

Black Culture and Social Inequality in Colombia

Peter Wade

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NOTE

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Map drawn by Virginia Smith.



COLOMBIA
 showing places
 mentioned in the text
 APPROXIMATE SCALE 1cm=120km

Black Culture and Social Inequality in Colombia

My interest in the subject of blacks in Colombia began in 1981 when I was living as a tourist, English teacher and part-time barman in the city of Cartagena on the Caribbean – or as the Colombians often say, the Atlantic – coast. I had arrived there after extensive travels along the Caribbean coast of Central America, and everywhere along that littoral the presence of the New World African diaspora was unmistakable and vibrant: perhaps also a surprise for many Europeans who are ignorant of the important black populations of many Central and South American countries. As a white, one was often automatically cast into a series of roles which had clear roots in the colonial past: whatever freedoms had been gained and economic progress made, the blacks still mostly performed manual and service tasks and a white person was regarded in the first instance as a wealthy individual. Cartagena was no exception. Under Spanish rule it had been a principal slave port for the empire and still in 1912, when the last racially classified census for that region was performed, its population was 40% black. Although black heritage was obvious in much of the city's population, it was equally clear that the working class neighbourhoods and the slums were inhabited principally by black people. In the elite neighbourhoods and on the tourist beaches, blacks were almost always performing some kind of service: domestic chores, mending cars, selling fruit and beer to thirsty sunseekers, cleaning windows, preparing food and so forth.

When I returned to England and gained a more bookish perspective, I found that official attitudes to race in Colombia, or at least towards the black population, were complacent. The taken-for-granted social divisions between blacks and whites I had encountered, the easy stereotypes of blacks as culturally inferior did not, it seemed, constitute a “problem”. The sociological literature had, in the past, and even sometimes in the present, supported this view by painting optimistic pictures of the position of the black population.¹

A year later, I flew back to Colombia with the aim of investigating the nature of racial discrimination and racism in Colombia. On the plane to Bogotá, I met up with a voluble Colombian medic who enquired after my business there. “Race relations”, he exclaimed with a good-natured laugh, “Why, there aren't any: we're all brothers in Colombia.” *Todos somos mestizos*, he said, a well-worn Colombian adage which translates roughly as

“We’ve all got a touch of the tar-brush.”² Some, however, have more of the tar-brush than others

To grasp the question of race in Colombia, one needs to understand something of the geographical structure of the country and the distribution of its people (see map on p.4). From the south of Colombia, the Andes splits into three mountain ranges which run north, separated by the two giant valleys of the River Cauca and the River Magdalena. To the west of this central Andean interior lies the Pacific coastal littoral, a densely-forested, humid and selvatic region. To the east lie the Amazon and Orinoco basins – vast, flat extensions of plains and jungles: this region will scarcely concern us here. To the north, where the Cauca and Magdalena join and debouch into the Caribbean Sea lies the Atlantic coastal region, stretching from the Panamanian border to the tip of the peninsula beyond Santa Marta and backed by an extensive hinterland of savannahs, low-lying plains and swampy backwoods. The Spanish landed first on the Atlantic coast and with its ports of entry this region continued to play a fundamental role. But the real centre of colonial settlement, wealth, culture and power became, and still is, the Andean highlands of the interior, especially around Bogotá, but also centring on the other highland cities as well. The Atlantic coast remained sparsely populated and under-developed, while the Pacific coastal region was hardly settled at all and exploited only for its gold deposits, using large, well-regimented slave gangs.

This regional distribution of wealth and power had corresponding racial configurations. Indian labour was relatively plentiful in the highlands, whereas in the coastal regions, black slaves were more common. They were especially used in the gold-mining areas, since Indians proved to be less resistant to the rigours of mine labour. Together, these factors concentrated blacks in the coastal areas – also the least wealthy areas – although they also congregated in some lowland mining areas in the Cauca valley. In the Atlantic coastal region, race mixture with both whites and Indians was extensive and blacks are a small minority there; in the Pacific coastal region, however, blacks are still almost 90% of the population.³ My fieldwork concentrated on black people from a region called the Chocó, on the Pacific coast: these people are known as **Chocoanos**. My first study was in Unguía, a rural village near the Panamanian border in a zone of agricultural and cattle-raising colonization, where Chocoanos, **Antioqueños** from the highland region of Antioquia (a wealthy white/mestizo area) and **Costeños** from the Atlantic coast region all participated differently in the local economy. My second study was in the highland city of Medellín, the capital of Antioquia, where blacks from the Chocó migrated to seek work.⁴ In both these places, I found that racial discrimination and black disadvantage were

tangible aspects of everyday life, recognized by blacks and non-blacks alike, although predictably they had different attitudes to these realities. In Unguía, blacks held hardly any land or cattle, and participated only marginally in commerce – the three mainstays of the local economy. In Medellín, they were mainly domestic servants, construction workers and sellers of cooked food on the streets – all badly paid, unstable occupations. How, then could the idea exist that Colombia was an example of Latin American “racial democracy”? Essentially, five claims are made in support of such an idea. First, the majority of Colombians are of mixed blood. Thus, apparently, there can be no specific group of blacks: there is only an infinitely variegated continuum from white to black with no definite breaks. Then, as Marvin Harris says, since the “*sine qua non* of any thorough-going minority system is a fool-proof method for separating a population into superordinate and subordinate groups” (1974:54), there can be no such system in Colombia, because there are no “sharply defined racial groups” (1974:54). Second, and as a corollary of the first, intermarriage between people of different coloured skin exists and is relatively frequent compared to places like the USA or South Africa: this, surely, is a sign of racial democracy? Third, some coloured individuals have succeeded economically and made it into the middle classes: here they are accepted socially as, so to speak, honorary whites. Fourth, and again as a corollary to the third, the position of blacks is said to be due to class inequality, not race: blacks are simply poor and suffer as such, but not specifically as blacks. If a black person can succeed economically and be accepted, surely economics is more important than race? Fifth, there is very little overt violence directed against non-blacks by black people in protest at their position: therefore, perhaps, their position is not a bad one.

Let us look more closely at these points. To begin with, however, there are two ground-rules which have to be borne in mind. Firstly, there is no avoiding the fact that the situation is complex. We are not dealing with simple, straightforward black/white oppositions; we are not in South Africa, the USA or even Great Britain, where, whatever the complications of intermarriage, group boundaries and particular modes of racial classification,⁵ such oppositions do exist. Race mixture in Colombia has created a situation in which, at the last national census to include racial classifications (1918), 54% of the population was mixed. After 1918, many departments stopped making racial classifications on the grounds that they were too difficult and arbitrary. The result of this is that there is no real *group* of blacks on a national level. One can talk of “the blacks” as a general category, but as a coherent social group it is more or less impossible to locate them in any specific way.

The second ground-rule, and one which it is important to bear in mind against the idea that a black Colombian is the same as any other Colombian, is that in *certain regional and local contexts* blacks do form groups that are relatively unambiguously bounded and that have specific cultural and structural attributes. The Chocó itself is one example, and the specific contexts of Unguía and Medellín are others. In addition, at an individual level, black people may find themselves discriminated against in a way not designed to repress black people as a clearly defined minority, but which pressures individual blacks to redefine their own identity in the eyes of others against a background of pervasive and prejudicial images of blacks, a redefinition which ultimately involves the taking-on of a culture which is typically non-black and a disavowal of black culture and blackness itself, even if in the short term a certain amount of judicious role-switching will do the trick.

Bearing in mind these two basic rules is essential in appreciating the complex operation of racial discrimination in Colombia.

1. Race mixture and whitening

As previously stated, the majority of Colombians are mixed. Everyone has “a touch of the tar brush.” There are many cracks in this veneer: the obvious predominance of darker people in the lower classes, the aversion of light-skinned middle and upper class people to having blacks or indians as spouses – although not necessarily as unofficial mates (Banton 1967; Bastide 1961). My own reaction is to invoke the second ground-rule set out above. Look at the elite neighbourhoods of Cartagena on the Atlantic coast where the blacks clearly form a servant class for middle and upper class people who are white or light-skinned. Look at the rural stretches along the Atlantic coast where black fishing households line the beaches and the non-blacks are immigrant entrepreneurs or tourists. Look at the Pacific coastal region where the direct descendants of black slave mining-gangs predominate over a small intrusive nucleus of white and mestizo merchants and capitalists. Or look at Unguía where the Chocoanos are juxtaposed to an immigrant white/mestizo group of Antioqueño colonists and entrepreneurs and another group of mixed-blood Costeño immigrant farmers and landless labourers from the Atlantic coast region. As Norman Whitten found in his study of Ecuador and Colombia, “Blackness is the opposite of whiteness and national concepts of ‘mixed’ in Colombia and Ecuador stand opposed to ‘black’ just as white is the opposite of black” (1974:199).

In all these contexts, there are elements of an opposition between a group identified by themselves and by others as clearly black and another identified as non-black. There may be complex interactions between these

groups, but even though some blurring of their boundaries results, in Unguía I found that statistically they maintain a distinct endogamy which is not based on class differences alone (see Wade 1984). Because of this and other patterns of intra-ethnic relationships, and the quite definite folk concepts of ethnic and racial identities that people hold, it is generally easy to delimit distinct groups.

This kind of data not only belies the image of the Latin American melting-pot which issues forth an undifferentiated light-brown population, it also undermines more scholarly accounts of the “maximization of ambiguity” (Harris 1970) in Latin American racial classification, caused by race mixture, which supposedly makes it impossible to delineate a black group. Harris shows that a multiplicity of racial terms exists for classifying people racially and he concludes that this creates an ambiguity which irremediably blurs the boundaries of racial groups. However, in certain contexts, it is clear that *negro* is a relatively unambiguous category.⁶

So, black groups exist; but here it is necessary to remember the first ground-rule. They are not rigorously defined minorities. For example in my fieldwork in the Colombian town of Unguía, I found that intermarriage rates for blacks were of the same order of magnitude as Detroit Protestant-Catholic or Israeli European-Oriental Jew intermarriage rates, and much higher than USA or South African black-white rates. The situation in Unguía is complicated by the presence of the Costeños, a third, intermediate group of mostly mixed people who diluted the opposition between the entirely black group and the entirely non-black group: a great deal of intermarriage observed occurred between the Costeños and the Chocoanos. Whatever the particularities of this case, however, the point is that across the boundaries of the black groups – even in these regional and local contexts where they form social units – there exists a process of osmosis by race mixture.

The irony here lies in the fact that it is precisely this process that acts as a mechanism in the perpetuation of racial inequality. Race mixture is not a morally neutral ratio of expected over observed frequencies of intermarriage, it is a social process heavily loaded with cultural meanings: it is conceived of as *blanqueamiento*, i.e. “whitening”. It is seen as a distancing of oneself, via one’s offspring, from blackness – negatively valued – towards whiteness – positively valued. As a motive it may be stated openly by the parties concerned, or inferred in gossip by others. As a process it may consist of dark-skinned women giving sexual favours to lighter-skinned men in the hope of lighter-colour offspring, of vertically mobile darker-skinned men exchanging their economic success for the kudos of a lighter-skinned wife, or of a straightforward “love matches” between people of

distinct racial types. Whatever the process, the meanings attributed to these actions always acknowledge the superior value of whiteness and the explicit or implicit slur cast on blackness. I came across black women in Unguía and Medellín who said openly that they preferred a non-black husband or boyfriend. Other black women saw this admission as “grinding your own face in the dirt”. Even if such a motive is not admitted, others may well attribute it to the parties concerned. One Chocoano mother in Medellín whose daughters had married or had children by white men told me that she had been accused of being a “racist” by other blacks, because, to them, condoning her daughters’ behaviour indicated that she scorned blackness. In short, then, the very chance of escaping blackness publicizes the low value placed on it by society and by the blacks themselves.⁷

There are certain objective consequences too. If black people who achieve some measure of success “marry up” racially, then blackness is gradually bleached out of the middle strata into which these people ascend. Hence the maintenance of an overall correlation between race and class. Not only images of black and white, but the structural position of blackness are perpetuated.

Of course, *blanqueamiento* is predicated on the fact that only a few people can do it: if everyone could do it the system would collapse. Its nature is individualistic.

2. Individual mobility

It has always been the case in Colombia and Latin America generally that just as a handful of blacks whiten their offspring, another handful (not surprisingly, two overlapping samples) succeed in advancing their economic fortunes. Concrete examples appeared in my fieldwork. When I first copied out the records of the local government anti-foot-and-mouth disease agency which censused the cattle on all the farms in the region, I found that, although the blacks as a group had been largely pushed out of landholding and hardly participated in cattle-farming, there was a handful of blacks (10% of the farmers) who owned about 880 cattle between them (6% of the total).⁸ When I copied out the records in July 1985, three years later, that handful had almost doubled their holdings registering a rise to 9% of the total cattle stock, an increase much greater than that achieved by the two other groups.⁹

Now the cattle that farmers have on their ranches are usually not all their own property. They may rent out excess pasture and, more particularly, they may enter into profit-sharing arrangements with others. Here another person, with or without land, buys young cattle and puts them in the care of

the farmer who raises them on his/her farm, bearing the costs of several years of fattening. These costs include maintenance of pastures by weeding and fumigating, vaccinating the cattle and purging them of parasites, branding, castrating, milking, providing salt-licks etc. When the cattle are sold, the profits (less transportation costs) are split. Thus, for example, one black farmer had 150 cattle on his farm in July 1985 of which 60 were *a utilidades* (“at profits”) with 4 different partners. Almost by definition since the blacks here, as elsewhere, have the least access to capital, these partners are not fellow blacks. In this case, one partner was another black who had a small number of cattle *a utilidades*. Thus the lack of capital among the blacks means that economic success depends on forming links with non-blacks. The black farmer of this example employed blacks on his farm and associated mostly with them in his social life; to get capital investment however he had to look outside his own group.

This is the essence of the structure of black upward mobility. Only a handful make it (for reasons I will discuss later, but which centre on a combination of inexperience plus cumulative and direct racial discrimination), and those who do almost inevitably become involved in various economic relationships with non-blacks. Another example is the case of Chocoanos in Medellín. Although they often occupy the lowest social strata in the city, they are also often better off than they were in the Chocó. Leaving their poor and under-developed homeland and entering the non-black world of the highland interior where, although poverty abounds, there are the greater opportunities attendant upon a centre of power and wealth, gives the Chocoanos a chance of upward mobility, albeit minor. For those with higher aspirations exit from the Chocó is almost inevitable, since education opportunities are so limited there. Again, then, the chance of a good education or better work is predicated on forming links with non-blacks.

Now this process in itself, in principle, presents no real problem; like race mixture, it may present, in abstract form, a benign facade. In reality, as before, this form of mobility itself becomes a subtle means by which racial inequality remains uncorrected. To begin with, it is too easily forgotten that black mobility is a minority process – the majority remain poor. There are also more hidden processes at work. While some of these economic links with non-blacks may remain at a purely business level, as in the case of the black farmer, very often they involve much more extensive social links, as is often the case with Chocoanos in Medellín. Two different, but related processes operate here. In the first place, the individuals themselves may begin to take on the cultural mores and values of their new territory and social environment – a well-known phenomenon in social mobility. This

may involve accepting, at some level, current images of black culture and thus depreciating their own cultural origins: the culmination of this is often finding a lighter-coloured spouse. Clearly the ground is laid here for complex personal conflicts about identity, particularly because of the indelibility of race as a social marker. The actual rejection of one's own origins, and thus implicitly of self, is not inevitable: some blacks in Medellín, for example, form ethnic enclaves in which to protect their identity to some extent. But many others, and especially their children, adapt their ways to those of the Antioqueños.

The second process is that other, non-mobile blacks resent the association of mobile blacks with non-blacks and feel they have been betrayed. This resentment and accusations of betrayal can occur even when links are almost solely economic. One successful black farmer in Unguía was thus accused for certain commercial links he maintained with whites, despite the fact that he had a black wife, employed a black farm administrator and associated mainly with other blacks. Blacks living in Medellín often experience accusations of behaving as if they felt superior to other blacks because they have lost some of their Chocoano ways. In short, resentment arises and it may fuel itself from any evidence, however partial. I found that blacks constantly complained that "we blacks discriminate against each other", that is, that some blacks, especially when they begin to rise socially, feel themselves superior to, and begin to look down on, other blacks. As one woman said, "It's something we blacks have: you could almost say it was instinctive".

The net result of these processes is a chronic lack of solidarity among the blacks which has two sources: one, the structural nature of black mobility which, especially when allied with race mixture, allows certain individuals to advance and transmute their identity; and two, the feeling, born of this and subject to stereotypic overgeneralization, that blacks are constantly being betrayed by their own kind. The black category as a whole cannot be solidary; this is the obvious corollary of centuries of race mixture which have created a colour continuum. But even where black groups do form in local or regional contexts, the same types of mechanism operate which have undermined the creation of a national black group. That is, individualistic mobility, often combined with *blanqueamiento*, destroys the solidarity of the black group, both structurally (since certain people make the group's boundaries ambiguous in the act of penetrating them) and in terms of blacks' perceptions (since they accuse of betrayal both blacks who are trying to escape the black group and those who are still basically within it).

Now, it may be maintained that lack of racial solidarity is, at bottom, not a bad thing: individual competition is to be promoted precisely because it permeates group boundaries and, ultimately, destroys their significance, leaving everyone competing as individuals. This is clearly a notion which, while it may represent a viable strategy to be pursued for some groups in some situations – what Banton calls a “low-profile strategy” (1983:406) – is unrealistic for a group suffering from subtle and deeply-embedded forms of exclusion. The possibility of the democratization of individual competition is, for them, a distant one. Here some kind of “high-profile strategy” (*ibid*) is better which draws attention to group membership, group disadvantage and needs group solidarity.

For example, in Brazil racial discrimination was only made illegal in 1950 when the black North American dancer, Katherine Dunham, was refused entry to the Hotel Esplanada in São Paulo. Her protests sparked a row and Gilberto Freyre (a member of the Chamber of Deputies and author of *Masters and Slaves* which portrayed a benevolent picture of Brazilian race relations) together with Afonso Arinos had a bill passed outlawing racial discrimination (Fernandes 1969:406–8; Degler 1971:138). Prior to this, Brazilian blacks had either not bothered to attempt entry to these hotels and other places implicitly reserved for non-blacks, or had not protested effectively at being refused, i.e. they had adopted a low-profile strategy when a high-profile one was much more effective in getting results.

In Colombia a handful of blacks achieve some kind of advancement. The majority remain below, with few opportunities for advancement. They form black communities which elaborate their own cultural forms and identity in symbolic and concrete resistance to the dominance of the non-black world. However, alongside positive feelings about Chocoano identity and pride in being black, I also found some blacks accepting in a piecemeal and ambivalent fashion negative images of black people (Wade 1984:124). As a group it was also clear that their solidarity and corresponding possibilities of political mobilization were undermined by the escape of some of their more successful members (and potential leaders). The blacks were riven by internal jealousies and lacking in the necessary confidence, solidarity and leadership to adopt a high-profile strategy.

3. Race and class

The question that has arisen more than once is: why do the majority of blacks not make it? What are the mechanisms that keep them in the lower strata?

Here we come upon a knotty set of problems. A typical answer is: “class rather than race”, i.e. it is because the blacks are poor, not because they are black. One has to remember here that “the very idea of a ‘racial problem’ is an obstacle to clear thinking problems which have loosely been called racial are economic, social, psychological and political problems” (Banton 1983:405). At the same time, one has to remember that certain economic and other problems may affect blacks more than others, or be specific to them as a group. The rather slippery formula “class rather than race” thus becomes the more precise statement that blacks are in the same position as other Colombians, given the overall class structure of the country; or at least that the differences are insignificant.

Attempts to sustain this idea have used different kinds of evidence. One oft-quoted tit-bit is the idea that “money whitens”, i.e. economic success leads to a racial reclassification in the eyes of others. People use a different colour term to describe a person who looks well-off from that used for the same person looking poor. This needs to be seen in perspective: in my experience, a person classed unequivocally as black – i.e. who has all the phenotypical attributes of a black – will never be classed as anything else, no matter how rich he or she is. This possibility is only open to those whose racial identity is already ambiguous. An interesting contrary case emerged when I showed people a picture of a friend of my family sitting in my parents’ drawing room in London. His dress and surroundings were unmistakably not poor, even to the foreign, inexperienced eye. His father is West Indian and his mother white. His skin is white, but his hair, although light brown, is observably negroid and his facial features show some traces of the same ancestry. When black Colombians saw this they unflinchingly remarked upon it. Far from according him the status of an honorary white or “not noticing” his racial heritage because he looked well-off, black Colombians were very acute in their perception of racial ancestry. Money may turn some blacks into social non-blacks, but their origins are never forgotten.

More systematic evidence than this has been brought to bear. Harris (1952) and Solaún and Kronus (1973) show that status groups are more homogeneous with respect to economic indices than they are with respect to racial types. In other words, the groups one sees “on the ground” have a variety of racial types who are all more or less economically equal. A major problem here is that since race and class largely coincide the difference in degrees of homogeneity is rather small and not very meaningful. That is, the groups on the ground are *de facto* made up of people who are racially similar: a status group made up of poor people is also made up mostly of blacks with just a sprinkling of non-blacks. Another problem is that “status group”, if not defined in an obviously tautological fashion by the economic

indices themselves, is defined by some rather vague and implicit notion of “the groups on the ground” and often these are defined by an equally vague criterion of “best friends”, i.e. who socializes intimately with whom. In effect the idea is that blacks are in the same position as everyone else because they have the same kind of best friends as others, at the same class level; and this is presumably meant to synthesize their life-chances in a socially stratified society. No real indication is given of whether the blacks have an equal chance of vertical mobility, for example.

My own research indicated that the idea that blacks are undifferentiated from others is manifestly untrue; and the differences are substantial. I did find, as did Harris, that intimate friendships and marriages occurred more frequently across racial and ethnic boundaries than across class ones, but I also found that, on average, poor blacks had less economic opportunity than poor non-blacks due to patterns of patronage between the latter and richer non-blacks, patronage that is not extended to the blacks and was not as available to them from the small nucleus of richer blacks. Both in Unguía and Medellín, a poor Antioqueño had a better chance of upward mobility than a black because he or she was able to benefit materially from connections with richer Antioqueños who tended to distrust the blacks and discriminate against them outside certain occupation spheres like domestic service and manual labour. In my case, race and class did *not* largely coincide, making an assessment of the differential patterns of mobility possible. I also found in Unguía that blacks as a group had been largely expelled from landholding, stock-raising and commerce, the three big money-earners of the region. They had experienced an absolute improvement, but a relative decline in their economic situation. In short, they occupied a very different economic niche from the other two groups in which their opportunities were also different. In Medellín, too, statistical analysis showed that while Chocoano immigrants shared many features with other poor immigrants, they had certain characteristics which militated against equal opportunities for upward mobility. For example, they were much more heavily concentrated in domestic service (40% of their workers, compared to only 9% of immigrant Antioqueño workers) which is a notoriously underpaid occupation.¹⁰ These differences are clearly due in part to ground-rule two, i.e. that blacks formed a distinguishable group with a distinct culture and history.

It is also worth bearing in mind more general considerations. While at some abstract level class and race have to be separated as factors, it is also true that “race is the modality in which class relations are experienced The two are inseparable” (Hall *et al* 1978:394). One has to be careful of theoretically, analysing the “*opus operatum*” – i.e. the objective structures

of racial and class stratification- to the detriment of the “*modus operandi*” – i.e. how people are created by and themselves recreate those structures through their actions and experience (Bourdieu 1977). Thus it is regrettably theoreticist and ahistorical to ignore that a poor black *cannot*, in Colombia, be seen by another Colombian simply as a poor person, but is inevitably perceived as a poor black, the bearer of a specific, negatively-valued sub-culture and phenotype.

Again it is necessary to restate something quite obvious: “class systems no longer function in the same way once class has phenotypical associations processes of selection come into operation that cannot exist in a [racially] homogeneous population” (Pitt-Rivers 1967). This is to do with the special role race has as an indelible marker which creates a fixity of ascribed, and also subjective, identity (see Wade 1985a for a detailed discussion). It is also connected to the fact that racial, like gender, ideologies “discover what other ideologies have to construct”, i.e. differences (Gilroy 1982).

We can return then to the original question: why do the majority of blacks not make it?

4. Discrimination and adaption

There is no question that blacks who form groups in the kinds of contexts I have briefly described suffer from direct racial discrimination at the hands of non-blacks who control substantial amounts of wealth and resources. A series of images and stereotypes exist which characterize blacks as irresponsible, lazy, spendthrift, good for only physical labour, disorganised in family and general life-style and so forth. While few people treat the blacks as if they firmly held these images to be the literal truth about every black, there is a gradual and usually covert exclusion of blacks from certain opportunities of employment and certain types of cooperative relations. In Unguía, some Antioqueños said frankly that they discriminated against blacks, affirming that it made logical sense to do so, in view of what they saw as their previous unfavourable experiences with them as, say, employees. In Medellín, to cite just one example, an experiment involving a black and a non-black group trying to rent rooms advertised in the local press showed that blacks were more frequently refused than non-blacks.

More significant in my view are the much more deeply-embedded structures of inequality. In Medellín, blacks take lowly occupations mostly because they are in the majority poor and badly educated migrants. In the region around Unguía, the blacks now hardly hold any land and one reason for their selling up lies in their particular attitude to land, agriculture and

stock-raising; a further cause is that a handful of the Antioqueño white/mestizo colonists had ready capital to offer in return for land. Or again, commerce is dominated by the Antioqueños: the principal reason is a history of dynamic, adaptable entrepreneurship in their region of origin. In another example, blacks find it hard to get a position of trusted employment with these immigrants who discriminate against them; but then many immigrants have been robbed by their black employees.

So, why are most Chocoanos poor and badly educated? Why do the blacks have this attitude to land? Why do the Antioqueños have entrepreneurial talents (or vice versa, why are the entrepreneurs white and mestizo)? And why have they had bad experiences with black employees?

The answers to these questions are historical in form and also quite complex (see Wade 1984: chs. 2 and 6). Here I shall be brief. The blacks are descendents of slaves used by the Spanish to mine gold on the Pacific coast. Settlement never got beyond the stage of impermanent and rudimentary frontier colonization. The blacks that were freed (mostly through self-purchase) were not integrated into colonial society but were rejected and retreated into the jungle. Later, wars of independence impoverished the mine-owners and in 1851 the slaves were freed. The whole area was then more or less abandoned, despite the continued presence of great wealth in gold deposits: there was very little infrastructure and the isolated and inaccessible life-style of the blacks, who maintained a fairly independent existence gold-panning in the jungle, posed great problems for the availability of labour.

The region was thus deemed a poor prospect by the whites who maintained only a small dominant nucleus in the main town there, while the rest was relegated to the blacks. The blacks remained there because the possibilities of integration into colonial and post-colonial society had been and remained very restricted. A *de facto* racial segregation set in, stemming from processes of racial discrimination and based on economic and ecological specializations. The blacks became adapted to a specific niche in which agricultural land was limited and very poor; they depended on shifting cultivation, gold-panning, fishing and hunting. Thus attitudes which valued land highly, and entrepreneurial or commercial experience and aspirations were developed to a restricted degree. In short, their present disadvantage in the competition with the Antioqueño immigrants to Unguía or Medellín is due to a history shaped by cumulative forces of racial discrimination.

The opposite applies to the white/mestizo highlanders: they were not discriminated against in the same way and could participate in the currents of development that centred on the highlands. In reality, the facts are much

more subtle and complex than this, but this is not the place to enter into the history of Antioquia, their region of origin (see Wade 1984: chs. 2 and 6; and 1985b). Suffice it to say that in this area, although slaves and mining were an important part of the economy, neither occupied a dominant role. Slave-gangs were not an economic form of labour and slaves were distributed singly and in small groups: they integrated both socially and racially and, in the highlands, a group of blacks did not really exist, although many people had black ancestry. At the same time, the indian population declined drastically and rapidly. The elite was forced to diversify and adapt and this formed a basis for their later entrepreneurial success. They relied neither on a stable subservient indian labour force, nor solely on large slave mining-gangs. Thus the eclectic investment portfolio of the elite and the absence of a large mass of blacks (and indians) are two sides of the same coin.

What this adds up to is that the relative non-blackness (and non-indian-ness) of these highlanders cannot be separated from their overall socio-economic position, just as the blackness of the blacks and the discrimination it entailed is intimately linked to their socio-economic position. Each group has adaptations that entail differential advantage in a competitive confrontation; and it is not by chance that the disadvantages have accrued to the blacks.

Thus the fact that some white merchants have had bad experiences with black employees stealing from them is due to a rather large income gap between them and the different opportunities that face each group, and these facts are in turn deeply embedded in a complex of social and economic structures rooted in the past. It is ironic that the blacks also often attribute the highlanders' success to unscrupulousness and sharp dealing, such that both groups have mutual images of suspicion and distrust that underlie everyday friendliness.

5. Violence and conflict

Solaún and Kronus (1973) call their study of Cartagena *Discrimination without Violence* and the task they set themselves is to explain how there can be racial discrimination of which blacks and whites are both aware, without there being a violent black reaction. The answer they come up with is that there are significant channels of mobility for blacks to move into the middle classes where they will probably mix racially and have lighter-coloured children who will join the ranks of the mixed-blood population which they find to be relatively complacent about racial discrimination, compared to the poorest black groups and the richest white groups. These

channels of mobility represent a “principle of integration” which outweighs the “principle of discrimination” and effectively defuses conflict. They also argue that as economic development creates more opportunities, black integration will increase even further, creating even more racial equality. I have already commented on the drawbacks of individualistic upward mobility and its effects on group solidarity; it is also very pertinent to observe that a host of studies of economic development have shown that when change opens up a series of new opportunities, those who are better placed to take advantage of them usually do so to the detriment of the worse off, thus increasing overall inequality. Several studies of blacks in Latin America, including my own, show that in situations where blacks compete with non-blacks in a situation of expanding opportunities, they often lose out, relatively speaking, even if there is some absolute improvement in their position. Part of the reason for this is their inadequate preparation for competition with other groups, given their respective histories. But part of the reason is also that the more advantaged groups tend to discriminate against them in order to keep potential benefits for themselves, and the evidence shows that the more the blacks try and compete, the more discrimination they encounter: their mobility is allowed *on condition* that it takes place on a small scale.¹¹ The optimistic view of Solaún and Kronus is therefore not well supported by the evidence. The future may be one of increasing conflict as blacks demand fuller rights and benefits in society as blacks and on a group scale rather than as individuals and honorary whites.

In any case, Solaún and Kronus’s description of the situation as being *without* violence may itself be rather blinkered. True, Colombia has not witnessed systematic lynching nor urban race riots like those of the USA, nor the violence of South Africa, but neither has it been without conflict in which race played a significant role. In colonial times, many was the time whites in Cartagena quaked in their beds as rumours abounded of murderous uprisings by the blacks, slave and free (Borrego Pla 1973). The backwoods sheltered many *palenques* or maroon communities where runaway slaves had formed their own settlements from which they made excursions to harass local farms and even towns (Arrázola 1970). One author even goes so far as to state that in Colombia conflicts with the black population “often took on the aspect of a civil war” (Jaramillo Uribe 1968:59). Even after emancipation in 1851, political configurations sometimes had racial undertones. Delpar (1981:22–24) describes how in the Cauca region of Colombia in the late nineteenth century violent conflict developed between a white Conservative elite and the negroid Liberal masses in which the latter attacked haciendas and individuals on the streets: in this case, race, class and political alignments coincided. Sharp (1969:177)

also notes that “it is very probable that among the many reasons that separated the Liberals from the Conservatives there has been the problem of race”.

On a contemporary level, I came across individual incidents of violent conflict that clearly had racial antagonism as a principal motive. In Unguía in the fifties and sixties, when the Antioqueños first arrived and began to impose themselves on the local area and its habitants, there were apparently some fights and even though these appeared under the guise of drunken outbursts, it is clear that they were part of an overall confrontation between the Chocoanos and the Antioqueños. In Medellín as well, in two neighbourhoods where the blacks formed a significant percentage and where they had established their own dance halls which attracted more blacks from other areas of the city, the local Antioqueños reacted violently, throwing stones at the dance halls and harassing the blacks. In both Unguía and Medellín, violence has decreased, but in both cases this is because the Chocoanos have submitted to the Antioqueños’ dominion: in Unguía, the latter clearly now control the whole area; in Medellín, in those neighbourhoods where conflict had occurred, the Chocoanos have closed down their dance halls, or moved them away to peripheral areas where the Antioqueños let them be.

A more overtly violent case was recounted to me by a black friend in Buenaventura, a large port town on the Pacific coast, just south of the Chocó. Here the local black population participates unequally in the main sectors of the local economy which are run by white and mestizo outsiders. One small scale business that some of the locals used to operate was that of buying a case or two of whisky and other such goods direct from the ships in port and selling them in town. The customs agents, mostly whites and mestizos from the interior, would allow themselves to be bribed or turn a blind eye. Then, for reasons which are unclear, there was a change in policy and resistance to petty contrabanding increased. One manifestation of this was a spate of killings in which customs agents shot down local blacks who were infringing the law. Finally in May 1971, they killed a young student and this proved too much for the local populace. There was a demonstration outside the local customs office which quickly turned into an attack on the building. Following this, the crowd rampaged through the town, locating the places where the agents lived and burning their possessions.

Isolated incidents they may be, but discrimination *without* violence is undoubtedly an over-optimistic interpretation. From early colonial times, blacks have experienced violent repression and have reacted in ways that have also included violent resistance.

6. Conclusion

When I was in Unguía, a black friend of mine said to me, “I sometimes think the system they have in the United States is better: where the blacks and the whites have their separate things. That way everyone knows where they are.” My own impression, as a white, was that in Colombia it is a good deal easier to get to know and befriend blacks of any class than it would be in the USA. At that level, at least, the Colombian system, with its relative absence of conflict and outright hostility, is a good one. Perhaps as a corollary, the blacks’ chances of changing their position in society and of redefining their culture without destroying its integrity are, at present, rather less than in the USA.

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NOTES

1. Gilberto Freyre's works on Brazil have been criticized as creating too rosy a vision of black-white relations (see, for example, Freyre 1946). Donald Pierson's *Negroes in Brazil* (1942) has also met with such objections. For Colombia, Solaún and Kronus's more recent study of Cartagena (1973), while it admits the existence of racial discrimination, is generally optimistic about the amelioration of racism and sees integration as a more powerful force.
2. *Mestizo* literally means mixed-blood of any kind, but is generally used to refer to mixtures between indians and whites, the word *mulatto* being used for black-white mixtures,
3. See Wade (1986) for a discussion of these patterns.
4. My first trip was financed by a grant from the Social Science Research Council of Great Britain. The second trip was made possible by grants from the Social Science Research Council of the United States of America, and the British Academy, and by a Research Fellowship from Queens' College, Cambridge.
5. See Watson (1970) for anomalies in the South African system (see also Dudgard 1978:59–63). See Myrdal (1944) for variations in USA classifications, and Benson (1981) for ambiguity in Britain.
6. See also Sanjek (1971) who shows that the multiplicity of racial terms in fact concentrates around certain core images.
7. Jackson (1976) gives a good account of the real meaning behind *blanqueamiento* or, as he calls it, "ethnic lynching".
8. The agency's censuses did not include the racial type of the farmers, nor their regional origin (in this case, the latter was an accurate guide to the

former). However, the enumerators were able to identify all the farmers according to their colour and origin.

9. This return visit was made possible by grants from several bodies, including the British Academy, the Durham Fund of King's College, Cambridge and Queens' College, Cambridge.
10. The material on Medellín is contained partly in Wade (1987) and in more detail in a forthcoming book.
11. See Whitten (1974:198), Ashton (1970), Harris (1952:80), Van den Berghe (1967:74). All these authors describe situations in which blacks lose out in economic competition, or in which discrimination increases in the face of competition.