

The Origins and Effects of “Colorism” in Latin America:
A Comparative Study of Mexico and Brazil

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how skin color affects a person's status in the society. The effects of skin color allows for finer distinctions than provided by major racial categories. The study of skin color (colorism), rather than race categories, allows for finer distinctions in the Latin American context, where there are a large number of people of mixed races. The subject of racism and white privilege almost invariably pertains to differences between blacks and whites in America without consideration of the effects the variations of skin tones have on the social hierarchy. This thesis will examine the topic of colorism by taking into account: 1) the geographical and historical factors which were involved in creation of white racial superiority in Latin America and 2) the role played by the independence movements in creating and maintaining colorism in the region.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Race is a topic that received a lot of attention in the U.S., especially in the past forty years, with many articles and books focusing on the historical and contemporary social injustices suffered by blacks. However, while black/white differences are highly relevant in the U.S. context where the percentage of people of mixed races is low, in Latin America, where there is a large population of mixed race background, a different perspective has to be used that takes into account the more subtle differences in skin tone: colorism. In order to differentiate between the concepts of racism and colorism, it is imperative to establish some definitions.

Racism is simply the belief that one race is superior to another. For most Americans the very word conjures up images of the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century or slavery, in which governmental policy allowed actions based on such beliefs to be highly visible. It is sometimes assumed that for a government to engage in overt racism the primary group must be the majority. While this may be the case in some countries, such as the United States, where the non-Hispanic, single-race, white, population is at 66% (US Census Bureau), it is not always the case, as in South Africa where the white population is a mere 9.6% of the population (CIA World Fact Book).

Colorism, although related to the power structure of a society, focuses on how racism has manifested itself in the psychology of a people, how it affects their concept of beauty

and privilege. It is defined as giving favored status to those who are of lighter skin complexion than those who are darker (Gabriel 2007: 11). Another key difference is that while racism deals with the subjugation of one group by another or the belief in racial supremacy, colorism deals with in-group discrimination in addition to between-group discrimination.

While the idea of making distinctions based solely on skin color could be traced back to biblical times, the enslavement of Africans by Europeans at the onset of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was to have the most profound effect on the racial make-up of Latin America (Gabriel 2007). Prior to this time, enslavement in southern Europe had little if anything to do with the color of one's skin but had much to do with a variety of other factors. Slavery during the Greek and Roman empires, for example, could be forced upon anyone who was captured in battle, sold to wealthier men by impoverished parents, or abandoned as infants on a hillside only to be picked up by a stranger (Westermann 1955: 2, 86).

This enslavement of Africans helped foster a sense of superiority by the Europeans and project the attitude that black Africans were mere uncivilized savages. This was not only the case with black Africans, however. It was also true wherever Europeans managed to conquer the indigenous populations in Latin America, who they viewed as being less than human, or at the very least less civilized than they were. Much of this attitude has carried over until this day, particularly in Latin America where racial differences are much more complex than in the United States. But, if one were to look at

different regions of South America one would observe that persons of European descent tend to have a lesser influence over the rest of the population than is the case in other areas. Although it is an oversimplification to suggest that European colonization is the only factor involved in the phenomenon of colorism in Latin America, it is certainly the primary one. The discrimination in Latin America is further complicated, however, by the continuum of skin tones. While skin tone alone is not the sole predictor of discrimination, it is associated with perceived cultural deficiencies and may put the person with darker skin at a larger disadvantage than the person with a lighter complexion.

Chapter II

Literature Review

In discussing the origins and effects of colorism, I will use three different theoretical perspectives as developed by Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Hechter, and Benedict Anderson. Pierre Bourdieu's work on *habitus* and *distinctions* is of particular interest here. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is nothing more than "systems of dispositions that are shaped by the experiences of actors in particular positions in the social structure", which "generate and organize practices and representations" (Calhoun et al. 2007: 261). In the modern social arena there is a constant struggle for capital in two very important fields: culture and economy. People seek constantly to increase not only their monetary capital or financial well-being, but immaterial things of value, such as education and refinement, as well. This involves efforts in their daily lives to distinguish themselves from others, whether through manner of dress, eloquence of speak, or discriminative tastes. But the group that decides what exactly qualifies as refinement, beauty, or taste in general is the primary group. Since they have the influence and status, it is they who decide these matters. This is not to say secondary or tertiary groups do not have their own standards of beauty but these standards are still measured in relation to the standards of the primary group.

Michael Hechter's concept of group solidarity is important in framing this thesis as well. He theorized that people can essentially form group bonds on just about any characteristic they have in common, but it is only those characteristics that have an influence on their ability to achieve an end that have the most value. For example, people could theoretically come together as an exclusive group based on the sole requisite that they have brown hair as opposed to blond or black. But this type of group solidarity is actually irrelevant because that quality does not generally keep people from obtaining jobs, getting entrance into universities, or earning equal pay. In contrast, being the member of a racial minority, having a particular religious affiliation, or speaking a different tongue can have an influence on whether or not a person achieves a particular end. It is these types of characteristics that can be the basis for group solidarity (Hechter 1987: 176).

Finally, Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking book *Imagined Communities* (1983) examined the historical and social factors that led and lead to nationalism. According to Anderson, there was probably no invention in human history that was more important than that of the printing press. It was not only the ability to print more literature faster but it was the fact that it changed language as a whole. For example, in Western Europe, prior to 1500, some 77 percent of books printed were in Latin, since "it was the only language taught" (Anderson 1983: 18). Even in France only ten percent of the books were actually written in French. After 1575, however, the *majority* were written in French (Ibid). In Latin America it was the development of newspapers that helped create

the regional pride that would lead to nationalism. No longer was news coming from the crown, it was now a domestic venture. Local linguistics coupled with local news provided the spark that led to the formation of nations in Latin America.

Another book that helps in framing the topic of colorism is *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora* by Deborah Gabriel (2007), which gives a historical analysis of the origins of colorism in continental Latin America as well as the Carribean Islands. What was most valuable, however, was not the historical nature of the analysis but how it dealt with the social aspects of colorism and its political implications. The most important theme of this book, however, was the direct connection she drew between black enslavement and the “pigmentocracy”, as she calls it, and how this attitude persisted even after emancipation. But, unlike most books, which focus primarily on the United States and the African continent or some other geographically narrow scope, she examines the United Kingdom as well as various countries in Latin America.

Jorge E. Hardoy (1973), in his book *Pre-Colombian Cities* provides information on the social structures of Indian civilizations in Latin America. The book includes an exhaustive examination of the cultures of Latin America prior to colonization. Although it includes social aspects of these civilizations it is primarily a historical documentation of the people rather than a sociological work. The author describes in detail the fluidity of the societies there and how they came to adopt similar governments and cultures despite being so far apart. The book is broken down by each tribe and civilization and describes in detail their language, manner of dress, governmental style, and policies

towards other tribes. But what was most helpful about this work is that within each chapter is each class level of that society is broken down and described, in detail, in terms of class membership, social fluidity, and relation with the larger society. The only other book that rivaled the importance of Gabriel's work on colorism was *African Mexicans and the Discourse on Modern Nation* by Marco Polo Hernandez Cuevas (2004). This book explained a lot about why there was so little quantitative information on the subject regarding blacks or mestizos in that country. Since the end of slavery, Mexico has been trying to rid itself of African identity on both a historic as well as a cultural level. This history behind the ongoing attempt at eradicating the culture of Africans and indigenous people, as well as their contributions to the formation of that country, clearly reveals the extent to which colorism still plays a role in that nation's identity.

Chapter III

Methods

This thesis uses a historical comparative method, relying heavily on historical information for explanations of contemporary issues. There is an abundance of literature on the historical events that are of extreme importance in determining the origins of colorism and how that phenomenon found its way to the New World. Writings from the time of Homer in Greece to Constantine in Rome illustrate the way slaves were treated and how the attitudes related to such treatment evolved over the centuries. This evolution can be traced to outside influences, particularly the Arabs, who brought with them a more tolerant attitude towards intermixing than their northern European counterparts but still favored the light skin/dark skin hierarchy. But this tolerance still had a gender bias. Only a light skinned man was allowed to intermix socially with a darker skinned, therefore inferior male. Southern Europeans viewed the reverse as disturbing the social hierarchy and therefore turning the hierarchy upside down. This attitude, once exported to Latin America, affected the entire population of the region (Westermann 1955) (Musselman 2003). Also, literature on Trans Atlantic Slave trade and how the beginning of it coincided with the adoption of Muslim attitudes towards slavery is heavily relied upon.

In order to show that this discrimination still exists as a result of these historical events, I used census data that show the disparity in educational achievement and income

among the differing levels of skin tone. But the most specific data came from Brazil since Mexico does not make a distinction between blacks and whites in their census data. This fact, ironically enough, helped further my original point regarding discrimination. There is information, however, on the educational discrepancy between indigenous people and the rest of the population, gathered by Pedro Flores-Crespo when doing research on the subject that I was able to use in my analysis.

In order to show its relevance in the sociological literature, a theoretical perspective is also used to show how colorism and its effects manifest themselves in modern attitudes. For example, I will use Michael Hechter's theory of social solidarity to examine why some groups in Latin America were able to galvanize and further their own cause while others, put under similar circumstances, are not able to unify as a group. Pierre Bourdieu's work regarding distinctions is also of importance in this context due to the fact that it is these distinctions and the struggle for resources that are largely at work in the perpetuation of colorism in Latin America. Finally, Benedict Anderson's theory of nation building, from a historical perspective, is crucial in understanding how the current social structure came to be as well as to contrast the different groups and their ability to galvanize.

Chapter IV
European and Latin American
Attitudes Prior to Colonization

If the argument is going to be made that European colonization is primarily responsible for the onset and perpetuation of colorism in Latin America, it must first be shown that the phenomenon did not exist prior to its introduction by the Europeans. Based on historical and archeological records of the indigenous people of the time, we can determine what sort of social structure was in place, the type of governments they employed, and what determinants, if any allowed someone to move up or down the social ladder before the European arrival in the Americas.

Life for the natives of Latin America was clearly far different than that of the inhabitants of Europe and Asia, as they had a very limited knowledge of many of the basic tools Eurasians had centuries to master. Their rudimentary knowledge of metals, their failure to utilize the wheel, and the lack of domesticated animals were an enormous hindrance to their advancement (Diamond 1997). But it was not only their lack of knowledge of such things that influenced their society it was also the terrain in which they lived. Many of the groups living in the region consisted of small rural tribes that relied heavily on farming and irrigation in order to survive, whereas urban settings were reserved for the much larger civilizations such as the Aztecs and Incas, and even those populations were heavily reliant on the farmers for sustenance.

Prior to the rise of these great civilizations there was a loose collection of smaller tribes in Meso-America that shared ideas, religions, and goods, and that traded with one another. These early dealings with one another would form the basis for what would be a common trend among the greater civilizations. A perfect example of this (relevant to the topic at hand) is that while they all took part in conquering lesser tribes, none of these people ever demanded the people they conquered give up their language, customs, or even religions. The Incas, for example, believed that in order to create a stable society, there must be some sort of acquiescence to those who were conquered in order to create a unified nation that would not be susceptible to revolt (Hardoy 1973: 411-12). But what is probably the most important factor here is not that there was a more complex social structure than was previously thought prior to archeological findings, but that instead it was the fluidity of the social sphere that allowed people, even slaves, to earn their way up the social ladder.

Just as it was in early Roman and Greek times, the natives of Latin America did not base their policy on slavery on skin color. It was based on circumstances similar to those in southern Europe. When these larger civilizations conquered smaller tribes, the warriors who were not killed were kept in slavery, just as were the women and children of the group. The women, however, were more often than not forced to be concubines of the chieftains or sold off as sex slaves to the highest bidder. But becoming a slave did not necessarily mean that that would be the victim's ultimate fate. A man could work his way out of slavery by performing well in the battle field and even rise up the ranks of the

military. Their civilizations were run through a system of meritocracy, with those who proved themselves to be more useful to the community achieving a greater status regardless of skin color. This is not to say a slave could eventually ascend the ranks to become the leader of the people. This position was still hereditary, except in instances where there was no male heir in which case a general or other leader would be selected (Hardoy 1973). The Aztecs, however, had one of the most interesting arrangements for slaves. Not only were the sons of slaves born free, but they “could marry, own property and even possess slaves themselves” (Hardoy 1973: 142).

But having this meritocracy was not necessarily to insure equality of opportunity. As mentioned above, it was common for the conquerors to allow their captors or subjects to keep their culture, so long as they paid tribute to their masters. The Incas, for example, allowed for the conquered armies to keep their generals as well. The reasoning behind this was to allow for a greater control of the conquered soldiers as they were less likely to revolt against their new leadership if the old commanders were still in place (Hardoy 1973). These generals were never allowed to move up the ranks further than commanding their own troops, but the soldiers were allowed to prove themselves worthy in battle and move up a limited ladder. The end result was something similar to what the Romans had upon conquering their neighbors--a large army made up mostly of other people's soldiers who fought under the same name. Being one of the conquered warriors was not always ideal but depending on the warrior it was better than the more lethal alternative.

Just as there was more fluidity to pre-Columbian societies than was previously thought, there is also evidence that the two-tier system, which consisted of a wealthy upper-class and impoverished lower class, commonly associated with these cultures is also not accurate. It may be easy to assume that because these civilizations were so far behind Europeans and Asians technologically they were also behind in terms of social organization as well. But this was certainly not the case. All three major civilizations had more complex social structures than was previously thought (Chase 1992). Just as in every society there was an elite class, there was also a class just under the elites that was made up of the clergy. These men were not normally newcomers to the clerical ranks but usually entered in as boys where they would learn the teaching of the elders and become prominent members of society (Hardoy 1973). This is, of course, not unique to the natives of Latin America, as most primitive cultures--and until fairly recently Western cultures as well--viewed the clergy as having divine powers and therefore as very high up on the social hierarchy.

Below the elites and clergy is the class that is not always associated with pre-Columbian society: the merchants. Archeological evidence shows clear evidence of a thriving middle-class (Chase 1992). Reasons given for the omission of this in the historical records is that when the Spanish conquered and destroyed much of the information there was available on the natives, they wrote their own history on how they believed the former society may have functioned. Then of course there were the farmers who, as mentioned above, were some of the most important people in each of the three

civilizations. They usually owned their own lands and depending on the region they lived in, would have to rotate property every two or three years in order to not exhaust the fertility of their land.

This social structure is important because it gives us insight into the criteria that were used to measure a person's worth in a given culture. The fact that there was a great deal of merit-based ascension or descent within these cultures leaves little room for discriminatory practices based on skin color. What we do know about the physical differences in appearance between the classes is that the wealthier tended to be taller, due to a better diet and access to medical treatment, such as the minor surgeries available at the time, whereas the poor did not have this access. It is evident in the skeletal records when viewing the differences between the remains of the lower and upper classes (Chase 1992).

Some Ancient Europeans, like the Greeks and Romans, had similar attitudes towards slavery and social mobility. In the Roman Empire, for example, though there were some slaves taken from places outside the province, through battle or other means, the great majority were actually acquired from within the Empire. Even of those who were imported from places like Gaul, Syria, present day Germany, and various locales in Asia Minor, a relatively small proportion were of black descent (Westermann 1973: 96-97). There is no evidence of color having any influence on slavery during those times. It was not until the introduction of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade that blackness become synonymous with slavery.

However, this still does not account for the differences in racial attitudes between the Latin American countries and the United States. The casual observer can notice that in the United States there is a clear distinction between black and white in that racial lines are drawn very rigidly. Of course, there are people of mixed descent in the United States, but this is not the same type of racial continuum that one sees in Latin America.

According to Dr. Carlos Moore, the reason for this difference in racial attitudes can be traced back to the Arab invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in what is now modern day Spain and Portugal in 711 A.D. (Gabriel 2007:76).

In contrast to the attitudes of some Europeans towards slavery, where Africans were in the minority of the slave population, the Arabs enslaved them en masse. Upon conquering the Iberian Peninsula, where they ruled for some eight centuries, the Arabs also reportedly brought with them millions of black African slaves, though the number is debated (Musselman 2003). Towards the end of the 15th century, when Christians finally regained control of the region, they merely adopted the Arab model of enslaving black Africans. It would be around this time that would mark the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This is by no means a coincidence.

The birth of modern Europe included the creation of nation-states, a rise in capitalism, new economies and merchant classes created by gold and other resources in places like Africa and the Americas, and the need for labor to mine for these resources. (Rawley, 2005). The first countries to take advantage of this change in the world economy were those in the Iberian Peninsula with its now large population of black African slaves.

However, there was a reason for them not to enslave the northern Africans. Europeans viewed them as being part of their history, a shared history, whereas the blacks from Sub Sahara were not viewed as such (Rawley 2005: 10).

Despite being on separate continents the attitudes of the Europeans and the indigenous peoples of Latin America in regard to slavery were quite similar. There is no evidence of colorism as a social phenomenon among the tribes or great civilizations of Meso and South America as they seemed to share the common trait of employing, for the most part, a meritocracy that capped one's social status only at the very highest levels, where heredity still played a large role in determining ascension to the highest position. Even slaves were not excluded from this opportunity for mobility. Aztecs afforded slaves not only the right to own property, earn their freedom and work their way up the social ladder, but they also allowed them to own their *own* slaves.

Europeans had similar social structures but it was their treatment of slaves that is most relevant. Not until the arrival of the Arabs, who were accustomed to enslaving black Africans, did Europeans in that region regard skin color as a determinant to whether or not someone should be owned by another person (Gabriel 2007: 11-12). Prior to this time, slaves in Europe were acquired through battles, purchases, trades, or other means independent of race. When the Arabs were finally defeated and the Iberian Peninsula was returned to Christian Europeans, pattern of eight centuries of Arab slave treatment was adopted by the Europeans who saw black Africans as a means to supply the labor necessary to engage in the new larger economy of long distance trade, and this brought

upon a change in European attitudes toward slavery. This shift in attitude, along with the technological advancements in ship building and weaponry, would allow them to search for quicker routes to Asia where they would discover more African territory in which to amass slaves and ultimately “discover” the New World.

Chapter V

Colonization

The phenomenon of colorism in Latin America really began when European colonizers landed on the shores of present day Mexico and South America. It would be fallacious to assume that the mere presence of Europeans in South America and the prejudices they had alone caused this to occur. On the contrary, the settlers also experienced discrimination at the hands of the “true” citizens of the homeland. It was this discrimination, and the nationalism that arose from it, which stimulated the development of colorism. In order to understand how this came about, we should first lay down the fundamentals of what nationalism is and how it affected the onset of colorism.

Depending on the country being studied, the degree of nationalism in Latin America varies among scholars due to their differing pasts. In order to get a firm grasp on the range of these variations, we will compare the cases of Brazil and Mexico to get an idea of how these nations viewed themselves, the degree of nationalism within their respective populations, and the historical factors which led to these differences. While the concept of Brazilian nationalism is generally accepted, the concept of Mexican nationalism remains challenged for reasons to be explored. In order to understand how these nations became nation-states, we must first define the term “nation-state”, differentiate it from

the “nation”, and look at the factors that created each of these entities in their respective regions.

The nation-state is a legal political entity with geographically recognized borders (however abstract they may sometimes be) that wields legal influence over its populace with administrative powers. Its sovereignty and very existence extend only so far as its ability to fend off outside intruders, including other nation-states, or rival political factions (Hutchinson and Smith 1994: 35). Members of these states are only recognized as such because of their government’s inherent right to legally declare who is and who is not a citizen of this country. The social cohesion of this nation-state--and subsequently its ability to thrive-- is based largely on the citizenry’s perception of membership in the culture at-large.

Specifically defining the term nation, on the other hand, has long been a contested issue among scholars in various fields, from anthropology to sociology to history to political science and to every other academic field dealing with groups of people on a macro or micro level. What is commonly accepted among many scholars, however, is that in order for there to be a nation there must necessarily be a common language (Hutchinson and Smith 1994). For a people to be united the ability to transmit ideas within a given populace must first exist. The lack of communication between groups can create disunity and factionalism. Any form of auditory or visual communication, which effectively transmits ideas from one person to another would suffice in fulfilling this first requisite of unifying a people into a nation. For example, people who are hearing

impaired may not be able to communicate with each other verbally, but may be able to communicate with each other visually. Similarly, the blind may not have the ability to transmit ideas visually but are more often than not able to speak to each other and galvanize as a group with a common characteristic. This ability to transmit ideas is essential for group solidarity and for uniting the population as a nation. But communication in and of itself is not sufficient. The people in question must also possess a similar culture and similar goals, lest the aforementioned societal fragmentation take root. Because of these basic considerations, geographical location is less relevant--if at all--than the three requisites put forth: communication, culture, and goals.

Ironically enough, what the terms nation and nation-state have in common is the chances for their survival may be enhanced by a certain level of conflict, either internal or external. As Johnson (2008: 369-71) points out, the lack of internal conflict may sometimes be a symptom of a greater problem that has not been addressed, and that lack may signal unacknowledged contradictions in the structure of the system that decrease its chances for long-term survival. But, it may also be a sign of the suppression of ideas since humans are not a monolithic species. This suppression goes to the heart of the question of the legitimacy of the political system as perceived by the people, and this perceived legitimacy is intrinsically related to the level of equality or inequality existing in the system, particularly political but also economic. Even though the elites will be perceived to have greater autonomy than the population at large in pursuing their interests and expressing their ideas, it is crucial for the legitimacy and overall solidarity of the society that all segments of the population see themselves as having a stake in its survival

and at least some voice in pursuing their interests. When there is strong sense of perceived legitimacy, external threats can unify people around their identification with the nation. Whenever there is an outside threat, perceived or real, people tend to band together against the out-group when they may otherwise have not have done so (Mann 2007: 41). History is replete with examples of this process whereby external threats serve to unify the citizens of a nation. Examples include the high level of American patriotism after 9/11 and the racial minority participation in World War II despite the rampant racism of the time. This is also very important in the formation of the national identities of Brazil and Mexico.

Some historians have argued that Brazilian nationalism really began when the first colonists set foot on South American soil in 1532 (Burns 1968: 7). Upon arriving they immediately sensed a difference between themselves and the Portuguese residing in Europe. The new land they inhabited along with the indigenous tribes they came into contact with almost immediately created a culture and identity separate from that of Portugal. The problem with this argument, however, is that the colonists in the New World had not abdicated their allegiance to the Portuguese throne. They had not yet forged an identity distinct from the motherland, and more importantly still considered themselves Portuguese who bore arms for the throne under John III. While they may have been foreign subjects, they were certainly not a sovereign nation distinct from the nation of Portugal (Burns 1968).

National identity always takes time to develop. Particular modes of thinking and cultural uniqueness sometimes take many generations to form and become internalized.

Over the course of the next hundred years the Portuguese in Brazil would develop this identity by forming their own distinct language, which was a mix of European Portuguese and indigenous languages. More importantly this development helped unite them as a common people.

While Europe was in turmoil in the 17th century, the Brazilians, as they came to be known, were left to fend for themselves by having to ward off attacks by the Dutch who saw an opportunity to capitalize on Europe's inability to protect the resource rich colonies. This threat from the Dutch is what truly first solidified the Brazilian identity (Burns 1968: 15). Despite the racial hierarchy that permeated its politics and the military, whites, blacks, natives, and Mestizos, bound together to fight a common enemy. The Dutch spoke a different language, had a different religion (Protestantism), and most importantly were not Brazilian. The Catholic people of Brazil had set aside whatever personal differences they may have had with each other to ward off an outside threat to their unique way of life (Burns 1968). Over the course of the next few centuries, similar battles with the people of Paraguay and other South American neighbors would further galvanize the people of this new nation. They also stood apart from their neighbors, who were also primarily Protestant, by being the only non-Spanish speaking people on the continent.

Because of this transformation from colonial Portuguese subjects to Brazilians, as well as various economic factors that are beyond the scope of this paper, political independence was not far off. By the time Dom Joao granted independence to the new nation-state and left a constitutional monarchy in place with his son Dom Pedro as its

monarch, the Brazilian nation and the subsequent nationalism had long been forged. However, despite this independence there remained underlying racial tensions that would need to be addressed.

The war with Paraguay (1864-1870) decimated the white population of the military, causing a rise in the percentage of its black population. As the numbers of blacks increased among the higher ranks in the army, the racial hierarchy that had been ignored during battles with external forces was now forced to the forefront of Brazilian politics, causing an internal struggle that would end slavery and the monarchy and ultimately lead to the establishment of the republic in 1889 (Smallsman 2002: 16). It is this republican identity that has remained the national identity of the Brazilian people as well as the reputation of being one of the most racially tolerant nations in the west. Therefore, it can be stated that external conflict was crucial in forging the identity of the nation and internal conflict forged the identity of the nation-state in Brazil.

Mexico's history of nationalism is not as clear, however. The degree of solidarity among the Mexican people can be debated. Take for example the large number of Mexicans fleeing their country for the United States, forsaking their home and the national identity of the children they may bear in the United States. Unlike Brazilians, who forged their identity by battling outside forces, the Mexicans' only significant call to unity was a common disdain for Spanish colonialism. At the time of its independence, the people of Mexico shared neither a common language nor a common culture.

Also unlike Brazil, the peoples of Mexico were not by themselves unique in that there were many other Spanish colonies in the region. However, what was probably the most

significant difference was geography. Along with European forces, Brazil was in constant battle with its neighbors to the west that had a different faith and spoke a different tongue. Mexico had no such neighbors. The Spanish speaking people to the south had vowed to stand with Mexico if Spain had tried to retake the country and the new United States had favored their independence. Their only common enemy was Spain. This lack of significant conflict was arguably the most pivotal factor in undermining the country's ability to unify as a nation. Further complicating the issue was Spain's influence on separatist groups in Yucatan, support of Spanish elitism by Mexican born president, Porfirio Diaz, and the rampant economic inequality that continues to plague the country (Turner 1968).

Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), argues for the creation of the nation prior to the Mexican revolution by pointing to the "Creole Pioneers", or the elite Mestizo class of Mexican society, as "exhibit A" of Mexican nationalism. The problem with this argument, however, is that it ignores some 95% of the entire Mexican population. He therefore makes a broad generalization about an entire population by using an extreme minority to further his argument (Doyle and Pamplona 2006: 188). But what is important is that it was the loss of elite status in the eyes of the crown that was one of the primary reasons for the push to independence. The need to regain that status was essential and led to the formation of a bond among the Creole elite. They became socially capped and looked down upon by European Spanish who viewed them as foreigners.

Because the vast majority of New Spaniards did not rally around this larger

community imagined by the Creole elite, other factors must have come into play for them to perceive themselves to be a unique group of people separate from the European Spaniards. The first was the Virgin of Guadalupe. This uniquely Mexican religious icon played a significant role in the Mexican revolution as it provided a distinct imagery not found in other regions where Catholicism is practiced. Few other bonds are as strong as that of religious solidarity. The second was the creation of national heroes during the war for independence. Civilian heroes such as Miguel Hidalgo and Mariano Matamoros as well as military heroes like Juan Aldama and Vicente Guerrero gave the people of Mexico a sense of pride as they looked up to these men who fought for a nation transcending class or race.

The wars with Texas and the United States proved to be a double edged sword in forming Mexican nationalism. Here again people across race and class lines bound together to fight a common foreign enemy, and this brought pride and a sense of community to the people of the region, despite many embarrassing defeats. Frederick Turner (1968: 39) argues that the loss of what is now the American southwest may have actually been beneficial to Mexico in terms of nation building. For one, the sheer size of Mexico at the time, coupled with sparsely inhabited territory by the many indigenous tribes, was far greater than Mexico's ability to unite them as a common people. On the other hand, the loss of this territory only weakened the resolve of the Mexican people and created a feeling of distrust in what was perceived to be a weak central government. This lack of confidence in the Mexican government only deepened the already existing factionalism among the Mexican people. It could be argued that these divisions, extant

prior to the formation of the Mexican nation-state, have yet to be smoothed out. Due to these factors and the pull of the prosperity of the United States, a united Mexican nation still eludes them.

While there are some obvious similarities between the paths to statehood for Brazil and Mexico, there are some clear differences. Although both nations were born of European colonialism, with colonists coming from the Iberian Peninsula, Mexico fought for its independence, while Brazil was *given* independence. Also, while racial and class inequality exist in both Brazil and Mexico, the extreme cleavage that exists in the latter has caused mass emigration to the north and calls for secession in the southern region of Chiapas.

According to Michael Hechter (1987), there are three ways in which to monitor group solidarity. People who are phenotypically dissimilar from others or who are similar to each other are the ones who are most likely to form tight knit groups. As mentioned above this phenotypic trait is dependent on how important it is to that society in regard to obtaining an end. Also, those who share social bonds thereby exchanging ideas are also likely to come together. Finally, a people who are culturally homogenous will band together when need be (Hechter 1988: 176-78). But what are the circumstances under which this would happen? He claims there is a constant need for either resources or services. When the state or the market cannot supply these needs solidarity is likely to emerge as people who are similar to one another band together to meet their common needs. Applying this theory to the Creole elite, who were now lacking status and the power that came along with it, all three criteria fit particular group of people. They were

phenotypically similar, they were part of the same small elite population who interacted regularly and they also shared a common culture. Group solidarity, coupled with the rest of the population's discontent with the crown, was enough for them to fight for what they believed they deserved.

Chapter VI

Colorism and Discrimination

From the above, it has been established that European colonization is responsible for the change in the racial make-up of Latin America. But with this change also came the discrimination that often accompanies the mixture of two drastically different people. Of the countries being studied for this project, Mexico illustrates the most glaring example of its preference for whiteness and its disdain for blackness.

While doing the research for this project I found it rather difficult to come across information from Mexico that would break down education and income levels by race in Mexico. Upon further exploration, I discovered that this was not necessarily due to lack of resources, but it was that the Mexican government ignores the fact that there is “black blood” in their lineage. In *African Mexicans and the Discourse on Modern Nation* (2004), Marco Cuevas shows how, since the time of independence, Mexicans have implemented a de facto and later de jure policy of Mestizaje, or cultural whitening, by which the African history and heritage of Mexico is being gradually erased from memory. In religious paintings or idols, for instance, once black figures are being lightened in order to seem more appealing.

Although we will never know the exact number of African slaves brought to Latin America, it has been acknowledged that their presence in Latin America had a marked changed on the landscape. Since the majority of slaves brought to Latin America were male they often had no other choice but to mix with the females of the native populations.

This constant mixing of races led to several identifiable classes in Latin America at the time. But this was not only because of the lack of black females; there was also a marked advantage to propagating with an indigenous female. Since they were considered free subjects, the children born of such a union would also be born free (Gabriel 2007: 69-70). The mixed unions gave rise to the varying shades of darkness within the population. The offspring resulted from different types of mixed unions received different category names; for example, a person born from a Spanish-African union was labeled 'Mulatto', while a person of black and Indian descent was labeled a 'Zambo' (Gabriel 20007).

This phenomenon of labeling and stratification based on skin color and descent was not limited to continental Latin America either. Jamaica had a similar situation in regard to slavery and the offspring of slaves. Like Brazil and Mexico, the majority of slaves brought over from Africa were male, but so were the majority of colonizers. This lack of white females provided the motivation to sexually engage black slaves, who would often become the concubines of the land owner. Though it may be fair to say many did not engage in this activity willingly, there were some advantages of becoming a member of the man's household. They were not only exempt from working the fields, but their chances for freedom and guaranteed freedom for her children were thereby increased (Henriques 1968: 42-3).

But this new class of citizens--those born of mixed white and black unions—created a whole new problem for the citizens. As children of these mixes increased in number, so too did the amount of wealth being inherited by the black and mulatto class. Because of a fear of an empowered colored population, during the end of the 19th century a law was

passed limiting the amount of inheritance and black or mulatto could receive from a white person. It was also generally accepted, as a matter of law, that colored people were inferior to whites as they could not serve on juries or testify in court (Henriques 1968). Though the total black population of Jamaica is currently 91% black (CIA World Factbook), the preference for whiteness continues to dominate the structure of that society.

Chapter VII

The Effects of Colorism

In 1829 the newly independent country of Mexico banned slavery, envisioning a new type of nation that would compete with the rest of the world in terms of social progress and classical liberalism. This, however, would come at the expense of the Mestizos of all shades who were now viewed as not being part of the new Mexico. The reasoning behind this was to create a unified nation by identifying everyone as being of the same race (Cuevas 2004). Of course, this meant the eradication of all black and indigenous identity at the historical, cultural, and biological record. Though there was no physical holocaust, in the sense that people were not rounded up and exterminated, there was for a long time a sort of cultural holocaust of the nation's non-European history. This Eurocentric attitude of superiority, fomented by the Creole elite, lasted for almost a hundred years until in the 1920's when it actually became a matter of public policy.

Upon becoming president in 1920, Alvaro Obregon appointed Jose Vasconcelos to head his ministry of education. Obregon had become president after the most violent phase of the Mexican Revolution. After almost one hundred years of independence the country had yet to achieve the unity it had been seeking. So, as a matter of policy, Vasconcelos decided that the people of Mexico would speak one common language-- Spanish—and glorify their European origins while at the same time diminishing anything that related to their black or indigenous past, despite the fact that those of mixed origins made up the majority of the population (Cuevas 2004: 4). This mentality of whitening, or

as some would call it “integration”, is still going on to this day. Much like Frantz Fanon describes in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) the black and mixed races of Mexico have to deal constantly with the fact that they are colored while trying to adopt a culture and mode of thinking that is not in line with their heritage. The notion of not being white equating to being less of a full citizen might tempt some to believe that this would cause a mass rejection of one’s background and self loathing for not being a member of the primary group. However, Pedro Flores-Crespo (2007) surveyed people in Mexico and found that despite the government’s best efforts, seven in ten indigenous people still took great pride in their ancestry.

Unfortunately, this attitude does not translate into opportunity. One could look to some statistics on the educational achievements of the people of Mexico to see that the indigenous population stands at a marked disadvantage in terms of having less access to resources and quality education. Flores-Crespo also lays down the educational differences between indigenous people and the rest of the population. The five most populous states in Mexico were examined and the Human Development Index shows how each state ranks within the country of Mexico as can be seen in Table 1.

The figures show the disparity between the math and reading scores of the indigenous people and the state average due to the significant disparity of access to education, which greatly hampers a person’s social and economic mobility (Pedro-Crespo 2007). In reading, for instance, for each state there is a significant drop in scores when comparing the indigenous people to the rest of the population. The reading scores within each state are 47.63 points lower than that states average and 55.87 points lower than the national

Table 1. Human Development Index and Reading and Math Scores in
Five Mexican States

HDI Rank	State	Reading				Math			
		State Avg.	Urban	Rural	Indigenous	State Avg.	Urban	Rural	Indigenous
9	Quintana Roo	456.21	482.11	439.66	392.66	389.96	399.24	383.21	357.18
10	Campeche	449.65	458.70	450.69	407.99	393.98	394.11	405.39	368.60
19	Yacatan	446.81	469.74	429.24	406.59	385.52	399.42	368.94	364.09
31	Oaxaca	441.79	475.58	426.88	405.70	397.28	418.86	378.41	385.13
32	Chiapas	443.46	480.57	428.91	386.81	399.65	413.67	391.69	377.51
	Natl. Avg.	459.40	476.49	444.18	403.53	398.19	407.29	389.46	361.98

Source: INEE 2003

Note: Although there are 31 states in Mexico, Distrito Federal (or Federal District) is also counted as a region bringing the total to 32.

average. For math, indigenous people within each state score an average 24.78 points lower than their peers and 36.21 points lower than the national average.

The data for Brazil also show large differences between whites and the other racial ethnic groups, in terms of income (Table 2) and education (Table 3). There is a distinct correlation between skin color and income, where lighter skinned people tend to have higher incomes than darker skinned people. In Table 3, as education rises, the proportion of dark skin people decreases in each given category. For instance, the percentages of black and brown people in the “no schooling” category are 21.5 percent and 18.9 percent of their total population respectively. However, in the “university complete” category those numbers drop significantly to 1.1 percent for both color groups. Unlike Table 2, which showed the disparity between indigenous and state averages on reading scores, Table 3 actually breaks down the population into much more accurate categories. Asians are also included in these data and they do not seem to be suffering any ill effects of discriminatory practices. Much like in the United States, their education level and income are significantly higher than the rest of the population. The limited literature on the subject of Asians in Latin America was not sufficient to make a definitive argument as to why this is the case, but it is likely in cases such as this that various other factors may come into play, such as cultural influences and expectations of achievement from the primary group.

Some of these numbers can be misleading, however. It is not uncommon for people with some African ancestry to classify themselves as white in order to avoid

Table 2. Income Differences in Race/Ethnicity (Brazil)

Race/Ethnicity	Mean income	Median Income
White	452.12	151.00
Brown	193.41	40.00
Black	204.64	110.00
Asian	1021.38	245.00
Indigenous	185.35	0.00

Note: The zero median income for indigenous is due to at least 50% of respondents reporting no income, as many live off the land they occupy.

Source: Minnesota Population Center, International Census Data

discrimination (Gabriel 2007). The way in which this occurs depends on the region being studied. As mentioned earlier, there is a distinct difference between the United States and Latin America in terms of the symbolic significance of skin variations given the rigid nature of race differences between the two areas. But it is not only a visible biological difference; it is also a social difference of how one person's skin tone can determine - where they land on the social pyramid.

In the early years of slavery in the United States there was a social distinction between blacks, mulattoes and whites, where freed fair skinned people of mixed race would often try and marry other people of fair complexion in order to dilute the darkness of their skin in their offspring. They were not considered to be as "good" as whites but they were still higher up on the social ladder than the black slaves. This changed towards the end of the 19th century when the United States made it a matter of law that anyone with black ancestry was now considered to be black (Wagley 1965). While this did indeed relegate

some people to a lower status than before, there were some people who were still fair skinned enough to pass as white. It also had the consequence of blacks using certain physical characteristics to make distinctions amongst themselves and rank themselves accordingly (Wagley 1965: 537).

For Latin America, the process of defining these differences was not as clear as in the United States. While there were attempts to categorize individuals by their phenotypic features and ancestry, the sheer amount of combinations, and subsequently categories that arose made it almost impossible to accurately keep track of all of them (Wagley 1965: 536). People were divided into categories based on the skin color and ancestry, but over time this system became more simplified than before. For example, in Mexico and Brazil a person could now effectively be put into one of only three or four categories, such as Pardo (Brazil), Caboclo (Brazil), or Cholo (Mexico) to name a few.

Physical appearance was not the only factor in determining a person's category because of what Charley Wagley (1965) considers "social race". Placement in a social category can be determined by the level of education a person has, the language a person speaks, or the manner in which that person dresses. The reasoning behind this is that persons of dark complexion with a high education would likely be considered to be in the upper echelon in terms of education and perhaps income and thus would not logically be

Table 3. Educational attainment in Brazil

		Race						Total
		White	Black	Indigenous	Asian	Brown (Brazil)	Unknown	
Educational attainment, international recode [detailed version]	No schooling	531277 11.2%	122628 21.5%	11797 30.4%	3221 8.4%	656623 18.9%	13566 22.4%	1339112 15.0%
	Some primary completed	958493 20.2%	158088 27.8%	10506 27.1%	4949 12.9%	1013234 29.2%	16040 26.5%	2161310 24.2%
	Primary (4 yrs) completed	1062378 22.4%	121155 21.3%	7108 18.3%	6311 16.4%	738741 21.3%	11901 19.6%	1947594 21.8%
	Primary (6 yrs) completed	1000739 21.1%	98461 17.3%	5594 14.4%	6485 16.9%	628505 18.1%	10445 17.2%	1750229 19.6%
	Lower secondary general completed	165204 3.5%	15182 2.7%	899 2.3%	1173 3.1%	91587 2.6%	1576 2.6%	275621 3.1%
	Secondary, general track completed	623700 13.1%	42662 7.5%	2155 5.6%	6547 17.1%	272044 7.8%	4991 8.2%	952099 10.7%
	Some college completed	157421 3.3%	4926 .9%	308 .8%	3186 8.3%	30516 .9%	862 1.4%	197219 2.2%
	University completed	245420 5.2%	6206 1.1%	388 1.0%	6522 17.0%	36566 1.1%	1184 2.0%	296286 3.3%
Total		4744632 100.0%	569308 100.0%	38755 100.0%	38394 100.0%	3467816 100.0%	60565 100.0%	8919470 100.0%

put into the same category as someone who may have the same skin color but who is an illiterate poor farmer. Although that person's biology shows he is of one classification, he is "acting" white and has other characteristics considered to be white and so therefore is socially labeled as white. This relative acceptance of a biologically non-white person assimilated into the "white culture" leads to a sense of acquiescence among the darker skinned populace in accepting this arrangement. It can be seen as a form of social exchange, whereby a person seeks to maximize his or her social rewards by giving up that part of his or her identity that is based on skin color.

The Creole elite, as mentioned above, managed to form solidarity with each other to regain the status they had lost. Given the same criteria that were applied to the Creole elite--phenotype, social bond, and culture—why have the colored people of Latin America not come together in solidarity to force change? Neither the market nor the state is giving them the services or the resources they desire, so according to the implications drawn from Hechter's rational choice theory these people *should* bind together. The reason why they do not fight back against the system lies probably in the acceptance of colorism as the status quo. Instead of rejecting the "pigmentocracy" and demanding a change, they have learned to live with, and work within that structure. This weakens the ties and motivations necessary to form substantial group solidarity based on skin color. What may also be considered is the "pull" factor the United States has on many countries in Latin America, given the opportunities for better services and resources. The inability to enact change in their country is due to this decrease in solidarity.

Because the primary group in this situation defines themselves as being of European heritage, what is aesthetically pleasing is defined as that which reflects this heritage. If one wanted to see what a particular culture defined as beauty, TV channels are a good starting point. Whether one is in the United States, Brazil, Slovenia, or Russia, the media promote people who are considered attractive by the standards of that country. This does not necessarily have to include only movie actresses or actors, but also news anchors, hosts for television shows etc. In almost every instance in Brazilian and Mexican television the people seen are clearly of European ancestry with white features. They are phenotypically dissimilar from the poor people living in these countries.

If we were to take the very essence of colorism and what it means -- that whiteness is equated with beauty, power, and superiority -- then would it not stand to reason that blacks would be on the lowest rung of this social hierarchy and indigenous people would be further up? However, this is not the case for a very simple reason. This reason can be understood in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus (Calhoun 2007). This concept refers to a system of subjective dispositions that correspond with one's objective life circumstances. In Bourdieu's perspective, the social world includes two distinct and important fields, culture and economy, in which people who share the same social space are in a constant struggle for both material resources and symbolic status. In the case of Latin America the dominant group--those of European descent and of consequently lighter skin color--impose their idea of beauty, taste, class, and all things refined on everyone else. Anyone who is not part of this group is looked upon as being antithetical to the progress of the society. Blacks, Mestizos, and other groups who have submitted to

this notion of refinement may not necessarily be viewed as posing as much of a threat to this common notion of culture and progress. The indigenous, however, by holding on to their customs, religions, and languages, are not part of the same culture as those who embrace European heritage and are therefore viewed as deserving of a lower status than those minorities who have embraced this heritage.

How does an entire population reconcile the realities of colorism with the overt and sometimes legal rejection of color preference? Tim Wise asks the question, “[W]hat does it mean to be white?” (Rothenberg 2008: 133-6). Whenever there is a discussion on race, it is usually the ethnic and colored minorities that are discussed and rarely are whites mentioned outside of the role of oppressor. But why should whites give up the privileges that come with being part of the dominant group? There is no incentive to end the social stigma of not being white when one is aided in terms of employment opportunities, educational opportunities, or the social capital that accompanies an ascribed characteristic (Rothenberg 2008: 133-4). It is automatic admission into an exclusive sector of society that money cannot purchase and that networking cannot overcome.

In more heterogenous nations, such as Mexico, where there is a continuum of color variance, those who are on the lighter side of the spectrum without being completely white may be offered more opportunities than their darker associates, thereby providing more fluidity to the overall stratification system. This contrasts with the United States where there is a more marked distinction between people classified as white or black.

Chapter VIII

Conclusions

This thesis has examined the origins and effects of colorism in Latin America in two particular countries (Mexico and Brazil) in a historical and contemporary context. Upon conquering the Iberian Peninsula in the 7th century and not relinquishing control until some eight centuries later, the Arabs had a strong influence on southern European attitudes toward slavery, due to the legacy of mass African enslavement that had not been entrenched into the society prior to this era. Although colorism in Europe was extant prior to this invasion, it is this attitude of mass African enslavement that was the primary reason why blackness has continued to be associated with inferiority in Latin America. The consequences of being non-white in a society that favors whiteness can be severe, but not as much if one is willing to accept the culture that perpetuates this. If, however, one rejects cultural norms, as do the indigenous people of Mexico and Brazil, then opportunities of upward social mobility are severely hampered, as is evidenced by the data presented above.

Although this thesis is based on only two Latin America countries, particularly Brazil and Mexico, it is worth noting that this phenomenon is not limited to this area. Colorism, as an internalized idea of the presumed superiority of whiteness, can be witnessed in other parts of the globe. The concept of whiteness as being equated with beauty can be seen in some Asian cultures as well. The Hindu caste system, for instance, is based on this premise, whereby lighter skin complexions are viewed as superior to darker varieties.

More research should be done on this topic, especially in a comparative perspective at a global level, by comparing and contrasting the origins and reasons for the perpetuation of these patterns of prejudice based solely on distinctions in skin color.

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