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Who Are the Morenas?*

EDWARD E. TELLES, *University of California Los Angeles*

That Brazilians hold a different conception of race from Americans has become quite clear to analysts both in Brazil and in the U.S. However, Brazilians do understand the nuances of how race is defined in their own country much better than they understand U.S. conceptions of race, just as would be expected of Americans in understanding U.S. versus Brazilian conceptions of race. Nonetheless, Harris et al. (1993) claim that their findings "expose the error of imposing upon the rest of the hemisphere rigid dichotomous (white/nonwhite) or trichotomous (white/mixed/black) categories deemed appropriate for establishing racial identity in the U.S." (451). They recommend that color self-identification in the Brazilian Census allow respondents to use the more popular *morena/o* term rather than (or in addition to) *parda/o*, which is the term used by the Brazilian Census. However, I am concerned that because the term *morena/o* is an ambiguous referent to race, its use greatly mystifies racial distinctions in Brazil. Also, generalizing results from one small town to a socially and economically diverse and mostly urban country seems risky at best.

The authors imply that officials and analysts of the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), the federal agency responsible for carrying out the Census of Brazil, do not understand Brazilian conceptions of race or color and therefore parody U.S. racial categories. The IBGE continues to use the categories of white (*branca*), *parda/o* and black (*preto*) because they believe that these categories best capture a salient hierarchy of racial distinctions across a large heterogeneous country where the scores of racial labels, like *morena/o*, are often ambiguous and may vary regionally. The use of the popular term *morena/o* would likely include persons at nearly all points in the color continuum with the exception of white persons with light hair color (*loira/o*). While Harris and associates collected extensive data on both objective and subjective indicators of race, I am struck by the fact that the authors do not examine the extent to which racial self-identification is linked to actual phenotype. Why haven't the authors told us who are the whites (under alternative categorizations)? Who are the morenas? What do they look like?

The first author's own evidence, like that of many others, suggests that *morena/o* is an ambiguous racial category. Harris (1970) observed that Brazilians seem to define almost any combination of facial features by the term *morena/o* "with a high but unpatterned frequency" (12). Earlier, Harris (1956) defined

* Address correspondence to Edward E. Telles, Department of Sociology, 264 Haines Hall, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1551.

morena/o as a person who "has wavy hair with the skin color of a heavily sunburnt white." The *Dictionary of Latin American Racial and Ethnic Terminology* (Stephens 1989) documents several studies which define *morena/o* in many ways, ranging from "white person with brunet hair" to "black person," often depending on locality. *Parda/o*, on the other hand, clearly refers to a mixed-race individual throughout Brazil, as indicated in 33 of 35 studies (Stephens 1989) but which the authors dismiss because it is not a preferred term of color self-designation. Thus it is no surprise that in Harris and associates' study, almost half of the population identifying as white in the white/*parda*/black categorization would be *morena/o* when forced to choose from the white/*morena*/black categorization and fully half of those identifying as black in the *parda/o* scheme would be reidentified as *morena/o*. Conversely, *morenas/os* almost evenly divide into the white, *parda/o*, and black categories under the alternative categorization.

This reflects the common conception in Brazil that many whites may also be *morena/os* in Brazil. Indeed, among the almost entirely white Brazilian elite, there are many persons who are widely considered and may consider themselves *morena/o*. This includes persons of Portuguese, Lebanese and even some Indian (native Brazilian) ancestry as well as persons of predominantly European descent but with small amounts of noticeable African blood. Under the Brazilian conception of race these persons are socially defined as white, where being *morena/o* white rather than non*morena/o* white makes virtually no difference to one's status in Brazil. That these persons may not be white in the U.S. is irrelevant.

It is quite unlikely that racial identification in Rio de Contas can be generalized to Brazil, not to mention Latin America. Rio de Contas is a town of 505 persons, according to Harris and associates' census, and is located in Brazil's poor Northeast region. By contrast, Brazil today is a highly diverse country with a population of 150 million scattered across an area the size of the continental U.S. About 60% of its population lives in urban areas of 20,000 or more and rural/urban and regional differences are among the greatest in the world.

Specific comparisons between Rio de Contas and Brazil nationally are difficult given the limited data on the former. Nonetheless, one bit of evidence is available from Harris and associates' study and suggests significant differences from national data: only 37% of those identifying as *morena/o* reidentified as *parda/o* in the Rio de Contas census, compared to a national survey showing that fully 63% of the *morena/o* respondents reidentify as *parda/o* (Silva 1988). Although I do not know Rio de Contas, I suspect that such a town would more strongly adhere to the traditional Brazilian racial ideologies. In particular, lighter individuals, who tend to be middle class, may strongly believe that Brazil is a racial democracy, where race makes little or no difference to life chances, while darker individuals, who tend to be poor, may strongly believe in whitening, that upward mobility for their children is best assured by marrying a lighter partner and thus producing lighter children.

Clearly, any Brazilian racial categorization scheme will not precisely capture racial distinctions and therefore will not permit a precise measurement of racial inequality or racism as it would in the U.S., where racial criteria are more

clearly and rigidly defined. Racial distinctions in Brazil are often ambiguous and may depend on the individual observer. However, the use of *morena/o* as a category takes the imprecision of Brazilian racial categories to an extreme. While Harris and associates' concern that racial/color labeling should permit open-choice self-identification in the interest of civil rights may be a noble one, it seems that the civil rights of racially subordinate Brazilians are better served by a categorization scheme which forces respondents to choose among far less ambiguous racial categories that can at least approximate the extent of racial inequalities and the effects of racist practices. Indeed, the availability of such statistics has been important to weakening the image among Brazilians (at least white Brazilians) that they live in a racial democracy.

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