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The overlapping concepts of race and colour in Latin America

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I thank *Ethnic and Racial Studies* for the opportunity to participate in this symposium and I am honoured to be in conversation with Michael Banton, an esteemed contributor to the *Sociology of Race (and Colour)*, with whom I respectfully differ.

Banton argues that ‘U.S. scholars followed the ordinary language trend of using *race* instead of *color*’, as W. E. B. DuBois originally had, and that my use of the term ‘race’ erringly uses the experience of North American ‘black–white relations as a paradigm case to offer a conceptual framework for the analysis of relations in Brazil.’ Banton objects to my use of race and colour as rough equivalents. For him, colour refers to a ‘first order abstraction’, which describes physical differences that are used in society as markers of social distinction, while race is a ‘second order abstraction’ that is neither visible nor measurable and that varies from place to place, ‘making it more difficult to identify what has to be explained’ (p. 4). Banton (p. 6) seems to find it odd that my book, *Race in Another America*, should bear the subtitle ‘The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil’. But the title of my book simply reflects one of its central findings: that, in Brazil, conceptions of ‘race’ and conceptions of ‘color’ overlap.

Banton is right to separate folk and analytical concepts, but I think he goes about it in the wrong way.¹ Race is clearly a folk concept, and it lacks analytical validity, but his race/colour distinction begs more questions than it resolves. Race and colour are both folk concepts but race and many references to colour are based on the social process of racialization, which classifies people according to race, privileging some while excluding others. Racial and colour inequality and discrimination in Brazil and the USA are rooted in a common western racial ideology, although one that has been interpreted in different ways in both countries. Whereas colour might be seen as merely descriptive, it also elicits a racial ideology where Brazilians are keenly aware of human colour variation, which they often place on a naturalized hierarchy of worth.

I agree with Banton that race varies widely across societies (as well as by vantage point within societies), but I disagree that one cannot compare Brazil and the USA on that basis or on the basis of colour. In my book, I seek to understand how race or colour is and has become an important cleavage in both US and Brazilian society but in distinct ways. Both societies have a history of European colonization and conquest of the indigenous populations, centuries of slavery based on the importation of large numbers of Africans and subsequent European mass immigration, all of which fundamentally shaped them. The issue of racial classification in Brazil is a complex one, and for this reason I devote an entire chapter to the topic, which is apparently central to Banton's critique of my work. In it, I address many of the issues that Banton raises, including the fluidity, multidimensionality and varied uses of colour and race, largely through the prism of comparisons with the USA.

Banton seems to argue for sociologists to explain social relations across societies based on variations on a fixed biological characteristic like colour or, better yet, genetics. Race, he argues, varies too much across societies for comparative sociological analysis. However, race is a central construct in both Brazil and the USA where it refers to categories of humans differentiated by a set of physical characteristics, including colour. According to Banton, the USA changed its terminology to one of race from one of colour over the course of the twentieth century (although this too is disputable, since race was used alongside the term colour for decades), but both countries use a classification system based on race or colour, though in different ways. Having said that, I would not extend this argument to other countries since not all systems of racial classification are based upon colour (Washington 2008). In addition, racial discourse or the existence of racial categories cannot be reduced to the mere appearance of the word 'race', to take the example of modern China and Japan (Dikötter 1997).

On page 6, Banton reports that I write that "'black" and "white" are racial categories', but then he claims 'whereas, obviously they are color categories'. The fact is that 'black' (*preto* or *negro* in Portuguese) and 'white' (*branco*) are also known as racial terms in Brazil, as in the USA. This is clear from the wording of the race/colour item in the past three Brazilian censuses (1991, 2000, 2010) that asks respondents 'what is your colour or race?' (*a sua cor ou raça:?*). The previous censuses had simply asked about colour, but not race. The response categories have been roughly the same since Brazil's first census in 1872: white (*branco*), brown or mixed race (*pardo*), black (*preto*, which like *negro* also translates as black). Asian (*amarelo*, which is literally

yellow) was added in 1940 and, indigenous (*indígena*) was added in 1980.

The black movement has long used the dichotomous *negro/branco* distinction² and in recent years, the Brazilian government, public universities (especially for affirmative action) and Brazilian academics have also often used that system of categorization, which they often refer to as race (*raça*) (Telles 2004). They often combine *pardos* and *pretos*, as used in the census, into the category *negro*, which is sometimes denoted as racial. The dichotomous system is also used by ordinary people when discussing discrimination although they may simultaneously use a system with multiple colour categories (Sheriff 2001). To the extent that it matters, in recent years I have heard Brazilians say that *pardo* and *preto* refer to colour while *negro* is a race, which probably reflects the pre-1990 census question while the latter probably picks up the newer system of racial/colour classification.

Banton also reports on page 6, that when I describe a genetic study that examines the continental gene origin of persons that self-identify as white, that there 'he uses [I use] analytical constructs. When he uses race he does not.' On page 10, I was surprised to understand that Banton sees the idea of race as lacking validity because it fails to correspond with 'biological realities'. He earlier claims that definitions of white in the US are biologically misleading in that many whites have black ancestors (p. 2) or that 'advances in genetics have demonstrated that any racial classification is subject to unacceptable margins of error' (p. 4).

Banton thus seems to reduce race to biology/genetics, the latter of which he deems as analytical. In both Brazil and the USA, skin colour, physical appearance, hair type and ancestry have been used in both societies to signify race, but I would argue that genetics is another matter. Genetics may give us a more precise grounding of human variation, but how humans socially classify or identify by race has little to do with genetics so I do not understand how it could be a useful analytical construct. Genetics might one day come to belie the notion of race by revealing that race has no basis in biology, although there is also a danger that genetics may come to be used in medicine to reinforce racial distinctions (Duster 2007). We should look to sociology and psychology, not biology or genetics, for an analytic understanding of how race (and colour) come to be important distinctions among Brazilians, North Americans and others.

Banton also seems to ignore that transnational ideas of white supremacy or racial hierarchy are behind perceptions of colour in Brazil, an idea that is central to my book. Colour differences are not mere descriptions as a literal reading of documents might have it, but rather they are imbued with ideas of racial hierarchy. Indeed, even

though Du Bois used colour rather than race, this does not deny the fact that he was writing in an era of scientific racism, where whites were clearly considered superior. In Brazil, descriptions of colour were packed with connotations of power and relative merit and worth. We could exchange the words race and colour and we could come to the same conclusions. Ideas of white supremacy were commonly accepted throughout the western world at least since the colonization of the Americas. Brazil was worried about the spectre of remaining a non-white country in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and these same ideas also helped shape North American politics, although in ways that were different to the Brazilian experience.

Finally, on page 7, Banton suggests that I should explain how black movement activists have mobilized to overcome the Brazilian colour hierarchy through a theory of collective action 'without trying to make either colour or race into analytical categories.' He might be surprised to learn that *negros* organized as such, at least since the 1920s and 1930s, often referring to themselves in racial terms. Black organizations included a black political party (*Frente Negra Brasileira*), black newspapers (e.g. *Clarim da Alvorada* and *A Voz da Raça*), black social and recreational clubs (*Clube Negra da Cultura Social*) and more explicitly black movement organizations (e.g. *Centro Civico Palmares* and *Teatro Experimental do Negro*) (Butler 1991; Hanchard 1994). *Negros* were excluded by white Brazilian society and thus they formed associations in response, often with political aims. Blacks or *negros* were classified and defined themselves categorically as such, even though colour was more often used in polite conversation where they would be called *gente de cor* (people of colour).

The issues raised about colour and race are also important in the rest of Latin America, except the evidence is weaker in the Spanish-speaking countries than in Brazil. To address these and related issues, I have launched the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA), based on national surveys of Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Peru, with collaborators in each of those countries. One of our objectives is to assess the extent to which racial identities as opposed to actual skin colour, as perceived by the interviewers using a colour palette, are able to predict racial inequalities. Most Latin American censuses have begun to inquire as to whether residents identify in a black or Afro-descendancy category, while Brazil has been the only country that has long had such a question. We were concerned that such racial identity measures also pick up, besides colour and phenotype, social effects that might influence one's identity, including class, gender, age, region and social desirability. As a result, they might not adequately capture racial discrimination, which depends on the evaluation of race by others (Jenkins 1998). In contrast, actual skin

colour would reduce whitening and darkening effects, which Banton would also seem to prescribe. Our preliminary results confirmed our concerns in some countries. They revealed that if analysts were to rely on census-type indicators of racial identity, they might conclude that in some Spanish-speaking countries, Afro-descendants may suffer little or no socio-economic disadvantage. However, when using our colour indicator, darker skin colour consistently predicted racial disadvantage in almost all countries (Telles and Steele 2012).

The point here is that colour and racial identity are different ways to capture the multiple manifestations of the larger concept of race. Our measure of skin colour more directly captures physical variation and thus might be considered more objective and capture race as seen by others, which is important for discrimination. Skin colour or race as seen by others is probably more important than identity when examining racial inequality and discrimination. On the other hand, racial identity should probably be considered when examining one's propensity to join or sympathize with the black movement, although the causal direction might also act in reverse. Perhaps the causality might then be better understood with a measure of actual skin colour or phenotype, but at some point racial identity itself is important.

We use colour in one sense (actual skin colour), although colour, like race, has been used in others ways as well, including categorizations of colour that are affected by an individual's real or perceived social position. As Banton notes, race has been used in inconsistent ways, but then so has colour. More importantly, an ideology of race that put whites at the top and black and indigenous people at the bottom has been consistent, at least across these societies, despite the simultaneous presence of national narratives stressing race mixture (*mestizaje*). As a result of racial ideas, racial discrimination and inequality, which could be called colour discrimination and inequality, persist across the Americas.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. The question of how best to separate folk and analytical concepts, when it comes to 'race', has been explored by Washington (2008, 2011).
2. By dichotomous I am referring to those along the white–black continuum and not to the small Asian or indigenous populations in Brazil.

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