

Has there been any Social Mobility for Non-Whites in Brazil?¹

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Studies on social mobility often assume that as societies modernize, the socio-economic position of individuals will become attributable less to their *ascribed characteristics*, such as class, lineage, gender or race, and more to their own *individual achievements*, such as those based on ability, talent or effort. In other words, the characteristics of a child's family or other circumstances beyond his control will have increasingly less influence in determining his own eventual socio-economic status.

Such studies usually focus on individuals; they rarely examine *the mobility of groups*. It is possible that while individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as non-whites, could enjoy greater social mobility, the relative position of the group to which they belong could change little. This could happen, for example, if individuals exchange positions exclusively with other members of their own group. Thus, a poorer non-white could achieve upward mobility at the same time that a richer non-white suffered from downward mobility. Alternatively, a poorer non-white could exchange positions with a slightly richer white but both would still have below-average incomes.

We test this proposition for racial groups in Brazil. Slavery was abolished in Brazil only in 1888. Until then, race was a powerful determinant of one's social position. At the top of society were Portuguese settlers and their offspring. In the middle were other white Brazilians of European descent and free people of mixed ethnicity. In the lower echelons were natives and enslaved Africans.

Although all the legal grounds for such stratification have now been eliminated in Brazil, people of African descent and other non-whites remain over-represented among the poor. Race remains a very important determinant of stratification, especially if the relative status of groups, not merely individuals, is examined.

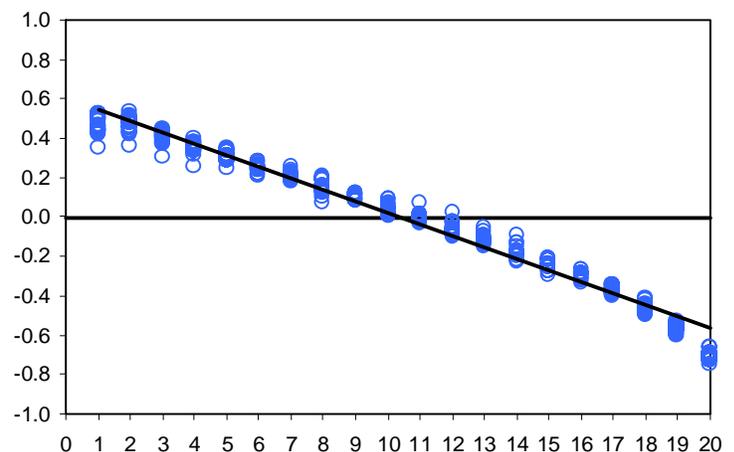
In order to examine this claim, we choose the distribution of household income per person as a marker of social stratification. First, we divide the total population into twenty equal shares – vintiles – ranked from the poorest five per cent (first vintile) to the richest five per cent (twentieth vintile). We use Brazilian National Household Surveys as our data source for the period 1976 to 2005. However, we can compare income and race for only 19 out of the total of 26 survey rounds carried out during this period.

For each of these rounds, we calculate twenty 'odds-ratios', namely, the odds that a non-white person (either Afro-Brazilian or of mixed ethnicity) could be found in a particular vintile (such as the poorest

5 per cent) versus the overall odds that a person could be non-white. These ratios are normalized to range between -1 and +1. If the ratio is close to -1, the likelihood of finding such a non-white person in that vintile is very small; conversely, if the ratio is close to +1, there is a high likelihood of finding him there.

The results of this exercise are shown in the chart. For each vintile, denoted on the horizontal axis, there are 19 observations (although they overlap on the graph). For non-whites, the probabilities of being in the poorer vintiles over the course of 30 years are consistently positive, and for the richer vintiles consistently negative.

In other words, non-whites, *as a group*, have experienced very little social mobility. A simple regression, depicted by the line drawn through the data points, explains a remarkably high 97 per cent of all variance over the 30 years. This implies, for example, that no matter where a poverty line is set, non-whites would remain concentrated among the poor.



Our conclusion is that the socio-economic position of non-whites has remained remarkably stable and predictable over a long period of time. If race had not indeed remained an important determinant of socio-economic position, one would expect non-whites to have become more upwardly mobile, even if only slowly, over the last 30 years. But the available evidence suggests that there has been practically no upward mobility for this group.

Reference:

1. Rafael Guerreiro Osorio, *Race and Social Mobility in Brazil*. Paper presented at the Workshop "Equity and Social Mobility", IPC - DRCLAS, Brasilia, Brazil, January 2007.