

Does the Color of Class Vary? A Comparative-Historical Study of the United States, Brazil and the Spanish Caribbean

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Abstract: This article advances a theory linking present-day racial inequality in the Americas to historical variations in class relations under slavery. Existing theories illuminate important mechanisms of racial formation but fail to account for differences in how race maps onto material inequality. In the former slave societies of the Americas, the racialization of class depends on the degree of planter autonomy during colonial rule. In regions where planters exercised substantial power—Brazil and British North America—racial boundaries became tightly coupled with economic exclusion. Where the state constrained planter elites—as in the Spanish Caribbean—avenues for freedom, property, and skilled labor produced lower levels of racial inequality in the long term. Thus, race does not map onto class inequality in the same way everywhere, and the link between the two is shaped in large part by how elites relate to one another and to those they exploit.

Does the color of class vary? Is it possible for some societies to have *more* racial inequality than others? If so, what might explain such variation? Most scholars agree that race and class inequality are inextricably intertwined, but there is surprisingly little scholarship theorizing how this relationship varies across space and time. The main bodies of macro-historical comparative theories on race tend to either bypass the question of explaining material inequality, or eschew the possibility of accounting for variation. This article seeks to account for both material inequality and geographic and temporal variation, which has not been systematically theorized comparatively. Drawing on the insights of older historical debates, I hypothesize that variations in contemporary racial inequality in societies with histories of slavery in the Americas can be explained with reference to class relations under colonial slavery. In areas where slaveholding elites held a higher degree of autonomy, political power and cohesive organization during slavery, racial categories correspond to higher levels of material inequality today.

A comparative historical analysis of the United States, Brazil, and the Spanish Caribbean confirms this hypothesis. Contemporary statistics suggest that racial categories correspond to

lower levels of economic inequality in the latter societies (Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico) than in the former two. I find that, indeed, planter elites had significantly higher levels of political power and autonomy in colonial North America and Brazil than they did in the Spanish colonies of the Caribbean. Higher levels of slaveholder power in Brazil and the United States translated into fewer opportunities through which the enslaved could obtain freedom and accumulate property and skills thereafter. Conversely, in the Spanish Caribbean, the Spanish Crown's curtailment of the class power of planters was correlated with greater opportunities for enslaved people to attain freedom and accumulate skills and property.

Sociological Approaches to the Study of Race and Racial Inequality

In recent years there has been an efflorescence of empirical research examining how racial inequality varies across space within the United States, attributing these differences to the uneven persistence of exploitative historical institutions. Scholars have linked regional variations in racial poverty gaps to historical concentrations of slavery (O'Connell 2012; O'Connell et al. 2024) and sharecropping (Baker 2022). Varying racial disparities in incarceration, meanwhile, have been linked to differing property regimes in the US South (Muller 2018), while the varying legacies of slavery have even been linked to uneven patterns of contemporary heart health (Kramer et al. 2017), and patterns of post-emancipation plantation labor to spatial differences in contemporary mortality rates (Smith et al. 2024).

Yet such variations in the extent to which racial categories correspond to class inequalities—that is, variations *in the racialization of material inequality*—have not been adequately theorized on a broader regional or global scale. Comparative sociological theories of race fall mainly into two groups, one focusing on the role of the state and the other on that of the

world system in creating and maintaining racial groups. Both are incomplete when applied to the study of comparative racial inequality; state-centered or Weberian approaches tend to ignore material inequality as an outcome of interest, and world systems approaches tend to eschew the possibility of variation. A third group of theories sees race as an ideology linked to class relations surrounding different systems of production. While emphasizing both change/variation and material inequality, this approach lacks the systematicity of the other two, inviting further development into a broader comparative theory.

Weberian Approaches

One school of thought in the comparative study of race has followed Weber's (1978, p. 389) argument that "it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity."¹ This school takes as its central object of study the question of how the state creates, defines and transforms racial or ethnic categories (Wimmer 1997, p. 653, 2008, p. 1008; Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 15; Wacquant 2022, p. 88). The resulting social process of interest is that of "group-making" (Wacquant 1997, p. 225; Loveman 1999, p. 891); the main variations of interest are those relating to how groups are constructed and how membership in them is operationalized and politicized, particularly by the state.² With respect to Latin America and the United States, for example, scholars have examined comparatively the relationship between racial ideology and nation-state building (Marx 1998; Wade 2012; Loveman 2014), the operationalization of racial categories on censuses (Loveman and Muniz 2007;

¹ For statements of Weberian inspiration among the authors cited here, see Loveman (1999, p. 891); Brubaker and Cooper (2000, pp. 20, 39); Brubaker (2002, pp. 169, 177, 186); Wimmer (2008, pp. 980, 985); Wacquant (2022, p. 75, 2024, pp. 8–12)

² Scholars taking a Weberian approach to the study of race also often invoke Bourdieu and his concept of "symbolic power" in their examination of the relationship between racial group-making and the state: see Loveman (1999, p. 892); Brubaker and Cooper (2000, pp. 4, 15, 17, 39); Brubaker (2002, pp. 166, 170–71); Wimmer (2008, pp. 985, 993, 997, 1002); Wacquant (2024, pp. 12–16).

Loveman et al. 2012; Paschel 2013; Villarreal and Bailey 2020; Sue et al. 2024), and the deployment of racial identities in social movements (Yashar 2005; Paschel 2018).

A strength of the Weberian approach is its critique of the reification of race as a concept of social analysis, which implies an openness to the study of variation: indeed, rejection of reification and embrace of variation are common articles of faith for advocates of this approach (Brubaker 2002, pp. 174–75; Wimmer 2008, p. 975). The limitation of Weberian theories of race, however, is their scope of analysis. In addition to an ideology that dictates group membership and which is created and changed by states, race is also, at least in a Pan-American context, an ideology created and deployed to rationalize and reproduce *class relations rooted in material exploitation* (Bonacich 1980, pp. 13–14). Yet variations in the extent to which race performs this task—or, put more simply, variations in the extent to which racial categories correspond to material inequalities—is not a primary outcome of interest in the Weberian approach.

This second point helps explain why in many statistical analyses that align with this approach, class status is treated as a *predictor* of whether people might identify (or be identified) with one or another racial category in government surveys (Loveman et al. 2012; Telles and Paschel 2014; Villarreal and Bailey 2020; Sue et al. 2024). The latter focus is an important contribution highlighting the “endogeneity of race” (Villarreal and Bailey 2020): although race and socioeconomic status are often treated as independent of each other, socioeconomic status may in fact impact racial self-identification. Yet in addition to treating class as a predictor of how otherwise similar people might identify themselves with different identity groups, the link between class relations and racial categories/ideology must *itself* also be treated as an outcome which can vary across space and time.

World-Systems Approaches

A second general approach to the comparative study of race treats the world system, rather than the state, as the driving force behind the formation of racial categories (Bonilla-Silva 1999, pp. 899–902; Quijano 2000, pp. 216–18; Grosfoguel 2006; Omi and Winant 2015, p. 111; Christian 2019, pp. 170–75). This includes much of the recent literature on “racial capitalism,” which uses the language of world systems explicitly or cites it as precedent.³ In contrast to the Weberian approach, world systems accounts consistently situate the formation of racial categories within material relations of exploitation such as slavery, colonization, and capitalist development (Bonilla-Silva 1997, p. 471; Quijano 2000, p. 216; Omi and Winant 2015, p. 111; Fraser 2016, p. 166; Robinson 2020, pp. 9–28).

The main shortcoming of the world systems approach, however, is that it eschews variation. Indeed, common among world systems theorists of race are statements claiming the stability of racial inequality across space and time.⁴ This empirical commitment to stability is a defining aspect of world systems theories in general, not just those applied to the study of race, and is reflected in Wallerstein’s (1974, p. 407) claim that the capitalist world economy, from its sixteenth-century beginnings, has been “an established system that became almost impossible to unbalance.”

³ In the racial capitalism tradition, for example, Melamed (2015, p. 79) speaks of “world-systems of profit and governance”; Fraser (2016, p. 171) states that “the capitalist ‘world system’ has incubated an alternative, imperialist geography”; and Matlon (2024, p. 1159) suggests that racial capitalism theory “neither refutes nor replaces postcolonial theory, critical race theory, settler colonial studies, world systems theory, dependency theory, [or] a Du Boisian sociology of racialized modernity.”

⁴ For example, Robinson (2020, p. 28) suggests that “as an enduring principle of European social order, the effects of racialism were bound to appear in the social expression of every strata of every European society no matter the structures upon which they were formed”; Omi and Winant (2015, p. 112) reject the “utopian framework that sees race as an illusion we can somehow ‘get beyond’”; Quijano (2000, p. 218) claims that “‘race’ and ‘racist’ social relations in the everyday life of the world population have been the most visible expressions of the coloniality of power during the last 500 years”; Grosfoguel (2002, p. 212) argues that “racism is a pervasive phenomenon that is constitutive not only of social relations in the United States, but of the imaginary of the capitalist world-system as a whole since the 1500’s”; and Christian (2019, p. 179) emphasizes “the persistence of white domination globally, and in all national racial social systems, even those that are ostensibly without white bodies and white institutions.”

The main unit of analysis in world systems theory, including in its application to the study of race, is, if not the entire world-system itself (Boatcă 2017, p. 467; Matlon 2024, pp. 1159–61), large geographical subunits: the “core” and “periphery” or “North” and “South” (Grosfoguel 2006, p. 169; Fraser 2016, p. 171), or the macro-historical region with a particular insertion into the global economy and a corresponding system of “labor control” (Wallerstein 1976, p. 1210). Yet this makes it difficult to analyze differences in race and racial inequality at levels smaller than the world-historical region.

A more recent example of the difficulties with the regional unit of analysis implied in a world-systems approach are arguments regarding the “Latin Americanization” of race in the United States, which posit a “Latin American” pattern of racial inequality in which “Whites will still be at the top of the social structure but will face fewer race-based challenges and racial inequality will remain and may even widen as is the case throughout Latin America and the Caribbean” (Bonilla-Silva 2002, p. 13, see also 2004; Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2009; Almaguer 2012; Biagas and Bianchi 2016). Such an assumption essentially implies that virtually all Latin American societies are characterized by a uniform pattern of racialized inequality in which racial categories are malleable and hidden but the inequalities to which they correspond are very high. Yet recent empirical research has suggested that Latin American nations are in fact far from homogenous in the degrees to which racial categories correspond to material inequalities (Telles 2014; Ayala-McCormick 2021; Parker and Perez-Brunner 2024).

A Third Approach? Class Relations and Comparative Political Economy

A third approach to the study of race, which we will call here a *class-relations* approach, suffers from neither of the shortcomings of the other two: essential to it are both an accounting of variation

and an emphasis on the importance of exploitation and material inequality. Common to this approach is an understanding of race as an ideology that seeks to reify class exploitation by essentializing the exploited. Thus, according to this approach, differences and changes in racial inequality are best understood in terms of the dynamics of class relations embedded in particular systems of production and exploitation—and in the ideological constructions that sustain them.

As Barbara Fields puts it with respect to the United States, race is an ideology that “came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons and is subject to change for similar reasons” (Fields 1990, p. 101). Citing the earlier work of Edmund Morgan (1975, chap. 16), David Brion Davis (1975, pp. 299–306) and C. Vann Woodward (1955, chaps. 2 and 3), Fields emphasizes the roles of the initial establishment of slavery in colonial North America, the American Revolution, and Reconstruction as exactly such kinds of critical junctures (Fields 1990, 2001). In her emphasis on the pivotal role of class relations in certain periods of conjunctural change, Fields echoes the approach of DuBois (1998 [1935]) in his classic analysis of Reconstruction in the United States, which interpreted the rise of segregation in the post–Civil War South as the outcome of struggles over labor and political authority among freedpeople, white workers, and northern and southern elites within a transformed political economy.

In a similar vein, David Montejano (1981, 1987) used a class-relations framework to account for county-level variation in inequality between Anglos and Mexicans in South Texas—across domains such as voting rights, landholding, and literacy—by analyzing political conflicts sparked by the uneven advance of Anglo-controlled commercial agriculture into areas long shaped by Mexican ranching. Sociologist Harold Wolpe (1972) argued that the move from informal Segregation to rigid Apartheid in South Africa arose from rapid industrialization and the

breakdown of African subsistence economies, combined with the demands of white workers and capitalists in a society built on the exploitation of semi-proletarian African labor. Bruce Schulman (1991, pp. 208–19) suggests that federal government-sponsored economic development and the mechanization of agriculture in the US South resulted in exactly the opposite effect during the same time period, by laying the conditions that pushed many southern elites to accept *desegregation*. John Lie (2004, pp. 179–80) likewise argues that postwar Japanese industrialization created the structural conditions for a substantial reduction in the economic and social exclusion faced by Japan’s “untouchable” caste, the Burakumin, whose treatment had substantially resembled that of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. All of these analyses link chronological changes or spatial variations in racial inequality to class relations embedded in certain structures of production and exploitation.

A cursory glance at these explanations raises a question, however: do they constitute a cohesive theory? The problem is perhaps best encapsulated in Stuart Hall’s statement that that “in the analysis of particular historical forms of racism, we would do well to operate at a more concrete, historicized level of abstraction (that is, not racism in general but racisms)” (Hall 2021, pp. 321–22). The question, in other words, is whether a class-relations perspective is limited to explaining the “particular,” or whether it can work at a higher “level of abstraction.” Indeed, as Erik Olin Wright suggested, the relationship between race and class is most often analyzed at the “conjunctural” level—that is, in terms of “contingent details and historically specific processes that are untheorized at the level of social formation and mode of production.” The “conceptual apparatus” for an understanding of this relationship at a higher level of abstraction, according to Wright, “is rather underdeveloped and when attempts are made they tend to be reductionist” (Wright 1985, pp. 11–12, 17n8).

I suggest that it is indeed possible to analyze the relationship between race and class at more than a “conjunctural” level. The studies cited above do examine “particular historical forms of racism” by applying a class-relations approach to specific cases. Yet they also plant the seeds for an analysis at a slightly higher “level of abstraction” by linking racialized class inequality to historical institutions of production and exploitation. Since such institutions are often shared across societies, this opens the possibility of a broader, comparative analysis.

Indeed, variations in the *degree* to which racial categories correspond to class inequalities provide an enticing opportunity to make what Tilly (1984, p. 82) calls a “variation-finding comparison,” which establishes “a principle of variation in the character or intensity of a phenomenon by examining systematic differences among instances.” “The advantage of variation-finding comparison,” according to Tilly, “is parsimony: a successful comparison in this mode produces a principle that extends readily to new cases, yet is relatively easy to verify, falsify, or modify on the basis of new evidence” (p. 116). A comparative approach that addresses variations in the relationship between class relations and race, in other words, provides an opportunity for a theory that is both ambitious and verifiable. Establishing, theorizing and explaining variation is the task of the rest of this article.

Toward a Comparative Class-Relations Theory of Racial Inequality

The class-relations approach points towards systems of production and the class relations that surround them as the central arena in which racial ideologies are conceived and transformed as reifiers of exploitation and inequality. At least on the hemispheric scale of the Americas, the institution of slavery provides a clear example of a structure of production widespread enough to

provide a common base for large-scale comparison; it therefore provides a promising candidate for the development of a more ambitious class-relations theory of racial inequality.

The idea of comparing the institution of slavery in different parts of the Americas to explain differences among contemporary “racisms,” to use Hall’s plural, is hardly new. Frank Tannenbaum, observing the horrors of Jim Crow segregation and the absence of comparable institutions in other parts of the Americas with histories of African slavery, attributed the difference to historical variation in the legal regimes governing slavery, which he in turn attributed to colonizer culture. According to Tannenbaum, Latin America’s less extreme racism stemmed chiefly from Ibero-American societies’ higher rates of manumission and their acknowledgment of slaves’ legal personhood (Tannenbaum 1947, pp. 52–82). Tannenbaum’s emphasis on culture, seemingly immutable and inherited, led many scholars of the late twentieth century to reject this argument, highlighting instead other more “objective” or “material” factors such as economic sector (e.g. urban slavery, sugar, cattle ranching) and demographics (e.g. ratio of enslaved to European colonists) as the most important determinants of differing slave systems (Harris 1964, p. 76; Mörner 1967, p. 124; Knight 1970, p. xx; Hoetink 1973, p. 6).

Absent in these debates, however, is consideration of a distinct line of argument which emphasized not colonizer “culture”—an implicitly static characteristic—but rather the *class relations* governing colonization, a much more dynamic factor, as a major determinant of the structure of slavery and the available avenues for freedom in different societies with slavery in the Americas. Such an approach is as old as Adam Smith, who argued that “in every country where the unfortunate law of slavery is established, the magistrate, when he protects the slave, intermeddles in some measure in the management of the private property of the master; and, in a free country, where the master is perhaps either a member of the colony assembly, or an elector of

such a member, he dare not do this but with the greatest caution and circumspection” (Smith 1976 [1776], p. 100).

The argument for which Smith laid the groundwork thus held that opportunities toward freedom for the enslaved were fewer, and the economic and legal exclusion that former slaves and their free descendants experienced more extreme, in slave societies where the landed planter class had more power and autonomy. Perhaps the best synthetic statement laying out this thesis was that of Arthur Stinchcombe: the possibilities of freedom available to the enslaved in Caribbean plantation societies, Stinchcombe argued, were a function of “how fully and effectively the government of an island devoted itself to making the property right of the owner in his or her slave unlimited,” and this, in turn, was determined in large part by “the degree of internal social and political organization of planters... and the political place of the planters in island government and of the island government in the empire” (Stinchcombe 1995, p. 130; see also Elkins 1959, pp. 50–52; Klein 1967, pp. 1–2; Genovese 1968).

The thesis linking the opportunities of the enslaved to the power and cohesion of landed elites mirrors a literature which emphasized a correlation between the levels of economic exclusion experienced by former serfs in early modern Europe and the degree to which landed aristocracies had cohesive and centralized political power (Moore 1966, pp. 29–30, 41–42; Brenner 1982, pp. 50–60; Lachmann 1989, pp. 154–58). It also echoes a more recent literature examining the relationship between institutions of colonialism and divergent patterns of economic development in the postcolonial world (Kohli 2004, 2020; Lange et al. 2006; Mahoney 2010, pp. 20–32).

Following these earlier insights, I suggest that variations in the extent of racialized inequality in the former slave societies of the Americas can be explained in terms of *class relations and planter power under colonial slavery*. More specifically, I suggest that *where planters held*

more power and autonomy during the first centuries of colonial slavery, contemporary racial inequality is higher. Furthermore, I propose that the main challengers to the power and autonomy of landed slaveholders, besides the enslaved themselves, were the monarchical powers at the metropolitan heads of each of the various European empires in the Americas. Finally, I argue that colonial class relations translated into later racial (in)equality through the following mechanism: *in areas where the power of planters was weaker, the enslaved had more avenues to freedom, and the formerly enslaved and their free descendants had greater opportunities for upward economic mobility through the accumulation of property and skills.*

Case Selection: The Spanish Caribbean in Comparative Perspective

The class relations theory of slavery and inequality outlined above would predict that in former slave societies with higher levels of racialized inequality today, the planter class under slavery had higher levels of political power, autonomy and independent organization than those with lower levels of racialized inequality. The analysis that follows examines the validity of this prediction by comparing colonial class relations in one set of societies with less pronounced racialized inequality today—those of the contemporary Spanish Caribbean—with those in two societies where such inequality is high, Brazil and the United States. Before proceeding, it bears actually demonstrating that these societies present sufficient variation in terms of contemporary racialized inequality to serve as leverage for a comparative analysis.

Table 1 gives some descriptive statistics from the last decade and a half on racial inequalities in earned income, employment in professional occupations, and higher education in Brazil, the United States and the two Spanish Caribbean societies which collect data on racial

identification in their censuses, Cuba and Puerto Rico.⁵ Although more than two racial categories exist in the censuses of all four of these societies, for ease of comparison the table focuses on the two categories which are common to the censuses of all four and which reflect a common legacy of African slavery and European immigration: “black” (*negro*) and “white” (*blanco/branco*). Data along all three axes presented in the table suggest that these two categories correspond to significantly lower levels of inequality in Cuba and Puerto Rico compared to Brazil and the United States.

Table 1: Basic Measures of Inequality in Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the US⁶

Measure	Country/Year	Black	White	B/W (%)
Median Earned Income Among Employed, Ages 25-64	Brazil 2010 (reais per month)	600	850	71
	Puerto Rico 2015 (dollars per year)	18,369	20,000	92
	USA 2015 (dollars per year)	31,670	42,273	75
Share of Persons Aged 25-64 Employed in Professions	Brazil 2010	4.1	8.6	48
	Cuba 2012	11.4	10.6	108
	Puerto Rico 2011-2015	9.0	11.3	80
	USA 2011-2015	9.3	17.8	52
Share of Persons Aged 25-64 with University Degrees	Brazil 2010	4.6	14.2	32
	Cuba 2012	16.6	17.2	96
	Puerto Rico 2011-2015	22.1	29.6	75
	USA 2011-2015	20.3	35.3	58

Sources: Ruggles et al. (2025b, 2025a).

⁵ The surveys consulted in the table are a flat 1 percent sample of the Brazilian census of 2010, a flat 5 percent sample of the Cuban census of 2012, and the weighted American Community Survey (ACS) and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS) for 2011-2015.

⁶ The 2015 Puerto Rico Community Survey found the island to have 3.5 million residents, of whom about 68 percent identified as “white” and 10 percent as “black.” The 2015 American Community Survey found the United States to have 321.4 million residents, of whom roughly 61 percent identified as non-Hispanic white, and 12 percent as non-Hispanic black (Ruggles et al. 2025b). The Cuban census of 2012 yielded a population of 11.2 million, of whom 64 percent identified as white and 9 percent as black (Centro de Estudios de Población y Desarrollo 2016, pp. 17–18). The Brazilian census of 2010 yielded a population of 190.8 million people of whom 48 percent identified as white and 8 percent as black (IBGE 2012, tbl. 1.2.1).

Although the Dominican Republic does not collect data on racial identification in its censuses, various independent surveys suggest that, like in Cuba and Puerto Rico, racial categories correspond to less acute levels of material inequality than in Brazil or the United States. For example, a 2021 survey of 1,309 Dominicans sponsored by the UN found that 45 percent identified as *indio* (a category which in the Dominican context denotes mixed rather than solely indigenous ancestry—see Sagás (2000, pp. 66–67)), 17.8 percent identified as white, 16.3 percent as *moreno* (roughly, “dark-skinned”), 9.4 percent as *mulato* and 7.8 percent as black (*negro*). Among those surveyed who were placed in the highest of five income brackets (corresponding to a monthly income of at least 100,000 Dominican pesos, or roughly 1,700 USD in 2021), the pattern of racial identification was roughly similar: 46.4 percent identified as *indio*, 18 percent as white, 17.4 percent as *moreno*, 7.5 percent as *mulato* and 6.9 percent as black (Lamarche Castillo 2021, p. 25).

Table 2: Median Monthly Household Income Bracket by Skin Color Category, Brazil and Dominican Republic, 2018-19⁷

Skin Color	Dominican Republic	Brazil
90th percentile (darker)	10,001 to 11,200 pesos	901 to 1,000 reais
Median color	10,001 to 11,200 pesos	1,101 to 1,200 reais
10th percentile (lighter)	11,201 to 12,700 pesos	1,701 to 2,000 reais

Source: LAPOP Lab (2019).

Data from the Americas Barometer survey (LAPOP Lab 2019), which includes questions on racial identification, skin color, income and other socioeconomic data, helps place the Dominican Republic in comparative context. Table 2 provides data on median household income bracket according to skin color as measured on an 11-point scale, choosing as reference points the

⁷ The total number of persons surveyed was 1,498 in Brazil and 1,516 in the Dominican Republic. All respondents in both countries had their skin color recorded by survey-takers; 1,405 answered the income question in Brazil, and 1,356 in the Dominican Republic. The relevant variables are “colorr” for skin color and “q10new” for monthly household income.

90th percentile (darker), 10th percentile (lighter), and median skin colors.⁸ While in the Dominican Republic the median income of the lightest-skinned individuals was approximately 12 percent higher than that of the darkest skinned (taking the midpoint of the respective income brackets), in Brazil it was 95 percent higher.

This study has chosen to examine two societies with high contemporary racialized inequality—Brazil and the United States—because a long tradition has consistently noted differences in the *form* such inequality has taken in the two countries. More specifically, while in Brazil the legacy of slavery translated into high levels of post-abolition racial inequality, it did so without the extreme legal, spatial and social segregation or blatant white supremacist ideology typical of the United States after abolition (Harris 1964; Degler 1971; Marx 1998; Telles 2004). Given existing literature emphasizing variation in the politicization of racial categories, the relevance of a class relations theory would be bolstered if it can explain high levels of racialized inequality in two societies where such inequality took different political forms. If both Brazil and the United States displayed high levels of planter power and autonomy under colonial slavery but the Spanish Caribbean did not, then the class relations theory of racial inequality would appear robust.

⁸ Respondents' skin colors were categorized by interviewers according to a color palette scale of 1 to 11, where 1 was the lightest color and 11 was the darkest. In the Dominican Republic, the 10th percentile was a 3, the median was a 4 and the 90th percentile was a 6. In Brazil, the 10th percentile was a 2, the median was a 4 and the 90th percentile was a 7. Thus, the range of skin colors was generally greater in Brazil than in the Dominican Republic, while the median skin color was similar in the two countries. Rather than specific income figures, the LAPOP data categorized respondents according to 16 monthly income brackets. In both countries, a value of 1 in the scale corresponded to no income. In the Dominican Republic, the maximum value of 16 corresponded to a monthly income of more than 50,000 pesos (approximately 1,000 USD in 2019), while in Brazil the value of 16 corresponded to an income of more than 5,600 reais (approximately 1,400 USD in 2019).

The United States: Inequality With Segregation

The extreme segregation and fixed legal status to which bonded African laborers were ultimately submitted in the United States was not a foregone conclusion. Contrary to the Tannenbaum thesis, which held that the lack of a legal tradition governing slavery in England led to a more oppressive version of the institution in English colonies (Tannenbaum 1947, p. 65n153), the legal ambiguity surrounding slavery if anything tempered the institution in early colonial Virginia, the first slave colony in British North America. Although the extent to which this was the case is still debated, it is clear that some proportion of those of African origin who were subjected to forced labor in Virginia, especially during the first half of the seventeenth century, were actually indentured servants like their European counterparts (Hook 1952, pp. 12–16). The possibility of Africans serving as indentured servants was not decidedly prohibited in favor of slavery until 1682, more than sixty years after the first Africans arrived in the colony (Cope 1973, p. 14). While indenture involved a definitive possibility of freedom after the term of servitude expired, planters in early colonial Virginia also clearly allowed Africans who were enslaved to purchase their freedom, which they were able to do with earnings from the sale of tobacco and other produce cultivated on small subsistence plots during their free time (Breen and Innes 1980, p. 73).

On top of these possibilities for freedom, early colonial Virginia's African laborers, rather than being brought directly from Africa, were instead usually either raided from the possessions of other European powers or imported from the burgeoning English plantation colony of Barbados. In either case, they came with a certain previous degree of acculturation that facilitated their integration into colonial society (Breen 1973, pp. 6–7). Although Africans were a small share of the colony's population around mid-century, by that time some free people of color had gained a relative level of status, owning land and even importing indentured English workers to labor for

them, as was the case with one Anthony Johnson, who owned 250 acres of land as of 1651 (Brewer 1955, pp. 576–80). In Northampton County in 1668, about a third of the black population was free. This included various heads of household with landholdings of several hundred acres, some of whom employed white indentured servants (Breen and Innes 1980, pp. 68–69, 80, 105). Interracial marriages, usually of black men with formerly indentured white women, “occasioned little comment” (Deal 1993, p. 185), even as late as 1671 (Smits 1987, p. 190).

Explaining how this higher degree of equality both in bondage and in freedom came undone requires reference to the class power of Virginia’s planters. Klein (1967, p. 31) suggests that “colonial leadership fell to the most prominent planters of the community, who entrenched themselves, especially after 1624, in all of the major political and administrative offices in the colony.” This entrenchment was certainly evident by 1643, when the colony’s governor, William Berkeley, decided to yield more autonomy to the House of Burgesses, dominated by the tobacco planters, by having them “sit apart from the governor and Council members in a bicameral legislature,” and in 1670, when the legislature restricted suffrage to tax-paying property owners (Tarter 2011, p. 10).

People of African origin constituted a small share of Virginia’s population for most of the seventeenth century (estimates rarely disaggregate the enslaved, indentured and free); 1.9 percent of a population of 1,250 in 1625 (compared to 41.6 percent who were white indentured servants) (Hook 1952, p. 25; Wells 1975, pp. 161–62); 2 percent of a population of 15,300 at mid-century (Brewer 1955, p. 575; Cope 1973, p. 23); and 5 percent of a population of 40,000 in 1670 (Hook 1952, p. 29; Breen 1973, p. 6; Parent, Jr. 2003, p. 74). As Coombs (2011, pp. 348–51) has demonstrated, however, enslaved African laborers seem to have been virtually monopolized by a group of elite planters from very early on. Enslaved Africans began to outnumber European

indentured servants among the labor forces of these elite planters as early as the 1650s. By the 1660s, a group of “roughly 250 planters who occupied the coveted positions of county commissioner, burgess, and councillor” (p. 349) controlled “between two-thirds and three-quarters of all enslaved bondspeople” (p. 350-51).

It is unlikely a coincidence that it is precisely around the middle of the seventeenth century that one begins to see legislative measures and official discourse explicitly discriminating against bonded and free people of African descent. In 1643, the legislature placed a higher tax rate on black female workers than their white counterparts (Parent, Jr. 2003, p. 61). In 1668, the legislature stated plainly with respect to free women of color that “negro women, though permitted to enjoy their freedom, yet ought not in all respects to be admitted to a full fruition of the exemptions and impunities of the English” (Breen and Innes 1980, p. 109). And in 1670, a law forbade free people of color from owning white indentured servants (Brewer 1955, p. 576).

The decisive shift in the conditions faced by bonded and free Africans in Virginia, however, occurred in the final three decades of the seventeenth century. Historians have highlighted the importance of two events that coincided with this shift. Although the relative causal contribution of each is difficult to disaggregate, both revealed the importance of planter power. One of these was the exacerbation of class conflicts in the colony. Bonded African and European laborers worked together to steal from planters and to escape from bondage (Deal 1993, p. 179); the 1660s saw a “rash of collective runaway attempts” in the colony’s Eastern Shore (p. 124). Class conflicts came to a head in Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676; ostensibly about relations with the colony’s indigenous people, the rebellion unleashed a flood of class resentments evidenced in grievances against county officials, seen as representatives of local landed oligarchies who were “unfairly taxing the poor and landless” (Tarter 2011, p. 21).

The collaboration of indentured Europeans and enslaved Africans in the rebellion spooked landed elites; in Edmund Morgan's formulation, "[elite] Virginians had always felt threatened by the danger of a servile insurrection, and their fears increased as the labor force grew larger... The answer to the problem, obvious if unspoken and only gradually recognized, was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt" (Morgan 1975, pp. 327–28).

Coinciding with this increase in class tensions was a dramatic increase in the importation of enslaved Africans to Virginia. This increase was a product not of new demand, but rather of newly available supply. Up until the 1680s, the supply of slaves to the colony was monopolized by the Royal African Company. This monopoly was linked to the monarchy of Charles II who, contrary to the interests of the planters (and their landed counterparts in England itself), "sought to pursue the twin goals of augmenting his own royal authority and of Catholicizing England" on the model of France (Pincus 2009, p. 144).

The Royal African Company monopoly was a manifestation of this centralizing impulse, but the Company continually proved itself unable or unwilling to satisfy Virginia planters' demand for enslaved labor (Parent, Jr. 2003, pp. 66, 73, 75). The overthrow of Charles II's successor, James II, in 1688 not only removed the absolutist monarchical impulse and reestablished the power of parliament but also served the interests of both the Virginia planters and the "interlopers," merchants independent of the royal monopolies, who had also previously sided with parliament against the monarchy during the English Civil War (Brenner 2003, pp. 387–89; Pincus 2009, p. 381). With James II overthrown, the Virginia planters could more easily press Parliament to serve their interests. In 1698, responding to petitions of the planters, Parliament dismantled the Royal African Company monopoly and liberalized the English transatlantic slave trade. The result was a

marked increase of slave imports to Virginia; while only about 1,200 enslaved Africans were brought to the colony between 1670 and 1698, over 7,000 were brought between 1699 and 1710, the vast majority by the interlopers (Parent, Jr. 2003, pp. 74, 76, 79).

In tandem with these two shifts, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw a veritable battery of laws aimed at maintaining the absolute dominance of planters over their slaves, preventing collaboration between poor whites and enslaved and free Africans by promoting segregation, and, perhaps most importantly for our analysis, restricting the rights of free people of color and limiting as far as possible the expansion of their numbers. In 1691, the Virginia legislature forbade interracial marriage (Moller 1945, p. 134, inc. note) and required any slaveholder intent on manumitting a slave to pay for the costs of their transport out of the colony (Hook 1952, p. 20). A 1705 law clarified that “all servants brought in by sea or land, who were not Christians in their native country, were to be accounted as slaves... a slave’s being in England was not sufficient to release him from his status”; in 1723, manumission was categorically banned except by special act of the legislature (Hast 1969, pp. 219–21).

Unlike in other colonies of the Americas, neither Virginia nor any other British North American colony permitted free men of color to participate in the militia (Quarles 1959, p. 643). In 1738, free blacks in Virginia were prohibited from holding weapons (Breen and Innes 1980, p. 27). Until 1744 free people of color were forbidden from bearing witness in court in the colony, just like slaves, and a statute that year only permitted them to testify in cases involving a person of African or indigenous descent. Beginning in 1723, free black men could no longer vote in colonial elections, even if they met the necessary property threshold (Hast 1969, pp. 235–36).

The effort at political and economic disenfranchisement of free people of color in colonial Virginia was thus total. Nor was it unique to Virginia. The result was a society in which free people

of color were treated, to quote Ira Berlin (1974), as “slaves without masters.” In terms of the almost total exclusion of the formerly enslaved from public life, “nothing like this had previously existed in the long annals of human slavery” (Patterson 1982, p. 261). In 1755, only 4 percent of Maryland’s Afrodescendant population was free (Berlin 1974, p. 47), while in Virginia the figure was just 2.5 percent (Hast 1969, p. 218). While there was a significant increase in manumissions during the US War of Independence (Russell 1913, p. 19; Jackson 1939, p. 390), the prevailing status quo reimposed itself quickly thereafter, save in the exceptional case of Maryland where the free population of color grew rapidly (Brackett 1889, p. 265). In 1806, the Virginia state legislature again passed legislation calling for the expulsion of any manumitted slave (Jackson 1939, p. 391). North Carolina, Mississippi and Tennessee followed suit with similar laws in subsequent years (Klein 2012, p. 97). By the eve of the Civil War in 1860, the free population of color in most of the South remained miniscule; 1.4 percent of the total population in South Carolina, 0.3 percent in Georgia, 3.6 percent in Virginia, 0.3 percent in Alabama and 0.1 percent in Mississippi, to give just a few examples (Bergad 2007, p. 118).

The opportunities for wealth accumulation among free people of color were also severely limited. In 1830, only 1.7 percent of them held slaves in Virginia (Schwarz 1987, p. 322), compared to 47 percent of rural white households in a sample of fifteen counties in the state in 1850 (Fields 1953, p. 134). In 1832, free people of color in Virginia were banned from acquiring slaves except in the case of spouses or children, and in 1858 even this was prohibited (Schwarz 1987, p. 322). Virginia’s rural free people of color were in their majority dependent laborers rather than independent farmers; according to Jackson (1939, p. 395), “the outstanding fact in free Negro rural labor was the preponderance of the farm hand.” Indeed, in 1860 only 1,202 of the state’s 58,042 free people of color owned farms. Free black rural laborers were also paid miserly wages; as little

as half the daily going rate for the hire of a slave, whose wages, of course, went to their enslaver (Jackson 1939, pp. 390, 393, 397).

Free blacks and mulattoes were similarly excluded from skilled urban labor. While 88 percent of native-born white adult workers in Richmond in 1860 were skilled, the figure was only 32 percent among free people of color in the city (Berlin 1974, p. 220). The situation was better in other southern urban areas like Charleston and New Orleans (Schwarz 1987, p. 325), but even here the numbers involved were very small. While 76 percent of free black workers in Charleston were skilled in 1860, they still accounted for just 20 percent of skilled workers (Berlin 1974, p. 221) at a time when 57 percent of South Carolina's population was enslaved (Bergad 2007, p. 118).

The pattern of racialized class relations which took shape in colonial British North America, perhaps the best systematically studied of the three cases examined here, can thus be summarized as follows. From practically the beginning of colonization, landed elites in the plantation colonies of the South had a high degree of autonomy and cohesive organization. This allowed them to direct the local state apparatus as they sought fit and prevent the emergence of a vigorous smallholder class that might compete with them for land, labor and political power. The fact that planter elites relied on two distinct pools of forced labor— from England and Africa, respectively— posed both a problem and a latent solution. It created a powder keg of potential class conflict, driven by the possibility that English servants might joint African servants and slaves against the planters. Yet a clear, binary cultural division in the plantation labor force also provided an easy way to divide and conquer, by creating an ideology of racial difference, reinforced by special privileges granted to Europeans regardless of class, that helped thwart such resistance. The fact that Europeans made up a substantial portion of the early plantation workforce in British North America helps account for the region's stark segregation and sharply defined racial boundaries. Yet it was ultimately the

cohesive political and economic power of the planters that curtailed enslaved people's paths to freedom and enforced severe economic marginalization on the small number who succeeded in becoming free.

Brazil: Inequality Without Segregation

If the English colonies of the southern US, which spread from their early center in Virginia, were controlled by powerful tobacco planters, the Portuguese colonies in Brazil, which spread from their early center in Bahia and Pernambuco, were controlled first and foremost by sugar planters. Already in 1545, in a sign of what was to come, Martim Afonso de Sousa, the recipient of the first fief-like captaincy to be established by the Portuguese in Brazil in what is today São Paulo, owned six sugar mills employing over three thousand slaves (Marchant 1942, p. 508)—more than the total number of enslaved laborers employed in all of Virginia in 1670. Local captains like Sousa and incipient organs of local colonial government issued enormous land grants of thousands of hectares to favored individuals, establishing what would become a powerful landed oligarchy. By 1570, there were some sixty sugar mills in Brazil, two thirds of which were in the northeastern settlements of Bahia and Pernambuco. Like in British North America, this expansion of plantation agriculture was fed by a relatively unrestricted transatlantic trade—unrestricted because planters and merchants influenced the Crown to keep it that way. The establishment of a Brazil Company by the Crown in 1649 to monopolize trade was undone nine years later on the complaints of planters and excluded merchants (McAlister 1984, pp. 276, 278, 386).

At the apex of colonial Brazilian plantation society were the sugar mill owners, *senhores de engenho*, each of whom presided over a small plantation “society consisting of 100 to 300 people” and who exercised jurisdiction by “settling quarrels, punishing offenders against the

common interest, and taking on the powers that were otherwise those of police and magistrates' courts" (Curtin 1998, p. 53). The "small empire" of the *engenho* (sugar plantation) typically included about a thousand acres, a large plantation manor house with a chapel, slave huts, cane fields, subsistence plots and pastures (Hutchinson 1961, p. 204). Like their Virginia counterparts, the sugar planters controlled the bulk of enslaved labor in the sugar regions that dominated the colonial economy from the sixteenth into the eighteenth century. As late as 1816, a sample of 1,328 slaveowners in the Bahian sugar region (Recôncavo) found that sugar mill owners (*senhores de engenho*) and the sugarcane farmers (*lavradores de canas*) who supplied them controlled the labor of 81 percent of the roughly 20,000 slaves in the sample (Schwartz 1982, pp. 59, 64, 66). Yet the power of landed families was the rule even in regions whose main economic activity was not sugar production. Regarding the cattle ranching backcountry of northeast Brazil, the *sertão*, Lang (1979, p. 70) notes that the crown had "surrendered" power there "to powerful families who ordered society in their own way... The Brito family owned 160 leagues (about 480 miles) along the São Francisco. In the interior of Ceará, which was settled by ranchers in the 1690s, the powerful Feitosa clan dominated local politics for more than two centuries."

Brazilian landed elites not only presided with a remarkable degree of autonomy over plantations that were veritable fiefs; they also controlled the organs of colonial government. In England and colonial North America, the mechanisms of landed control were rather straightforward: landed elites in both places controlled legislatures elected by limited suffrage which exercised the main functions of state power. In Brazil the situation was somewhat more complicated, but planter power was no weaker for it. Local power in colonial Brazil rested in municipal councils, the *senados da câmara*, whose members rotated and were chosen through local lobbying from the members of prominent landed families. The *câmaras* often maintained

representatives in Lisbon to remind the Court of their interests, and controlled local police functions (Curtin 1998, pp. 55–56). As Lang (1979, p. 53) notes, the câmaras “sometimes modified or reversed the crown’s decisions... New prohibitions against slave raiding in 1639 created strong resistance in the southern captaincies, where Indian labor was still essential to the economy. These laws simply could not be enforced; in São Paulo and Santos, the câmaras even expelled the Jesuits. In 1644 the town councils in Salvador and Rio de Janeiro refused to pay a new export tax whose purpose was to provide escorts for the sugar fleet.”

Although the Portuguese Crown expanded the presence of its appointive bureaucracy in Brazil beginning in the late seventeenth century (Hutchinson 1961, p. 205), this expansion did not fundamentally shake the foundations of planter control in the colony. For one, an expansion in the number of royal officials did not necessarily imply an effective increase in Crown supervision of the planters. Between 1652 and 1676, for example, the judges who were meant to be representatives of royal power “made no outside tours of inspection, even to villages in Bahia.” And insofar as these officials still held real power, they were absorbed to a remarkable degree by local elites. One fifth of judges who served in the High Court (*Relação*) in Bahia between 1609 and 1751 received permission to marry Brazilian women. Ten of the magistrates who served on the court between 1653 and 1752 were Brazilian-born themselves. Judges invested in local economic ventures, from sugar mills to moneylending and the slave trade. They also served as officers in the social organizations of the local elite, such as the charitable *Misericórdia*, in which five judges on the *Relação* and five governors general served as president in the seventeenth century (Lang 1979, pp. 45–47).

The lack of a large European servile population in early colonial Brazil, and the consequent lack of major class conflicts that united African and European bondsmen against planter elites,

may help explain why Brazilian planters did not become quite as vested in racial segregation as their North American counterparts. Manumission thus maintained a legal status analogous to the one it had in Virginia before the end of the seventeenth century. On the one hand, the colonial state did not prohibit or severely restrict manumission like it did in the US South. Yet, on the other, nor did it legally enshrine and protect the institution like it did in the Spanish Empire (see following section). Thus, as Schwartz (1974, p. 610) puts it, “Portuguese law was peculiarly silent on the nature and regulations of slavery as it operated in Brazil... there is virtually no set of laws or ordinances that guide the historian’s approach to the question of manumission in its varied aspects.” The question of manumission was thus entirely in the hands of the planter himself. This helps explain a particularity of the institution of manumission in Brazil, which was “the fragility of the manumission grant itself. All manumissions were in essence revocable and dependent on the appropriate behavior of the former slaves” (Schwartz 1985, p. 331).

Indeed, Brazilian planters were hostile to manumission because they feared that the manumitted and their descendants would ally not with bonded white laborers— their Brazilian incarnation, Portuguese convict laborers (*degradados*), were never more than a small share of the European population (da Silva 1992, p. 124)— but with enslaved Africans. The latter were a much larger share of the total population than they were in early colonial Virginia: as much as 50 to 60 percent in the mid-seventeenth century (Blackburn 1997, pp. 174, 197). Planters and the state institutions which they controlled were thus generally hostile to manumission and to those who were lucky enough to be its beneficiaries. In 1719, the colonial governor of Minas Gerais almost implemented a Virginia-style requirement that grants of manumission be made only on his approval. Local statutes often made no distinction between criminal penalties for slaves and free people of color, using the revealing oxymoron of “free slaves” (*escravos fôrros*) in legal

terminology. A general hostility to manumission was accompanied by severe restrictions on the civil life of free people of color. In 1710, the governor of Minas Gerais and São Paulo forbade slaves or free people of color (including Indians) from carrying weapons “on pain of a public whipping in the pillory,” and the Crown issued a similar statute in 1749 for all of Brazil. Another example of special legal penalties for free people of color was a ban on gold smuggling in 1732, which prescribed “banishment to Angola and a fine of 2000 *cruzados* for white offenders, whereas free blacks, mulattos and Amerindians were also banished but in addition received 400 lashes” (Russell-Wood 1982, pp. 44–45, 52, 67–68).

If planters were skeptical of manumission because they saw it as sowing conditions of social unrest that might challenge their power, they were also hostile to the formation of an independent smallholding peasantry that might compete with them for land and labor. Indeed, the conditions were far from optimal for smallholders in colonial Brazil. Planters tended to monopolize land close to urban centers, pushing the food cultivation that was typical of peasant production far away from urban markets (Prado, Jr. 1969, pp. 184–85). Schwartz (1992, p. 71) dates the emergence of a peasantry as such in Brazil—linking it to the rise of a non-plantation export sector, mining, which simultaneously generated demand for food—to the second half of the eighteenth century, *over two hundred years* after the beginning of colonial settlement. As late as 1807, a report on Bahia found that “peasants were prohibited from selling [produce] in the places they judged most advantageous” (Forman 1975, p. 33). Efforts by colonial officials in Brazil during the second half of the eighteenth century to establish surplus-producing peasantries settled in towns in frontier areas largely floundered (Dean 1995, pp. 99–101). Free rural dwellers were instead generally pushed into relations of dependency with the planters. They could squat on the marginal lands of the planters and plant subsistence crops in return for a small fee and the expectation of

providing occasional labor. The tenurial rights of such squatters were insecure to say the least, and they lived at constant risk of eviction (Forman 1975, pp. 25–26; de Andrade 1980, p. 64).

The bulk of people of color in colonial Brazil were enmeshed in continued relations of dependence with the planter elite. Certainly, very few became *lavradores de cana*, the sugar cane farmers who supplied the *engenhos* (Schwartz 1973). One analysis of four hundred such farmers in the Bahian Recôncavo between 1680 and 1725 found only one of them to be nonwhite (Russell-Wood 1982, p. 58). Free people of color were instead much more likely to end up among the poor squatters on plantation lands, whom Andrade (1980, p. 63) reckons were “generally Mestizoes.”

Another indicator of the insertion of the manumitted and their descendants into relations of agrarian dependency is their comparative lack of representation in urban skilled labor. According to Russell-Wood (1982, p. 56), “there can be no doubt but that throughout the colonial period in Brazil the so-called ‘mechanical trades,’ were dominated by white artisans and that free coloured persons were not accepted as professional equals.” One estimate suggests that blacks and mulattoes constituted only 5 percent of the “free artisan class” in Bahia between 1680 and 1729 (Diffie 1987, p. 344). Another reckons that Portuguese immigrants alone made up two-thirds of urban artisans in Salvador during the early eighteenth century; by contrast, free people of color, especially those considered to be of mixed descent (*pardos*), were better represented as artisans in *rural* areas (Schwartz 1985, pp. 334–35).⁹ This was precisely another indicator of the success of plantations in maintaining formerly enslaved workers and their descendants as dependent laborers.

⁹ Although the representation of nonwhites increased significantly in the urban artisan trades in the nineteenth century, it remained considerably below the levels seen in the Spanish Caribbean, as detailed below. In the mid-19th century, the observations of foreign visitors still suggested that “the urban artisanry... was in Brazil monopolized, on the one hand, by Portuguese immigrants and, on the other, by the slaves” (Graham 1972, p. 16). In 1872, 56 percent of free carpenters, 62 percent of free tailors, 59 percent of free metalworkers and 69 percent of free shoemakers employed in the city of Rio de Janeiro were foreigners (Diretoria Geral de Estatística 1876, p. 61). That these foreigners were overwhelmingly Europeans and not formerly enslaved Africans is suggested by the fact that 18 years later, those considered black were underrepresented among Rio’s artisans—accounting for 5.5 percent of craftsmen but 12.4 percent of the population (Klein 1969, p. 50).

This dependence was often accompanied by wage discrimination; at least in the first half of the seventeenth century, Schwartz (1985, p. 322) found that the Engenho Sergipe in Bahia paid native-born free black (*crioulo*) caulkers (*calafates*) 320 réis a day, compared to 700 for white caulkers. The upshot of the analysis above is that by the end of the colonial period in the early nineteenth century, although the free nonwhite share of the population was larger in Brazil than in the United States, its social position was similar, confined for the most part to precarious and dependent employment in rural areas.

The Brazilian case thus demonstrates the implications of planter power in a case where the plantation labor force did not consist, in any significant share, of European coerced laborers during the formative period of plantation society. Although manumission was less rare and racial categories more fluid in colonial Brazil than in colonial British North America, landed elites' high degree of autonomy, organization and control of the local state apparatus nevertheless guaranteed a high degree of racialized class inequality. Insofar as the enslaved had a higher chance of being manumitted in Brazil than in the US South, planters nevertheless still made sure that the formerly enslaved and their free descendants would exist in a precarious, dependent position that in no way challenged their own political or economic power. Free people of color were thus generally denied opportunities to accumulate skills and property with which they might prosper in colonial society.

The Spanish Caribbean: Sources of Social Mobility

Nowhere in the Spanish Caribbean developed a plantation economy on the scale of that of colonial Brazil until the first half of the nineteenth century. By that time, an incipient plantation sector and the elites it enriched had to contend with a relatively large and well-established free population of color. The importance of this population, and the much later emergence of a plantation economy

in the region, both had much to do with the fact that a planter class rivaling those of colonial North America and Brazil had not been allowed to emerge previously.

In fact, the Spanish Caribbean *almost* developed a plantation economy in the early colonial period, like Brazil and Virginia. Anticipating developments in northeast Brazil a half century later, sugar plantations began to develop on the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico during the 1520s. These were, in fact, the very first sugar plantations to be established in the Americas. During the sixteenth century, the number of sugar mills reached a peak of more than forty in Hispaniola (Rodríguez Morel 1992, p. 99) and twelve in Puerto Rico (Gelpí Baíz 2000, pp. 19, 68). The sugar plantation boom brought the familiar bundle of exploitive social relations. Where sugar plantations came, concentrations of enslaved Africans followed. Estimates of the highest number of slaves in Hispaniola during the sixteenth century range from 12,000 to 30,000, compared to roughly 5,000 European settlers (Deive 1980, pp. 602–4; Rodríguez Morel 2013, p. 486). For Puerto Rico, the figures are something like 5-10,000 slaves and about a thousand European settlers (Sued Badillo and López Cantos 1986, pp. 135–36).

An incipient planter class also emerged in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, and they sought the same mix of lordly autonomy and collective political power that their counterparts did later in Virginia and Bahia. In the 1560s, nine of the twelve aldermen (*regidores*) of the municipal council (*cabildo*) of Santo Domingo were owners of sugar mills (Ratekin 1954, pp. 18–19). In Puerto Rico, of 58 individuals who were *regidores* in the San Juan *cabildo* between 1540 and 1600, 15 owned sugar mills and 53 were landowners (Gelpí Baíz 2000, pp. 172–73). In both places, sugar planters sought to make their plantations into veritable fiefs; for example, they made sure the Catholic Church had a subordinate presence on their lands by paying tithes not to the Church as a whole

but rather directly to priests employed in chapels on their plantations (Ratekin 1954, p. 17; Gelpí Baíz 2000, p. 53).

Yet by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the plantation economy and the power of the planters had been undone. Why? The answer, simply put, is Crown intervention. The Spanish Crown was hostile to the emergence of a planter class that might claim aristocratic prerogatives and challenge its power in the colonies (Keith 1971, p. 440). This jealous guarding of royal prerogatives, mutually reinforced by monopolistic merchant interests in Seville (Stein and Stein 2000, pp. 8–19), shaped the most important factor behind the decline of the early sugar industry in the Spanish Caribbean: the Crown's refusal to grant the sector direct access to markets beyond peninsular Spain. Planters petitioned the Crown as early as 1520, when the sugar industry was barely beginning, for permission to export their sugar to Flanders, then still a territory of the Spanish monarchy, and thereby have access to a broader Northern European market.¹⁰ They repeated this request numerous times in the following years (de Herrera 1728, pp. 34, *Década V*, *Libro II*, *Cap. V*; Sánchez Valverde 1785, p. 43).

Each time, the Crown either ignored these requests or indefinitely postponed them for further study. This denial of access to markets beyond Spain left the Spanish Caribbean sugar industry's days numbered, as even the Spanish market began to be saturated by domestic production and imports from the Canary Islands, Portugal and Sicily (del Río Moreno and López y Sebastián 1991, pp. 47–50). By the first decade of the seventeenth century, sugar production in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico was barely a tenth of peak figures in the previous century (Cassá 1978, pp. 123, 126, 128; Stark 2015, p. 25; Wolff 2022, p. 69).

¹⁰ See Pasamonte, Ampíes, and Alonso Dávila to Charles V, "Oficiales reales Santo Domingo: gobierno y población," 28 January and 20 August 1520, Archivo General de Indias, Patronato 174, R.24. This letter is mentioned but not cited in Saco (1879, p. 128).

As if this denial of market access were not enough, the planters also faced resistance from the enslaved. Fugitive slaves formed maroon communities that made periodic raids on the sugar plantations. Marronage achieved impressive proportions; in 1542, the archdeacon of Santo Domingo estimated there to be two or three thousand maroons in various parts of the island, while an Italian observer put the figure at seven thousand (Deive 1980, p. 445). If they had it their way like their counterparts in Virginia and Bahia, the planters might have responded with a massive wave of repression. But the Spanish Crown would not allow it. In December of 1570, Philip II addressed an ordinance to his officials in Hispaniola noting that slaves on the island “are mistreated by their masters who do not feed and clothe them and they go around naked and many die without sacraments... and it was a cause for them to flee... to the mountains and steal whatever they find and commit other crimes compelled by the bad treatment of their masters.” To remedy the problem, the king directed the magistrates (*oidores*) of the royal court (*Audiencia*) in Santo Domingo to visit sugar plantations and other estates every four months to ensure that slaves “were well treated by their masters.”¹¹ Although hardly an abolitionist document, the order represented a clear intent on the Crown’s part to regulate the institution of slavery.

The Caribbean sugar economy of the sixteenth century was replaced by an insertion into an imperial political economy based on the extraction of silver from more densely populated conquered territories in Mesoamerica and the Andes, a transition which occurred in Cuba relatively early, in the mid-sixteenth century (Le Riverend Brusone 1954, pp. 88–89), given the lack of a previous plantation boom, and several decades later in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico (Bosch 1983, pp. 55, 76; Moscoso 2020, p. 138). The Spanish fleets carrying Mexican silver required provisioning and protection, which generated demand in the Spanish Caribbean for food,

¹¹ “Real cédula al licenciado Juan de Valdivia, que va como visitador de la Audiencia de Santo Domingo,” 15 December 1570, Archivo General de Indias, Santo Domingo 899, L.2, F.154R-155R.

fortifications and ships, a demand which was met especially in Havana (Friedlaender 1944, p. 22). In addition, the region's inhabitants engaged in a burgeoning contraband trade with other European powers establishing a foothold in the region, exchanging livestock products, tobacco, coffee and wood for a variety of manufactured goods and slaves (Morales Carrión 1952, pp. 85–86; Moya Pons 1976, pp. 222–24; Martínez-Fernández 2018, pp. 87–89).

In the midst of this economic transformation, in addition to restricting the exploitive powers of the planters by regulating slavery, the Crown also made a lateral attack on their political power by reinforcing the prerogatives of an appointive bureaucracy meant to be—unlike in the Brazilian case— independent of them. In 1582, it ordered that its appointed officials in Santo Domingo should not be permitted to hold more than four slaves—enough for domestic service, but not for the operation of significant productive assets in the colony.¹² Throughout the empire, royal magistrates were prohibited from borrowing or lending money, owning landed estates, or receiving gifts, required royal permission to marry, and could not serve in their spouse's place of origin (Calderón 1988, p. 137). By the mid-seventeenth century, there was a clear rivalry in the main towns of the Spanish Caribbean between an appointive bureaucracy of civil and military officials, who were almost without exception peninsular Spaniards, and local colonial elites represented in the *cabildos* (López Cantos 1975, pp. 41–42; Moya Pons 1976, pp. 148–49).

Crown intervention in master-slave relations became a defining aspect of the institution of slavery throughout the Spanish empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It could reach the level of minutiae; for example, in 1574 Alonso de Cáceres, a royal magistrate from the *audiencia* of Santo Domingo, ordered during a visit to Havana that slaves in the area should be

¹² “Real cédula ordenando que el presidente, oidores, fiscal, alguacil mayor y sus tenientes de la Audiencia de Santo Domingo no puedan tener más que 4 esclavos,” 27 July 1582, Archivo General de Indias, Santo Domingo 899, L.3, F.132R-132V.

issued a daily ration of half a quart (*medio cuartillo*) of wine in local taverns, a measure resented by slaveholders who complained that it promoted drunkenness (Marrero 1956, pp. 219–20). In an 1693 instruction on the practice of hiring out slaves and forcing them to turn over their wages, the Crown instructed its officials in Havana “that if these [slaveholders] should at any time mistreat their slaves, you should apply the appropriate remedy, it being unjust to consent to or permit any excess in this matter, for their captivity is pain enough, without experiencing the harsh treatment of their masters” (Marrero 1956, pp. 348–49).

Yet Crown regulation covered not only working conditions, but also pathways to freedom. The Crown and its officials regulated and protected the institution of *coartación*, or self-purchase, which was the primary mechanism for manumission in the colonial Spanish Caribbean. Self-purchase could occur in installments, during which the enslaved would own the share of their time corresponding to the portion of the settled purchase price which they had paid so far. While in Brazil the status of *quartado*—linguistically analogous to *coartado*— was granted by the slaveholder and did not acquire legal recognition until 1871, in Spanish America the initiative lay with the enslaved, and the practice was embedded institutionally much earlier (Bergad et al. 1995, pp. 134–35). In Cuba, *coartación* contracts are evident from at least as early as the 1590s (de la Fuente 2004, p. 359).

Manumission was supplemented by the practice of granting asylum to maroon refugees from colonies of enemy powers. In 1677, the governor of Santo Domingo informed the Crown that he had granted freedom to twelve enslaved Africans who had fled from the incipient French colony of Saint Domingue; the move was framed as doubly good for the colony, as it provided it with willing workers while depriving the enemy of theirs (Rodríguez Morel 2018, pp. 271–72). This precedent, confirmed by the Crown in 1680, was applied to Puerto Rico in 1696 on the arrival of

maroon refugees from the Danish island of St. Thomas, and extended to refugees from the various non-Spanish plantation colonies of the eastern Caribbean (Chinea 1997, p. 64). In 1720, French officials claimed, perhaps with some exaggeration, that a thousand of their slaves had fled to the Spanish side of Hispaniola that year alone on account of this asylum policy (Silié 1976, p. 80). In 1790, British officials estimated that the number of maroon refugees who had fled their Caribbean colonies to Puerto Rico was in the “several thousands, including their descendants” (Chinea 1997, p. 57).

In addition to guaranteeing various routes from slavery to freedom, the Spanish Crown saw the development of a smallholding peasantry as a counterweight to the power colonial planters; it therefore often sought to guarantee access to land for cultivation to free rural dwellers of all colors. In Cuba, for example, it intervened on behalf of smallholding tobacco farmers (*vegueros*) against the encroachment of large landowners and cattle ranchers, even guaranteeing their right to cultivate riverbed lands within large ranches (*hatos*) in exchange for a fixed customary rent (*canon*) (Friedlaender 1944, p. 33; Pérez de la Riva 1946, pp. 116, 119–20; Le Riverend 1974, p. 8; Balboa Navarro 2013, p. 201). An analysis of various districts of western and central Cuba in the early 1770s suggests that about 20 percent of tobacco farmers in these regions were free blacks (*morenos libres*) (Cosner 2008, pp. 97–98). Another mechanism of property distribution among the formerly enslaved and their descendants was the *hatos* themselves. *Hatos* were generally held communally as *haciendas comuneras*, divided into individual shares (*pesos*). Possession of even a few shares secured rights to the *hato*’s resources— forests, pastures, and water. In Santo Domingo, a market in such shares emerged, enabling formerly enslaved people and others of “low social status” to gain co-ownership (Cassá 1978, p. 168).

The Crown also encouraged the congregation of the multiracial peasantry of the Spanish Caribbean into towns. In Puerto Rico, maroon refugees were settled in the community of San Mateo de Cangrejos in the outskirts of San Juan and granted two-acre plots of land to establish market gardens that might supply the town with fresh produce. In 1773, the community was formally incorporated as a town; in 1795 it had over 1,200 residents, three quarters of them free blacks (Stark 2007, pp. 553, 557, 576n). Free blacks (*morenos horros*) appear as owners of plots of land (*solares*) in Havana as early as the sixteenth century; of the 153 *solares* distributed to individuals in the town of Santiago de Cuba between 1721 and 1754, 17 were granted to free blacks (*morenos/as libres*) and another 15 to free mulattoes (*pardos/as libres*) (Marrero 1978, pp. 187–88).

In addition to land ownership, another route to upward mobility for free people of color in the Spanish Caribbean was employment in skilled artisan occupations. Among the officers in Havana's militia battalion of free blacks (*morenos libres*) in 1765, 47 percent were carpenters, 24 percent tailors, and 8 percent masons; among the free mulatto officers, 45 percent were carpenters, 14 percent tailors, 11 percent silversmiths and 8 percent shoemakers (Barcia 2009, p. 254). Already by the seventeenth century, local observers in Santo Domingo claimed that very few whites were employed in the “mechanical trades” (*oficios mecánicos*), which were dominated by free people of color and slaves (the latter presumably in subordinate roles) (Gil-Bermejo García 1983, p. 120).

Both of the economic patterns described above—the importance of landownership and the artisan trades among free people of color—continued to be evident in the nineteenth century, when Santo Domingo had gained its independence and abolished slavery, while Spanish colonial rule continued and sugar plantations expanded in Cuba and Puerto Rico. While free people of color constituted 29 percent of the total free labor force in Cuba in 1846 according to a census taken that

year, they made up 25 percent of those categorized as “farmers,” 49 percent of carpenters, 40 percent of blacksmiths, 39 percent of silversmiths, 72 percent of tailors and 60 percent of shoemakers (Comisión de Estadística de Cuba 1847, p. 10). Many of these nonwhite artisans were master craftsmen and owned their own workshops and slaves (Deschamps Chapeaux 1971, pp. 65–84). In the city of Santiago in eastern Cuba, free people of color likewise dominated the skilled trades, and often combined artisan employment with ownership of slaves and rural properties such as tobacco farms (*vegas*) (Chira 2022, pp. 202–6; Gómez Calderín 2024, pp. 89–93).

In Puerto Rico, the colonial census of 1860 found free people of color to be 41 percent of the population, 34 percent of those identified as “proprietors” (*propietarios*) and 37 percent of those categorized as *industriales* (literally, “industrialists”; in practice, owners and managers of small artisan workshops) (Junta General de Estadística 1863, pp. 842, 844, 845, 848).¹³ There is a general lack of statistics on the Dominican Republic in the nineteenth century, but anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest a similar pattern, where the social status of free people of color was if anything higher. An American observer visiting Santo Domingo in 1870 noted a black family in possession of 200 acres of land as a more or less representative example, and visited a rural school where the schoolmaster was “an intelligent coloured man” (Hazard 1873, pp. 223, 282–83).

As in Brazil, there was no significant population of coerced European laborers in the Spanish Caribbean during the early colonial period, making the development of the kind of especially virulent racist ideology characteristic of the United States unnecessary. However, the political power and autonomy of landed elites were considerably more circumscribed in the Spanish Caribbean than they were in either Brazil or British North America. A powerful Crown

¹³ On the definition of the term *industriales* in the Spanish census of 1860 see González Pérez and Martín-Serrano Rodríguez (2018, p. 76).

jealously guarded its prerogatives and, seeking to limit the emergence of an independent oligarchy that might challenge its power, sought to balance the influence of landed elites by granting concessions to those they exploited. This included legally enshrining pathways to freedom for the enslaved, and defending the rights of the formerly enslaved and their descendants to a certain degree of economic mobility as free people through the accumulation of skills and property. The result was a large free nonwhite population which enjoyed a significantly higher degree of upward economic mobility and independence than its counterparts in colonial Brazil and North America.

Conclusion

This article has sought to articulate a theory explaining variations in the correspondence between racial categories and class inequalities in societies with a common legacy of slavery. It has argued that contemporary variation in the racialization of material inequality in such societies reflects historical differences in the class power of elites during slavery. Where slaveholding elites enjoyed broad autonomy, cohesive organization, and effective control of local state institutions—as in British North America and Brazil—they ensured the systematic exclusion of Afrodescendants, even those who had gained their freedom, from the enjoyment of property, skills, or political participation. By contrast, in the Spanish Caribbean, the metropolitan state curtailed planter autonomy and regulated enslaver-enslaved relations, protecting avenues to manumission and enabling the emergence of free populations of nonwhite property owners and skilled artisans. These divergences in colonial class relations created distinct pathways from slavery to freedom which remain visible today in the different degrees to which racial categories map onto economic inequality in region.

More broadly, these findings suggest the need for political economy-focused theories of race which are attentive to both exploitation and variation. Race has functioned as a tool to reproduce class domination, but the strength of this linkage has always depended on the balance of power between elites and those they exploit, mediated by the variable role of the state. By identifying planter autonomy as a key structural axis through which slavery's legacies shape racial inequality, this study offers a framework capable of traveling across cases. Future comparative research should investigate the mechanisms—such as post-emancipation land reforms, forms of labor coercion other than slavery, industrialization, patterns of migration, and state projects of nation-building—that refracted colonial class relations into contemporary inequalities. Such work stands to deepen our understanding not only of why the color of class varies, but also of how policy and collective struggle may yet reshape its contours.

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