

Race in Brazil and the U.S.: A Comparison

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the concept of “racial democracy” as it is used in Brazil.
 - Apply the concepts of *unum* and *pluribus* to racial relationships in Brazil.
 - Apply the concepts of inclusivity and exclusivity to racial relations in Brazil.
 - Compare and contrast American and Brazilian views of race relations.
-

Materials

- Student Handout: **Race and Class in Brazil**
 - Student Handout: **An African-American in Brazil**
-

Activities

1. Write the terms *unum* and *pluribus* on the chalkboard.
 - a. Ask students if they are familiar with these terms and if they have ever heard them before. (Emphasize that the motto of the United States “E pluribus unum” means “Out of many, one.”)
 - b. Circle the term “unum” and emphasize that all societies contain forces of unum: they are the forces in society that people share; those ideas, experiences, and aspects of culture that make people feel as though they belong to the group.
 - c. Ask students to share the things that unite them together as a group: school spirit, etc.
 - d. Circle the term “pluribus” and explain that all societies also contain forces of pluribus: they are those forces that drive wedges between people in society, things that separate and divide them.
 - e. Ask students to share the things that separate them and make them different from one another: religion, ethnicity, neighborhoods, etc.
 2. Write the terms *inclusive* and *exclusive* on the chalkboard.
 - a. Circle the term “exclusive” and explain that in an exclusive society, power, economic opportunity, and social participation are restricted to a select few. Those people who do not possess the necessary qualifications and characteristics are left on the outside looking in.
 - b. Circle the term “inclusive” and explain that inclusive societies are based on tolerance and acceptance of diversity. In these societies, everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.
-

Continued on next page

**Activities
(continued)**

- c. Ask students to hypothesize whether exclusive societies have a high degree of pluribus or unum? Why? (Explain to them that, since forces of pluribus tend to divide, they will result in polarization and exclusivity if they are allowed to dominate.)
- d. Ask students to hypothesize whether inclusive societies have a high degree of pluribus or unum? Why? (Explain to them that, since forces of unum tend to unite, they tend to result in a more egalitarian system.)
3. Distribute the student handout entitled Race and Class in Brazil.
 - a. Direct students to read the first section of the handout: “A History of Race in Brazil.”
 - b. Ask students to determine based on the reading if Brazil appears to be a homogenous or a multi-ethnic society? In what sense does this early racial history mirror that of the United States? In what ways does it differ?
 - c. Direct students to read the second section of the handout: “Casa Grande e Senzala.”
 - d. Ask students to summarize Freyre’s arguments about why Brazil can be termed a “racial democracy.” Would this be a force of unum or pluribus? Would such a society be inclusive or exclusive? Why?
4. Direct students to read the section entitled “The American and Brazilian Concepts of Race.”
 - a. Ask students to explain the fundamental differences in the American and Brazilian concepts of race. Which appears to more based on a pluribus approach to race? Why?
 - b. Ask students to explain which of these approaches would appear to result in a more inclusive society? Why?
 - c. Direct students to read the final section: “Does racism exist in Brazil?”
 - d. Ask students to answer the question reflected in the title. Do blacks appear to have equal opportunity in Brazil? Why or why not?
 - e. Divide the class into discussion groups. Based on the information they have read, direct each group to determine whether the United States or Brazil appears to have a more inclusive society based on race and ethnicity. (Insist that students provide a rationale and cite evidence for their positions.)
 - f. When the groups have reached their conclusions, direct each group to share theirs with the class.

Continued on next page

**Activities
(continued)**

5. Distribute the student handout entitled **An African-American in Brazil**.
 - a. Direct students to read the first section of the handout: “A Personal Quest.”
 - b. Ask students to summarize the goal of this American traveler’s research in Brazil. What is her ethnic background? Why would she be curious about the reality of Freyre’s “racial democracy” theory?
 - c. Direct students to read the second section of the handout: “Porto Galihnos.”
 - d. Ask students to summarize the traveler’s experiences. Based on her interactions, what appear to be the Brazilian attitudes toward race? Do they confirm Freyre’s theory? Does Brazilian society appear to be inclusive or exclusive regarding race?
 - e. Direct students to read the next segment: “While Shopping.”
 - f. Ask students to hypothesize whether this experience confirms or refutes their previous observations? Why?
 6. Direct students to read the next two sections: “At the Museum” and “In the Schools.”
 - a. Ask students to explain, based on these encounters, whether or not Freyre’s racial democracy concept is true in reality? Why?
 - b. Ask students to explain the significance of the changes being discussed in the school curriculum? Would this result in a more inclusive or exclusive history of Brazil? Why?
 - c. Direct students to read the next three sections: “On Zumbi,” “An Interesting Dinner” and “Views on Racism.”
 - d. Ask students to explain what these experiences reveal about the reality of race in Brazil.
 7. Concluding Activity
 - a. Assign students to compose an essay in which they give their analysis of the African-American traveler’s experiences in Brazil.
 - b. Ask students to explain whether or not the writer perceives racial prejudice in Brazil.
 - c. Explain that students must provide at least three examples to prove their hypothesis.
-

Race and Class in Brazil

A History of Race in Brazil

The conventional way of viewing the question of race and ethnicity in Brazil is to see the country as some sort of fusion of three ethnic groups – white, black, and American Indian. That is in a general sense the case, but the notion is complicated by the great variety of ethnicities that exist in each of these three groups.

The conquest of Brazil was undertaken by adventurers and *degredados* (persons who had been expelled to the colonies from Portugal for a crime). Unlike the Spanish, who found high civilizations of great population, the Portuguese encountered fairly sparse populations of Amerindians. Unlike the English, the Portuguese did not colonize in family groups, so a Portuguese-Indian hybrid was characteristic of the early colonial population.

The Portuguese also brought large numbers of African slaves to the Americas. Of the roughly six million Africans who survived the Atlantic crossing, almost two-thirds went to Brazil. With the arrival of African slaves, all three groups blended, and by the end of the colonial period it would have been difficult to identify many in Brazil as purely European.

The rapid decline in Amerindian population, due primarily to disease, and the continued importation of African slaves made the population largely black and mulatto for almost two centuries – in 1818 the population of Brazil was 60% black.

In the early nineteenth century, waves of European immigrants began arriving in Brazil. As a result, the population of Brazil became markedly “whiter” than it was in the colonial period. Immigrants came in largest numbers from Portugal, Germany, and Italy. Others included Swiss, Spanish, Czech, Russian, Ukrainian and Polish immigrants. Some immigrants arrived from outside the Europe, including Syria, Lebanon, and Japan. Most of these immigrants went to São Paulo, with lesser numbers going to Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul. (The largest Japanese population outside of Japan is located in São Paulo.)

Casa Grande e Senzala

Gilberto Freyre (1900 – 1987) was a Brazilian author, professor, and congressman. In 1933, he published the landmark *Casa Grande e Senzala* (*The Great House and the Slave Quarters*), an anthropological and psychological study of Brazilian society. In this work, Freyre argued that the country's racial mixture of Indians, Africans, and Europeans could be seen in a positive light and put forth the idea that Brazil was an example to the world of racial harmony. This has led to a widespread belief of Brazil as a “racial democracy” in which various ethnic groups have commingled to such an extraordinary degree that race is not an issue.

Continued on next page

The American and Brazilian Concepts of Race

Although there is considerable historical similarity between Brazil and the United States with regard to race – relatively low indigenous population, importation of African slaves, large-scale European immigration – there is a marked contrast between them today. One revealing contrast is in the terminology used to designate racial mixture between black and white. Throughout much of U.S. history, terms such as mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, and high yellow were used to indicate the degree of African-American ancestry. Today, the United States has adopted a generally binary system in which individuals are thought of as either black or white.

In Brazil, however, a gamut of literally hundreds of terms ranging from *branco fino* (“fine white”) to *negro retinto* (“very dark black”) is used. Intermediate terms include *branco da Bahia* or *branco da terra*, *moreno*, *sarará*, *mulato claro*, *pardo*, *mulato escuro*, *cabo verde*, *cabra*, and *preto* or *crioulo*, roughly on a white to black continuum.

Does racism exist in Brazil?

Brazil has never had separate facilities for different races, and there has never been a race riot in Brazil. A law passed in 1951 and a clause of the 1988 Constitution specifically prohibit racial discrimination. However, blacks are few and far between in the higher ranks of the military, the diplomatic corps, and major corporations. They are by far the majority in such occupations as laundress, porter, and dock worker. Whites outnumber nonwhites in the professions by a ratio of three to one, while half the population working in agriculture and domestic service is nonwhite.

Brazilians are somewhat bewildered by the American view of race. For example, someone like Andrew Young does not look black enough to be called black in Brazil. In addition, because he has held high elective office and wears a suit, this would disqualify him from being considered “black” in Brazil. The adage in Brazil is that “money whitens.”

Source

Adapted from *Culture and Customs of Brazil* by Jon S. Vincent. Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 2003, pp. 17 - 23

An African-American in Brazil

A Personal Quest

Before leaving for Brazil, I was exposed to Gilberto Freyre's concept of racial democracy as expressed in *Casa Grande e Senzala*. Was there really racial democracy in Brazil? As an African-American woman, I wondered how much of it I would find to be true for myself or at all.

Porto Galihnos

In the past, Porto Galihnos was where they brought African slaves into the region. Today, it is a crowded, popular beach full of tourists and vendors. While at Porto Galihnos I spoke to a male traveling companion in our group about race relations in Brazil. His theory at this point was that every place should be like Brazil. He felt really that people really got along well. My reply was that it seemed so on the surface, but I still questioned what I was seeing. His viewpoint was from that of a white American male and mine was from that of a black American female.

We talked about the differences in reactions to blacks and whites being seen together in the United States and in Brazil. Shock was not a reaction you saw in Brazil. There were no apparent stares or reactions to blacks and whites being together. Times have brought about change in the United States, but not to the degree of acceptability which seems to be the case in Brazil.

Suddenly, in the midst of our conversation two men strolling the beach for a paying audience came up to us and started making up a song. They sang to us about being a couple. Neither of them questioned that he could be anything other than my husband. Both of them were older men. One had slightly tanned skin and the other was a golden brown. My friend gave them a tip and mentioned to me that they gave no thought about our color.

I was also interested in examining the color of the beach vendors. My traveling companion thought the coloring of the vendors was varied. My other traveling companion, a female, did not. She had walked all around the beach and felt most vendors were black or at least what we considered black. Her response brought up another interesting question. What is black? To her as a white American female, how is "black" determined? To a Brazilian what does "black" mean?

While Shopping

When a female companion and I were out shopping, she came up to me and immediately let me know that a child thought we were related. This boy wanted to be our guide. He was about eleven. He thought my friend was my mother, although I am a definite brown and she is a definite white. It did surprise me. Biracial families do exist in the United States, but Brazilian families seem to be of many different shades.

Continued on next page

At the Museum

When we visited a museum, I was interested in the statue of a black man that appeared in the entrance way. I asked the tour guide about it. He said it was a slave dressed up by his Portuguese master and taught all the manners to welcome well-to-do foreign guests. It was this master's objective to show that black slaves could do what any man could mentally, but the foreign guests were insulted to be met and welcomed by a black slave.

In the Schools

Throughout our stay we visited a variety of schools. It was surprising to me to see so many of the people that were in charge of education were what I considered to be black. I asked each one about racism. They expressed that there was an inequality in education that was being addressed by laws.

One solution to address racism was the curriculum in the schools. White Europeans would not be the only ones given credit for contributing to the history of Brazil. Native Americans, blacks and Europeans would all be given credit for the development of Brazil. Well, this problem sounded very familiar. It was not just European descendants that helped to make the United States. African-Americans, Native Americans and other ethnic groups contributed as well.

The schools informed me that there was a black history month. I was happy to hear that. They celebrate in November. My traveling group and I shared that we celebrate in February and we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday in January.

However, when I asked students to tell me what they knew about Zumbi, there were only two schools where students knew who he was. (He was a heroic black leader who led a *quilombo* – a refuge for runaway slaves – in the 17th century.) Both of these schools were model schools which had been recently reformed. When asked people in the general population, many did not know him. One taxi driver I befriended told me that they celebrate a day for him in May. There are *festas* (parties).

On Zumbi

Zumbi was a heroic black leader who led a *quilombo* – a refuge for runaway slaves – in the 17th century. When I asked students to tell me what they knew about Zumbi, there were only two schools where students knew who he was. Both of these schools were model schools which had been recently reformed. When I asked people in the general population, many did not know him. One taxi driver I befriended told me that they celebrate a day for him in May. There are *festas* (parties).

Continued on next page

**An Interesting
Dinner**

One educator invited me to a dinner because of my research on race in Brazil. She belonged to a group of women mostly of African descent. The purpose of the group was to discuss issues that plagued people of African descent, but also issues affecting women. I was honored and excited to be invited.

It was an elegant night in a fine restaurant seldom attended by blacks. (I was told most, historically, didn't have the money to attend.) Here sat well-educated and well-known women. Most of these women had dominant features of African ancestry. There were those that wore their hair in braids and a few that I am sure could have traced their roots back to an African tribe. When it was time to pray, I did not realize it was going to be an African god to whom I was praying. When it was time to sing, I wanted to sing. It was not Portuguese. It was an African language; I was that is Yoruba. As they sang, the crowd broke out into a dance. It was an African dance. My African connections to my past were not so close back in the United States.

**Views on
Racism**

As I took classes in Brazil, I questioned my professors about laws and racism in Brazil. Their response was that there were laws on racism. They also said there would be no laws if racism did not exist.

One of our helpful Brazilian guides of white ancestry worked with groups studying racial problems. She explained to me what "*boa aparencia*" was. It means the "good appearance," which is code for looking white. I had seen billboards (advertisements) with this expression, but I had not previously realized the significance.
