



# Is the Brazilian Tale of Peaceful Racial Coexistence True? Some Evidence from School Segregation and the Huge Racial Gap in the Largest Brazilian City

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**Summary.** — Brazil has always been considered to be a land free of racial and ethnic tensions. However, despite Brazil being famous for miscegenation, racial discrimination in Brazil has been documented in the literature, especially in light of the huge disparity between Brazil's racial groups with respect to economic outcomes and education levels. The objective of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the economics of racial discrimination in Brazil. To this end, the effect of segregation on the income of workers is estimated using data from elementary schools in São Paulo, the largest city in the country. Measures of segregation in the educational system are evaluated using economic data obtained from the 2010 census. It is shown that segregation plays a fundamental role on the wage gap among racial groups. This effect may be attributed to the virtual absence of pretos and pardos in private schools. In public education, however, there is little separation along racial lines, which suggests that lack of access to social networks and to higher quality public schools may be the most important element in explaining wage differences. In Brazil, racial discrimination seems to work indirectly through socio-economic factors.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Brazil was considered to be a land free of racial and ethnic tensions after the end of slavery in 1888. When Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz, a famous Harvard biologist, visited Brazil in 1865, he wrote a book describing a world completely unlike that found in the U.S. From his point of view, Brazil was a land where people of different races lived together despite the brutality of slavery. However, according to Agassiz, miscegenation would lead the country into a terrible state of degeneration, so he suggested that the U.S. keep people of different races separated (Agassiz, 1868). Needless to say, he was wrong. However, despite indications that coexistence between people of European and African ancestry in Brazil is less problematic than in other areas, extreme racial discrimination has also been documented in the country, with data showing a huge disparity between white and non-white populations, especially with respect to economic outcomes and education levels.

For instance, in São Paulo, the largest city in the country, the black population is considerably more homogeneous and poor. In almost all regions of the city, whites earn more than blacks, and these income disparities increase as districts become richer. Empirical evidence shows that geographical location and race are connected factors. In this way, the most important Brazilian urban area seems to mirror the U.S., where race consistently appears to be an important variable affecting the wages and the schooling of individuals. Given this evidence, can Agassiz's initial impression concerning the effects of integration be considered to be wrong? Is Brazil actually less segregated than the U.S.? Which types of dynamics best explain/describe how people interact in Brazilian schools?

These are not simple questions to answer. Economic agents are inserted into complex social networks that have different characteristics and that serve various purposes (Granovetter, 1973). In turn, such circumstances alter these agents' chances

of finding good jobs and affect their interests, their personal ambitions, and even the funding of their educational process (Akerlof, 1997; Arrow, 1998; Loury, 1998). Personality is also affected by prevailing patterns of behavior in the environment in which a given individual is embedded (Austen-Smith & Fryer, 2005). The network of relationships that a person enters into is deeply influenced by the geographical location of the network, especially with respect to the degree of existing segregation in the network (Jackson, 2010). Schools, in general, are a very central location for the shaping of such networks (Zenou, 2009).

One consequence of segregation is the spatial fragmentation of the city, which can cause a worsening of socioeconomic conditions due to the formation of ghettos and the uneven distribution of jobs within different parts of the city (Kain, 1968). In the U.S., the empirical literature has demonstrated that the distance between home and work for minority groups, certain patterns of behavior, and difficult access to health care as well as to public assets are major causes of ethnic and racial differences as measured by many social, economic, and health indicators (Almond, Chay, & Greenstone, 2006; Borjas, 1995; Case & Katz, 1991; Massey & Denton, 1993; Stoll & Covington, 2012). For instance, using data from U.S. metropolitan areas, Cutler and Glaeser (1997) estimate that a 13% reduction in spatial segregation would reduce the gap between blacks and whites by one-third with respect to education. Cutler, Glaeser, and Vidgor (1999) showed that, despite a decline in segregation in the U.S. in the mid-nineties, a typical African-American lived in a neighborhood that, on average,

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was inhabited by a population that was 56% black compared to only a 27% black population in 1890.

A huge effort has been made to decrease school segregation in the U.S., especially after the 1954 case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Welch and Light (1987) identified almost 50 school districts in the U.S. where there has been a major decline in segregation in response to judicial orders. Logan, Oakley, and Stowell (2008) also show a stark decline in school segregation. In 1970, 82.60% of students would have to change schools to eliminate segregation, while in 2000, only 65.70% students would so. The most segregated regions of the U.S. in 1970 were the Midwest, with 86.70% segregated schools, and the South—the former Confederate states—with 84.80% segregated schools. By 2000, these figures were reduced to 76.00% and 58.30%, respectively.

In Brazil, however, the empirical literature exploring segregation is still in its infancy. After the end of slavery in Brazil, no coherent set of legal processes developed that could be seen as implementing a regime of segregation in Brazil, unlike in the U.S., where the Jim Crow practices, for example, created a completely segregated school system. However, as outlined by Skidmore (2003), Brazil lacks the history of racial hatred that characterizes the U.S., but such a lack of hatred has not led to a lack of racial discrimination. Empirical evidence of racial discrimination in Brazil was found within national data by Silva (1978, 1980, 1985, 2000), Lovell (1994), Kassouf (1998) Cavalieri and Fernandes (1998), Arcand and D'Hombres (2004) and Campante, Crespo, and Leite (2004).

With regard to residential segregation in Brazil, Telles (1992, 2004) found a more tenuous situation in Brazil than in the U.S. case. In fact, the chances of interaction between whites and blacks are much greater in Brazil than in the U.S., which is to be expected due to the higher percentage of blacks in the total population. There is also evidence that segregation is positively correlated with income, favoring whites. Moreover, if segregation tends to be less important in the poorest segments of the population because, presumably, the budget constraints of the poorest citizens eliminate any possibility of their choosing their place of residence, among the richest segments, the populations of the districts are overwhelmingly white.

To the best of our knowledge, our paper is the first to delve into segregation issues in a large middle-income country other than South Africa (Christopher, 1990, 2001).<sup>1</sup> With this purpose in mind, after this brief introduction, our methodological procedures are detailed. Next, the 2005 School Census and the 2010 Census data are described, with the main economic and educational figures of the São Paulo districts discussed. In the fourth section, our main findings are shown. Finally, we present our primary conclusions: access to better quality schools and access to more profitable social networks may be the central issues surrounding segregation in Brazil.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

### (a) *Race and segregation*

Race is a social construct which has deeply shaped American and Brazilian societies. However, defining racial groups is a complex process because racial identities have evolving meanings, which are transformed along time (Omi & Winant, 2015). Wagley (1968), in his study on the formation of races on the American continent, has identified three basic systems of classification: ancestry and origin, socio-cultural status, and, ultimately, physical appearance. More recently, Wimmer (2008) and (Omi & Winant, 2015) noted that racial

boundaries are the outcome of the classificatory struggles and negotiations between actors given the institutional order, distribution of power, and political networks at play.

In the U.S., ancestry is the key concept defining racial classification (Barth, 1969; Telles, 2004). For example, Skidmore (1993) shows that despite “mulatto” was part of the racial classification in the U.S. national census during 1850–1920, mixed blood offspring were forcedly classified as black American, forging a biracial classification system. However, this system of racial stratification has recently been challenged by an increase in the number of Hispanics in the U.S. (Farrell, 2008; Frank, Akresh, & Lu, 2010).

In contrast, in Brazil, the history of broad miscegenation has created more fluid racial boundaries. Millions of immigrants arrived in fairly equal proportions from various areas of the European and African continents and, in conjunction with native Brazilians, created a very complex racial mix (Fausto, 2009; Telles, 2004). Only after the 1990s was the word “race” included in the census in addition to the word “color”, which was the term previously in use since 1950. In the school system, data about race have been collected since 2005 (Rosemberg, 2006). As a result, people are classified mainly by their phenotype, with skin color as the most important criterion. For instance, people who appear to be of European descent are generally classified as white, while others are classified as “pardo” or as “preto”, when the color of the skin is darker. Nevertheless, the federal government recently switched from a mostly three category scheme to a biracial one where blacks are legally classified as “pardo” or “preto” (Bailey, 2008).

As Telles (1992) notes, Brazilian racial ideology tends to emphasize a continuum from white to black. Lesser (2000) adds that Brazilians have usually placed economically successful people in the “white” category, regardless of whether they have ancestral origins in Europe. Thus, people of Asian origin, who are considered to be “amarelo” in the census, are usually considered to be equal in status to “brancos”. This same process happens with people from the Middle East. On the other hand, indigenous people tend to be considered “pardo”. Interestingly, this white *vs.* black Brazilian biracial system approximates the American standard understanding of racial groups at a point in time when such an understanding is no longer considered adequate for describing racial categories in the U.S. (Bailey, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2004). In this paper, for simplification purposes, black will be used to refer to pretos and pardos together and white for brancos and amarelos.

Much has been written about school segregation in the U.S. Logan *et al.* (2008) found that there was a large decline in segregation within school districts; however, the same trend was not seen between districts. In fact, segregation was slightly higher among separate school districts, reflecting a trend in which white families with children were more likely to choose to live in areas with smaller minority populations. In this way, for Saporito and Sohoni (2006), school segregation is more pronounced than residential segregation due to the existence of private, magnet, and charter schools. Clotfelter (2004) also concludes that this type of school segregation is most prominent in the U.S. South. However, private schools accounted for only 16% of the student population in metropolitan areas throughout the entire U.S. With data from 217 metropolitan areas, Reardon, Yun, and Eitle (2000) estimate that, on average, in the period from 1989 to 1995, 80% of multiracial public school segregation was due to segregation between whites and other groups. Segregation between districts is also more pronounced than is segregation within districts (Clotfelter, 2004; Conger, 2005).

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