Afrodescendants and indigenous people; many have declared themselves multicultural in their constitutions, providing communal and other rights for the indigenous and sometimes for Afrodescendants (Hooker, 2005). Democratization and greater transparency are being promoted by domestic civil society, including black and indigenous movements. These forces have started to weaken the *mestizaje* ideas that tended to homogenize the nation.

Since the 1980s, black and indigenous movements have emerged as important new global and domestic actors, pointing out and challenging the region's inequalities. The 2001 United Nations Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa, was promoted by black movements, including groups of Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Colombians; it increased awareness of racial inequalities throughout Latin America. At the same time, truth commissions in Peru and Guatemala discovered that most victims of internal armed conflict were indigenous peoples and the Zapatista rebellion, beginning in 1994 (and still unresolved), reminded Mexicans and the Mexican government that indigenous communities are severely marginalized and have the capacity to hinder national development plans. Often backed by an international network of human rights supporters and institutions, including UN forums to promote human rights, indigenous and black movement activists are now strong enough to pressure their governments to address their persistent social exclusion. In Brazil, both class- and race-based affirmative action now exists in most public institutes of higher education, upheld by the Brazilian

Supreme Court and legislatively mandated for all federal universities and other federal institutes of higher education (Telles & Paixão, 2013).

Under multiculturalism, ethnic and racial identities are finally being allowed to flourish and discrimination can no longer be hidden easily. Hale (2002) considers multiculturalism a new form of *mestizaje* as the state continues to administer and provide a narrative for ethnoracial difference, despite the actions and sentiments of minorities. One outcome of the multiculturalist turn is the latest round of national censuses, which collect data on race, in almost all cases.

### OFFICIAL ETHNIC STATISTICS IN LATIN AMERICA

Official efforts at data collection largely run parallel to this history. As many countries sought to assess their progress in whitening their populations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they took ethnoracial censuses (Appelbaum *et al.* 2003; Stepan, 1991). The inclusion of race queries peaked in the 1920s and was then dropped in many countries for ideological and political reasons but also because the scientific consensus began to invalidate race as a concept or category for understanding human behavior (Loveman, 2014). Liberals and conservatives alike also believed that using the census to count their people by race would reify any belief that their country was racialized or even racist, and would thus fuel the specter of a racially divided society.

By the 1990s, although, race and ethnic data began to appear with the shift to multiculturalism and the demand for ethnoracial recognition and the growing acceptance that race and ethnicity were social constructs that were associated with societal inequalities. Largely as a result of pressure by international human rights groups and international conventions, particularly the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention), adopted in 1989 and ratified by most Latin American countries by 2000, many Latin American countries began collecting ethnoracial data for the first time in decades. In addition, Latin American activists at the 2001 UN Conference in Durban demanded that their governments collect data on ethnicity and race. Without such data to document ethnoracial inequities, governments could easily turn a blind eye to racial inequality and stick to a national *mestizaje* narrative of nondiscrimination, racial harmony, and equality. Collecting data on race and ethnicity was also considered an important first step in the transition to multiculturalism. Indeed, many countries in the region began this process through their national censuses.

As of this writing, almost all countries now have census data for ethnic minorities since 2000. Nearly all countries have data on the indigenous as



mandated by the ILO Convention 169, although Bolivia began collecting such data in 1850 and Mexico in 1895 (Del Popolo, 2008; Loveman, 2014). Countries such as Mexico and Peru do not collect data on Afrodescendants. Cuba has census information for its Afrodescendants but not for its indigenous people. Both Uruguay and Peru have collected information on both groups in national household surveys and each plans to collect such data in its next census. The Dominican Republic has not collected official data on race since 1960 but is considering it for its next census (Republica Dominicana, 2012). Besides Brazil, only Cuba has collected data on its black population in most of its censuses since the late nineteenth century.

Table 1 shows the current proportion of the population that identifies as indigenous or Afrodescendant for each Latin American country, according to, in order of priority: (i) the latest census; (ii) where census information is not available, recent national survey data, and (iii) where neither is available, estimates from the 2010 America's Barometer (of the Latin American Public Opinion Project or LAPOP). The complete source list can be found in Telles and PERLA (2014). The second, third, and fourth columns refer to the Afrodescendant population, while the fifth, sixth, and seventh columns refer to the indigenous population. The final column refers to the total national population according to the most recent Census.

On the basis of these figures, we calculated a range of 113–133 million Afrodescendants, or 20.4–24.0% of the entire Latin American population of 554 million. This range is due to the ambiguity inherent in particular categories in two countries: *moreno* in Venezuela and *Indio* in the Dominican Republic, both of which do not specifically name persons of African or black ancestry and may contain others as well. For that matter, many pardos in Brazil are probably not Afrodescendants (Telles and Paschel, 2014) but in that case, pardos and pretos, collectively, are widely and officially considered Afrodescendants (Telles and PERLA, 2014). On the other hand, others might argue that even the 133 million figure is an underestimate because many Afrodescendants might not declare themselves as such because of their stigmatization and their ability to move out of these categories in the Latin American system.

By far, the largest Afrodescendant population resides in Brazil. Afro-Brazilians, comprised of the preto and pardo categories, constitute roughly half (50.4%) of the population in the region's largest country, as a result, comprising a large majority (73.0–85.9%) of all Afrodescendants in Latin America. Relatively large numbers also reside in Colombia, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Based on the 2010 America's Barometer, Mexico also registers a surprisingly large number of persons that self-identified as black or mulatto, although it is a small percentage of that large country's

**Table 1**  
Afrodescendant and Indigenous Population (in 1000s) and Percentages in Latin America by Country

| Countries          | Year | Afrodescendant<br>Population             | Percentage                         | Year | Indigenous<br>Population | Percentage | Total<br>National<br>Population |
|--------------------|------|--|------------------------------------|------|--------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|
| Argentina          | 2010 | 150                                      | 0.4                                | 2010 | 955                      | 2.4        | 40,117                          |
| Bolivia            | 2012 | 24                                       | 0.2                                | 2012 | 4068                     | 40.6       | 10,027                          |
| Brazil             | 2010 | 97,083                                   | 50.9                               | 2010 | 897                      | 0.5        | 190,733                         |
| Chile              | 2012 | 97                                       | 0.6                                | 2012 | 1700                     | 10.3       | 16,636                          |
| Colombia           | 2005 | 4274                                     | 10.5                               | 2005 | 1393                     | 3.4        | 41,468                          |
| Costa Rica         | 2011 | 334                                      | 7.8                                | 2011 | 104                      | 2.4        | 4302                            |
| Cuba               | 2012 | 3885                                     | 34.8                               | 2012 | —                        | —          | 11,163                          |
| Dominican Republic | 2010 | (A) 2267<br>(B) 8980                     | (A) 24.0<br>(B) 89.0               | 2010 | 2267                     | 24         | 9445                            |
| Ecuador            | 2010 | 1,043                                    | 7.2                                | 2010 | 1014                     | 7.0        | 14,484                          |
| El Salvador        | 2007 | 7  | 0.13                               | 2007 | 13                       | 0.23       | 5744                            |
| Guatemala          | 2011 | 5.0                                      | 0.0                                | 2011 | 4428                     | 30.0       | 14,713                          |
| Honduras           | 2011 | 59                                       | 1.0                                | 2001 | 428                      | 7.0        | 8448                            |
| Mexico             | 2010 | 2366                                     | 2.2                                | 2010 | 11,133                   | 9.9        | 112,337                         |
| Nicaragua          | 2005 | 23                                       | 0.4                                | 2005 | 444                      | 8.6        | 5142                            |
| Panama             | 2010 | 313                                      | 9.2                                | 2010 | 418                      | 12.3       | 3454                            |
| Paraguay           | 2012 | 234                                      | 3.5                                | 2012 | 116                      | 1.7        | 6673                            |
| Peru               | 2007 | 411                                      | 1.5                                | 2007 | 7600                     | 27.0       | 27,412                          |
| Uruguay            | 2011 | 255                                      | 7.8                                | 2011 | 159                      | 4.8        | 3286                            |
| Venezuela          | 2011 | (A)953<br>(B)14,534                      | (A)3.5<br>(B)53.4                  | 2011 | 953                      | 3.5        | 27,228                          |
| <b>Total</b>       |      | <b>(A) 112,035</b><br><b>(B) 133,027</b> | <b>(A) 20.2</b><br><b>(B) 24.0</b> |      | <b>34,317</b>            | <b>6.2</b> | <b>554,298</b>                  |

Source: See Telles and PERLA (2014) for extensive sources list.

population. By contrast, six countries in the region (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua) have Afrodescendant populations that comprise less than 1%.

Indigenous people, based on the best available figures, number 34 million people, which is 6.2% of the Latin American population. The largest numbers of indigenous people live in Mexico and Peru, although higher percentages of national populations are found in Guatemala and Bolivia. Like Afrodescendants, estimates of the indigenous population are often an artifact of the indicator used, including the way questions are worded and the response categories available, as we continue to show throughout this essay. Estimates of black and indigenous populations are sensitive to the census question wording and response categories as illustrated by such changes in the Bolivian Census, which resulted in an indigenous population of 42% in 2012 compared to 62% in 2001.

Human relations in Latin America often involve relationships among persons of various phenotypes and cultures, but they also often involve power differentials (racism), in which humans are classified according (racialized) to characteristics such as color, culture, or language. In the Americas, these characteristics are often denoted by categories that are popularly known as *racas* (or more politely, ethnic groups). While the idea of race is not a valid biological category as it once was thought to be, it is important as a social construct, with very real consequences for one's life chances (Telles and PERLA, 2014).

Today as in the past, one's ethnoracial position often becomes naturalized: whites or lighter-skinned mestizos tend to be privileged while indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, and dark-skinned persons are often seen and treated as less deserving. In this way, Latin Americans often use distinctions based on "race," culture—whether real, self-identified, or putative—and skin color as markers of social worth and class origins. As people continue this everyday behavior, they reproduce ethnoracial hierarchies and inequalities. As a clear example of how white (or near white in the Latin American case) privilege is naturalized, consider television and magazine propaganda: light-skinned actors and models predominate, while dark-skinned persons, although they arguably represent most Latin Americans, are nearly absent. As a result, someone unfamiliar with Latin America who watches Latin American television, whether produced in Mexico, Brazil, or any other Latin American country, could mistakenly conclude that Latin Americans look like Europeans. This example is just at the level of representation. Compelling sociological evidence for several Latin American countries is emerging, which shows that educators, employers, and voters use race to make important decisions (Aguilar, 2012; Rodriguez Garavito *et al.*, 2014; Telles, 2004).

The visible manifestation of “color” is particularly important in Latin America, which involves a continuum of visible difference and which is masked by the usual ethnoracial categories (Nogueira, 1955; Telles, Flores, & Urrea Giraldo, 2012). Language is arguably the main marker distinguishing indigenous people from others, a distinction that has been referred to as *racial*.

Distinct ideas about indigenous and Afrodescendant people emerged early in colonial Spanish America as well as in anthropological thought; ideas about one group or the other were often clearly related to each other. Von Vacano (2012) notes how American ideas of whiteness began in European encounters with natives but the bulk of thinking about race was built on the population descended from enslaved Africans. Bartolomé de las Casas advocated strongly for an end to the indigenous slavery of the sixteenth century, although at first he suggested alternative sources of slaves, particularly Africans, an idea he would later renounce (Gutiérrez, 1991). Indeed, Baker (2010) argues that the concept of culture developed by ethnologists to understand American Indian languages and customs in the nineteenth century formed the basis of the anthropological concept of race, which was eventually used to confront “the Negro problem” in the twentieth century.

With the turn to multiculturalism, such comparisons have become more important, especially as governments seek to recognize ethnoracial minorities. In his comparisons of blacks and indigenous people, Wade (1997) argues that the indigenous have occupied a more privileged position than blacks in Latin America, and that early on the Catholic Church considered them more worthy of redemption and made more attempts to assimilate them, compared to Afrodescendants. Hooker (2005) also notes that national policies have often favored indigenous claims over those of Afrodescendants as a result of distinct ideas about the two groups. The indigenous are seen as culturally distinct, while Afrodescendants are considered largely acculturated (Hooker, 2005). Moreover, the indigenous inhabited the Americas long before Columbus arrived and therefore Latin Americans thus perceive that they are entitled to certain rights such as their own land and way of life that are often not extended to blacks (Hooker, 2005). Symbolically and perhaps politically, then, the indigenous seem to occupy a higher status than Afrodescendants, especially in relation to nation-making narratives in the region which often ignore or downplay the black contribution to *mestizaje*. Still, as Telles *et al.* (2012) have shown, the indigenous have the lowest socioeconomic status of all ethnoracial groups in Latin America.

This essay represents only a snippet of the long and nationally diverse paths that the idea of race has taken in Latin America. In recent years, academic interest in the topic of race in Latin America has grown exponentially. We refer readers to only a small part of that literature.

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