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Title

The Shadow of the State: Social Categories, Politics, and the Standard Model of Inequality

Abstract

I contend that one of the main sources of obstacles to innovation and progress in the study of social inequality and stratification - especially ethnoracial inequality - is an adherence to what Bourdieu calls "State-thinking," seeing the world telescoped through the lens of the State. In almost exclusively relying upon State categories (e.g. census categories), I maintain that at least two important things are lost or obscured: (1) consistent scholarly recognition of and analytical attention given to important, yet relatively less politically salient and officially institutionalized forms of social difference and (2) the complexity of the processes and mechanisms underlying the production of social inequality associated with the highly socially and politically salient social categories and principles of social vision and division that we actually tend to examine such as race, ethnicity, and gender.

To illustrate this, I conduct a comparative analysis of ethnoracial inequality in the U.S. and Brazil focusing on a bodily marker of ethnoracial difference – skin tone. In so doing, I sidestep conventional research practices, which typically consist of between-group comparisons using dichotomous categories based on self-identification that inadvertently obscure how gradations of skin color significantly stratify life chances within and across official "State" categories. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for the study of ethnoracial inequality, pressing debates about the possible future(s) of the U.S. and Brazilian racial orders (e.g. "Latin Americanization" or "Convergence/Divergence"), and an approach to the study of social inequality, in general, that proceeds from centering the body in our analyses via a re-conceptualization of Bourdieu's relatively neglected concept of bodily capital.

Discussant

Daniel Sabbagh

Publications d'intérêt

Monk, Ellis. 2016. "The Consequences of 'Race and Color' in Brazil" *Social Problems* 63: 413-430: http://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/emonk/files/monk_-_the_consequences_of_race_and_color_in_brazil_-_sp.pdf

Monk, Ellis. 2015. "The Cost of Color: Skin Color, Discrimination, and Health among African Americans" *American Journal of Sociology* 121(2): 396-444: http://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/emonk/files/monk_-_the_cost_of_color_-_ajs.pdf

Monk, Ellis. 2014. "Skin Tone Stratification among Black Americans, 2001-2003" *Social Forces* 92(4): 1313-1337: http://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/emonk/files/monk_-_skin_tone_stratification_-_sf.pdf

NB : ce compte-rendu de séminaire a été rédigé à partir des notes manuscrites, nécessairement imparfaites, prises par Juliette Galonnier lors de la séance. Il est possible que des erreurs ou des approximations s'y soient glissées.

NB: these seminar proceedings derive from the hand-written notes taken by Juliette Galonnier during the session. Imprecisions and mistakes may have slipped into the text.

Notes taken by Juliette Galonnier

Race, Color and Politics in the US and Brazil: A Brief Comparative History

I will start by a brief comparative history of how race, color and politics work in the US and Brazil. Both countries have a very different history of categorizing people.

For instance, Walter White, a member of the NAACP was very light-skinned: he could literally pass as white, which enabled him to report on lynchings without too much difficulty. In Brazil, Fernando Cardoso is known for saying once that he had "a foot in the kitchen", which was his way of indicating that he had African ancestors, although he always identified as white. He was a sociologist of race, and became the President of Brazil. For those of you who have seen the film *Hidden figures*, one of the central characters, Katherine Johnson was very light-skinned but she always was categorized as Black. Recently, in the book *One drop*, Bliss Broyard recounted the life of her father, the New York Times journalist Anatole Broyard who was Black but always passed as white. Many of his colleagues never knew he was Black.

In the United States, racial categorization is founded upon the one-drop rule and the Black/white dichotomy. In Brazil, things are different and allegedly more fluid, for people are seen as part of this meta-race. Let's emphasize here that the Brazilian notion of racial democracy was crafted in reference to a particular moment in US history: the period of the lynchings. The notion was forged by Gilberto Freyre when he travelled to the US to study at Baylor University, in Waco, Texas. In his diary, he noted being stuck by a horrible smell upon arriving there and realized later on that it was because a lynching had just happened. It was a shock to him that led him to emphasize the differences with the Brazilian context where no such violence occurred. It pushed him to popularize the myth of racial democracy.

Later on, a series of UNESCO studies were launched to find the reasons for racial harmony in Brazil. But the scholars did not find what they expected. The so-called revisionist turn about the myth of Brazil's racial harmony took place in the 1970-80s. Two US-trained South American sociologists Nelson do Valle Silva and Carlos Hasenbalg applied US frameworks to the Brazilian society and demonstrated that racial fluidity in Brazil was mostly ideological, and that the Brown category was ideological too. They wrote "Brazil is just as racist or even more racist than the US", because at least in the US people acknowledge that there is a race problem and this has paved the way for the Civil rights movement.

Today, we notice interesting shifts in the politics of ethno-racial categorization in Brazil. A recent campaign regarding the census called "Do not let your color pass as white" has emerged. Some of the posters say "Confirm your African descent, whatever the color of your skin". This greatly differs from the way categories have been framed in Brazil. But there have also been debates around the affirmative action quota spots in universities and civil service. The main question is: who should count as Black and benefit from the quota? One light-skinned candidate was rejected on the basis of his phenotype. But if ancestry was all that mattered, then phenotype alone should not be what determines the access to the quota. How does all this align with how Brazil has conceptualized race?

Skin Tone and Politics

I now would like to turn to the issue of skin tone and politics. There have been many debates around this issue among African-Americans. For instance, someone like Marcus Garvey thought that dark-skinned Blacks should lead the political vanguard. WEB DuBois on the contrary advocated for a uniform "Brown America" category and thought anyone could lead the political vanguard of African-Americans in the US, independently of phenotype. If you look at the leaders of African-American movements today, you will see that many of them can pass as white.

Scholarship on race and color

Historically, there has been a shift in how scholars have studied race and color. In pioneering books such as *Deep South* (1941), *Black Metropolis* (1945) and *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), color was central. The studies always paid very close attention to color differentiation, through fine-tuned ethnographic details. Scholars investigated intra-differentiation processes and paid close attention to bodily markers.

Yet, with the rise of demographic and quantitative studies, scholars have tended to turn to more homogenous, clear-cut categories to describe race. We started asking questions about people's racial categories, and less about their skin tone and how it is interpreted in daily encounters. These racial categories were dichotomous and rooted in self-identification.

This dichotomous approach has been used in comparative scholarship on Brazil and the US. Books such as *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (1971), *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brazil* (1998) and *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (2004), all use dichotomous categories of race, without paying attention to how different contexts can shape these categories differently.

My argument

My argument is that we need to bring color back in. We must take into account bodily heterogeneities, skin tones, etc. and see how they affect the production of inequality. My argument is that we must invert the analytical gaze: we must elevate color as a way to compare across the two cases of the US and Brazil (instead of seeing Brazil as weird and exceptional because it does not fit the US pattern).

The comparative gesture often resorts to census categories but these categories tend to result from the conflation of race and color. Race and color are not the same thing. The racial categories the census uses are actually very different from the actual everyday constructions that emerge in daily interactions and rely on skin tone. These everyday constructions are the ones we want to measure because they significantly matter for the production and reproduction of inequality.

I am also highly critical of the notion of the “Latin Americanization” of race, as elaborated by E. Bonilla Silva. It is the idea that the US is evolving towards a tri-hierarchy of race and that skin color is mattering more and more. This is apparent in a recent issue of Time called “The New Face of America”, which emphasizes the importance of racial mixing and the increasing centrality of the Brown category. First, I think that the term “Latin Americanization” is misleading, because what people are actually referring to is Brazil and the situation is different in other Latin American countries. Second, my argument is that this so-called Latin Americanization of race is not a new phenomenon at all: skin color has always mattered in the US. It is simply that scholars did not pay attention to it.

There is a deeper analytical motivation to my work. Rogers Brubaker in his book criticizes the notion of “groupism”, which is the tendency to compare groups that are thought to be internally homogeneous. These groups often reflect visibly salient State categories. I would like to stress here that categories are different from concepts. Concepts are abstract mental representations of social difference. Categories are how we use these concepts in everyday life. In the real social world, we do not have such dichotomous categories, we do not have these clear lines demarcating people: there is no real ontology to our social categories. In fact, categories derive from the production of discontinuity. One example are debates over retirement age: age is a continuous thing but we need to mark a point where someone is considered old. But this marking point is a fiction. We can say the same thing about gender and race: these are continuous things, that we socially demarcate in a dichotomous manner. This demarcation has profound social consequences: a lot of things depend on the particular discontinuity that you chose. This demarcation is therefore a heavily politicized process. Because you want the State to agree with your marking line. However, as sociologists, we must enquire about the historical production of discontinuity, rather than using discontinuous categories without questioning them.

Thinking like a State

As Max Weber put it, the State has the monopoly on physical and symbolic violence. State categories are often seen as legitimizing. My argument is that State categories operate as epistemological obstacles. I propose two Bachelardian moves:

- we need to break with common-sense categories

- we need to forge robust concepts which will help us understand how people think about gender or race categories, and acknowledge that these concepts may at times be at odds with folk categories.

State categories are dichotomous and based on self-identification. They embody what Plato called “typological thinking” (the idea that knowledge is the search for the typical). Duncan, via Darwin, argued that we must break with typological thinking and turn to population thinking. We should look at regularities among populations. This echoes the work of Eleanor Rosch on categories. Try to name a bird. There are bird names that come to you very easily and others where you are not sure whether they are birds or not. Things belong to categories but they are also different in kind. You wonder about their membership in the category. Birds can vary in their “birdness” but some of them directly come to mind when you think of the prototype of bird. Along these lines, I suggest we rethink concepts and categories by following Aristotle and Wittgenstein. Skin tone provides a continuous way to measure race, keeping in mind the idea that things vary in their typicality.

Research on race relying on dichotomous state categories produces a lot of mispecifications (that do not take into account intersecting categories) and a lot of misattributions (causal effects are produced by subcategories that you do not see when using umbrella dichotomous categories). One of the examples of that is what has been called the *Black-White Mental Health Paradox*. Research has demonstrated that Blacks in the US have far worse physical health than whites, but similar or even slightly better mental health than whites. This is intriguing. But the paradox actually dissolves once we take the skin color continuum into account. Skin color measures show that darker-skinned Blacks’ rates of depression are much higher, and higher than the average for Blacks. There are in fact different patterns to the relationship between skin tone and perceived discrimination. As skin tone increases in the continuum, rates of perceived discrimination increase too. We must also add to that the issue of intra-racial skin tone discrimination, which studies have shown is a significant predictor of depression. The importance of taking into account subcategories is clearly demonstrated here.

Bodily capital

I rely on the notion of bodily capital forged by Bourdieu. We need a cognitively plausible micro foundation of inequality. We need to focus on bodily attributes as cognitive stimuli that trigger stereotypes. The body can signify categorical membership both dichotomously and continuously. But dichotomous measures do not enable us to capture how the body acts as a stimulus in daily instances of inequality production.

Bodily capital is in fact a relational property. For instance, within the Black population you may feel that you are discriminated against because you are too dark or too light-skinned. But from the vantage point of the white population, it is better to be lighter-skinned.

We also need to take intersectionality seriously. A recent study by Neil Hester and Kurt Gray shows that for Black men, being tall increases the amount of police stops you are exposed to. But for white men, it actually decreases it. We you cross gender (male), race (Black) and bodily shape (height), you obtain intersection results. The height for Black men is interpreted as danger and threat, while for white men it is interpreted as a marker of competence (many of the US presidents who were elected were the tallest candidates).

Colorism

Recent research shows that colorism is not a thing of the past, as people often argue. Skin tone variation continues to have a tremendous impact on life chances today. Look at the gaps in education. If you take into account the Black/white dichotomy, there is a 10.2 month gap in education. But if you take the skin tone continuum into account, you see that between light and dark skins, there is a 15.4 month gap. This indicates that race matters in more complex ways than the standard dichotomy rooted in self-identification tends to suggest. There is actually the same gap within the Black population between light-skinned and dark-skinned, as there is between Blacks and whites at the national level.

In Brazil, for a long time we only had census categories to work with and they were problematic for they relied upon a conflation of race and color. But recently the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey was released (in 2010). It is a nationally representative sample and it is the first survey to include a question about interviewer-rated skin tone. The *branca* vs. *preta* dichotomy reveals a 7.9 month gap in education, the *branca* vs. *negra* categories translate into a 4.3 month gap in education, but the light vs. dark skin measure reveals a 22.9 month gap. We uncover more inequality when using the skin color scale than when relying on dichotomous state census categories.

I argue that census categories obscure skin tone stratification in the US and Brazil. In both countries, we notice the coexistence of a dichotomous mode of categorization (based on the census) and a continuous mode of categorization as it unfolds in everyday life. I argue that the Latin Americanization vs. Americanization of race is in fact a false dichotomy.

I think we need to rethink race in the US, Brazil and beyond. I was part of the Committee of experts who was invited by the Census bureau to talk about the revision of categories for the 2020 census. What I can say is that they did not listen to us. There was concern specifically around the MENA category and that it relies on the racialization of religion. You are racializing a religious category. But this is not what the analytical concept of race should be.

Discussant: Daniel Sabbagh

I want to stress that this is genuinely innovative work. The need to take into account different understandings of race is central. One example is passing, which would not be possible if race was just a matter of ancestry. One key contribution is also to study race and color not only as independent variables but also as dependent variables. I have a number of questions:

- You seem to suggest that the predictive value of skin color as identified by an outside observer is higher than race as self-identified. But how do we empirically disentangle these two things which are often closely intertwined? In France, for instance, we do not have any information on self-identification vs. observer identification.
- I have one large question: your argument is that by focusing on color within a comparative project, one might avoid comparing incommensurable things. But this relies on the assumption that color is less the outcome of socialization, local context and historical trajectories than other categories. Is there enough empirical evidence to make that claim?
- My final question is on the US census: how does the introduction of the possibility to check different boxes affect your analysis in terms of continuity and discontinuity?

Responses by Ellis Monk

Concerning the possibility to mark one or more races, I want to emphasize that very few people do it. In 2010, 97.1% marked one race and only 2.9% mark more than one. And what is predicting the probability that people will choose different categories? Skin tone. There is no racial fluidity along the Black/white axis. In fact, there is complete stability. I think the racial fluidity paper by Saperstein has been overblown. It relies on very fragile findings. The only fluidity that does exist is among Hispanics and Latinos and it is totally predicted by skin tone (darker-skinned Hispanics identify as Blacks and lighter-skinned Hispanics identify as whites). In Brazil, it is different: the education level is often what determines racial fluidity, but interestingly the education level actually increases the probability of identifying as Black.

Concerning the differences between self-identified skin tone and interviewer-identified skin tone, I think we need both measurements. In my AJS paper, I demonstrated that self-identified skin tone was very important in terms of health outcomes. Because it is a marker of how you are perceived in daily contexts. So I think we need both measurements because sometimes self-identified skin tone is more predictive than interviewer-identified skin tone.

Concerning the comparison, my argument is to say that in both countries, there are strong cognitive consequences of skin tone as a physical marker. But I am aware that conceptions of color are always socially and locally determined. For instance, African-Americans have their own system of classification for skin tones: high yellow, blue black, etc.

Questions from the audience

Paul Schor

What about other markers such as dress and language (studies show that when Blacks speak in French in the US, they escape some of the stigma)?

=> Response: the body does not just mean skin tone. I am currently collaborating with a psychologist (Alex Todorov at Princeton University) to study facial morphology in relation to gender and skin tone. We seek to understand what kind of stereotypes are triggered at what point. Other attributes, like language, can modulate the harshness of the stereotypes.

Angéline Escafret-Dublet

How is color assessed in your surveys? Do you use vocabulary descriptions? Or do you use a palette?

=> Response: in LAPOP, color is measured with a palette. But I prefer the vocabulary because it is closer to the ground. We resort to Black interviewers to assess the skin tone of other African-Americans because it reveals a very fine-tuned language around race and color.

Ary Gordien

What are the mechanisms that tie together race, class and color?

=> Response: There is a concatenation of contemporary processes and historical legacies (slavery, homogeneity, discrimination, etc.)

Question

Why not go all the way and look at skin tone as a continuum, by measuring color variations?

=> Response: One way to expand this research would actually to use a spectrometer and measure skin tones in the US and Brazil. But there might be inconsistencies between the machine perception and the human perception. A recent study in Puerto Rico showed that

raw scores from machines were not predictive of everyday racial categorization and inequality. What is predictive is the social perception of color. What matters is not just the continuum. What matters is how people mark points of significance along that continuum.

Patrick Simon

In addition, the problem when you use a continuous scale of color and do cross country comparisons, there is a variation in the scale of colors itself. How do you account for that problem?

=> Response: In fact, it would be fascinating to study. A “7” on the color scale in one country might have a different inequality score in a different country. We do not have the data yet to make these comparisons but it would be very interesting.

Ary Gordien

Can you take into account hair texture?

=> Response: That would be great, but the problem is that surveys do not know how to measure it. Because people change the way they wear their hair. In this regard, self-identification could be useful here. One standard question could be: how do you typically wear your hair?

Patrick Simon

When relying on bodily markers, how do you account for ambiguity? As history unfolds, some bodily markers are less associated with slavery than they used to be.

=> Response: Skin tone does not need to be connected to slavery to be a source of stigma. We can see examples of that in Japan, the Philippines or India, where it is associated with working outside. These things can always be remade.

Juliette Galonnier

Can you expand on the debates over the MENA category at the census bureau?

=> Response: I am member of the Population Association of America. I am part of the Committee on Population Statistics and it is in that quality that we went to the census bureau. We were silent about the MENA category because it grew from the ground by Middle-Eastern and North African associations who asked to be categorized differently. Right now they feel that they are forced to identify as whites while they are not seen as whites. Our concern what that it would lead to the racialization of religion and that the MENA category would become a new proxy for “Muslim”. Some people among us were uneasy putting that in the census, particularly under the Trump administration.

Magali Bessone

How does gender play into your research?

=> Response: There was no specific gender differences related to color. However, gender came up front in a study we conducted on perceived physical attractiveness (as rated by white female interviewers) to capture how beauty pays in the labor market. The research showed that Blacks were much less likely to be viewed as physically attractive. But in terms of income, we found that Black women who were rated as physically attractive had the same income as white women. This invites us once again to take intersectionality seriously. Bodily capital and lookism play a central role in social stratification in the US. Lookism is perfectly legal in the US in the labor market and because it intersects with race and gender, it is a

perfectly legal channel to maintain racial inequality and gender stratification in the shadow of the State. The differences in terms of income are the following:

Race - Black/white: 13%

Gender - Male/female: 30%

Attractiveness - white males: 22%; black women: 48%

This demonstrates the returns of beauty on the labor market.