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RACIAL AND CLASS BARRIERS TO ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE IN THE AMERICAS

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RACIAL AND CLASS BARRIERS TO ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE IN THE AMERICAS

The peoples of the Americas come from many nations and are physically of three racial stocks. Perhaps no other area of the world has such a variegated population. Without exception all of our nations were once colonies of European powers, and after winning political independence twenty-one nations, dedicated to a democratic form of government, were founded in the New World. Throughout the Americas we have given voice to the ideal of equality, of the dignity of all men and of the inalienable rights of all men to justice, to free speech and political expression, to freedom of religion and worship, and to the access to education and the pursuit of knowledge. All these ideas were expressed in the legal framework of the constitutions of the new nations created during the enthusiasm and optimism of the 18th and 19th centuries, and they were reaffirmed by the American Declaration of Rights and Duties of Man signed at Bogotá in 1948 in anticipation of the work of the United Nations. Such ideals continue to motivate our public policy; however, the concept of equal social, economic and political rights for all men has remained but a partially achieved ideal throughout the New World. Each nation has strived toward this ideal in terms of its own culture and historical traditions; on the other hand, each nation in turn has encountered barriers arising out of these same cultural and historical traditions.

Out of the varied racial and cultural backgrounds of the people of the Americas has arisen a strong impediment to these ideals of equality of opportunity for all men, namely racial prejudice and discrimination. Out of distinctions between men based on economic and social station at birth has arisen another barrier, namely limitation of opportunity

due to socio-economic class. These two barriers to freedom in the larger sense have been felt with different intensity and in distinct ways in the different nations of the Americas, but they are factors present since 1500 which have hindered the full realization of our American ideal. In the present paper, it is proposed to discuss these two barriers as they have prevented the full realization of the inalienable right of all men to education and to access to knowledge, which is but one important aspect of the full American ideal of social, economic and political democracy. The point of view is taken that in those American nations which we speak of as Latin America, socio-economic class has been a greater impediment to overcome than racial prejudice and discrimination, whereas in the area of the Americas which we might call Anglo-America, racial prejudice and discrimination have been greater barriers than in Latin America. It is maintained that in large areas of Latin America, entrenched feudal classes have persisted into the 20th century primarily because of the lack of industrialization and the continued agrarian economic basis of the society. In Anglo-America, on the other hand, the overwhelming presence of a middle class - an inheritance from the greater impact of the industrial revolution - has led to a different type of socio-economic stratification in which economic and social upward mobility has been more readily achieved than in Latin America.

This difference between the two Americas results from our different European backgrounds, from differences in the aboriginal cultures which we encountered in the New World, and from the process of history as it unrolled in our different spheres. In the 16th century, when the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French, the Dutch, and

the English arrived in the Americas, they found these continents populated by American Indians whose cultures varied from that of the simple hunters of Tierra del Fuego and the Great Basin Plateau of North America to the complex civilizations of Meso-America and Andean South America. In these latter areas, where the population was dense, the European was able to exploit the labor of millions of Indians. In the areas of the Americas with relatively sparse aboriginal population, imported disease, war, or slavery quickly decimated or even exterminated the Indians. So in these areas the European sought elsewhere for the labor he needed in the New World - or as in the northern English colonies, he worked for himself. All of the European powers with colonies in the New World, and later even the new American nations, were guilty of the slave trade which brought millions of West African Negroes to the Americas to work on plantations, in mines, and even in the homes of the European colonists.

From these differences in the aboriginal population and from the slave trade resulted the regional differences in the racial composition of the New World population. In a sense, three "Americas" resulted: Indo-America, where a minority of Europeans dominated a mass of Indians; Afro-America, where Europeans were often fewer than their Negro slaves; and Euro-America, where the Indian disappeared (albeit leaving a certain cultural and genetic heritage). Negro slaves were few, and the European dominated both in numbers and in cultural contribution.

In addition, differences between the European cultures imported into the Americas contributed to the formation of distinct barriers to the achievement of our American ideal. Latin America has mainly an Iberian background and a Catholic tradition. Anglo-America is Northern

European and predominantly Protestant. Northern Europe was the scene of the Reformation and the rise of the Bourgeoisie; in the 17th and 18th centuries modern capitalism had its center in Western Europe. The Iberian countries were more conservative - traditional feudal class alignments were retained and Catholicism continued as both a religious and a secular power. Instead of witnessing a Protestant revolt, Spain and Portugal were the scene of the Inquisition. And Iberian peoples had, by the 16th century, become accustomed to people of different cultures and of different racial type; both the Spanish and the Portuguese had for centuries not only fought with the Moors but also lived with them and learned from them. This experience, as Gilberto Freyre emphasizes,¹ made it difficult for the Portuguese in Brazil to look down upon people of darker skin color and it contributed to the modern Latin American concept of human equality.

Based on different European backgrounds and on the distinct aboriginal cultures which were encountered, the two spheres of the Americas developed differently in the New World. Latin American colonial societies were in their inception "caste" societies.² They were founded by the subjugation of the Indian and the Negro by European minorities. But almost at once miscegenation between individuals of the two "castes" produced in the Iberian colonies groups of mulattoes and metizos who were intermediate in social position between the European masters and the Indian peones or Negro slaves. In Brazil the Portuguese men found the Indian women attractive, and such unions produced the mamelucos who were so important in early Brazilian colonial times. Later, a growing class of mulattoes were proof of the attraction of the European master for his slaves. In Spanish colonies

the process now called mestizaje - i.e., unions between Europeans and Indians - began almost at once; Martin Cortez, the son of Cortez by his Indian mistress, the famous "Malinche" or "Doña Marina," was an early example of a very general process. These mulattoes, mamelucos, mestizoes, or whatever they were called in local terms, generally identified with the ruling European "caste," but they were considered in turn inferior to the native-born Europeans and to the European-born colonists. Little by little, as new groups appeared in Latin American society, the original "castes" which in inception were racial (i.e., European Caucasoid and Indian-Negro in composition) took the form of two social classes made up on the one hand of landholding descendants of the European colonists, and on the other hand of aboriginal and slave workers.

In general, this Latin American class system has not been based upon physical race alone. In nearly all Latin American countries there have been in the past - and there are today - individuals belonging to the highest economic and social strata of society who have Indian or Negro ancestors. Yet it cannot be said that race has not been a criterion of class formation; the Indian and the Negro formed in colonial society the lowest social stratum. Even today Indian and Negro physical characteristics continue to be symbols of slave or peon ancestry. But in Latin America racial appearance has been but one criterion for granting a man membership in a socio-economic class - education, income, occupation and family connections have been given equal weight. Innumerable cases may be cited of mestizoes or mulattoes who have risen to high status in Latin America because of superior education, higher incomes, and even family connections through their

European fathers. And whole groups who are descendants of Indians and Negroes have raised their social status through better education. It may be said, therefore, that physical race has never been an invincible barrier in Latin American society to economic and social advancement. Whenever people of non-Caucasoid ancestry have moved upward on the social ladder they have moved into an upper class composed predominantly of whites of European descent - they have not simply moved upward within a "caste" of people of color.

But in Latin America socio-economic classes have resisted change, and in many countries a feudal class system persists today little changed from colonial times. In the 19th century most Latin American countries were dominated by a small aristocratic group of landed gentry who controlled the government and the economic life of the nation. These "good families" formed a closed group of people who married among themselves and struggled among themselves for economic and political power. As stated above they were mainly descendants of Europeans, while "the people" were in varying degrees of inter-mixture of Indian and Negro ancestry. In general, a middle class has been slow to appear in Latin America.³ Those individuals, regardless of their racial ancestry, who were able to move into the aristocratic class were soon assimilated through marriage and self-identification into the ideology of the ruling class. But upward mobility has been difficult. The Indians and the Negroes, because they are poor, have been unable to send their children to school even when free public schools have been provided, and in general the dominating upper class has seldom seen, in the past, the necessity of providing schools for the mass of the people. Without education, the people of the lower class have

continued to do manual labor, which everywhere in Latin America was the work of slaves or peons and which has continued to be a symbol of lower-class membership. Manual labor has been poorly paid, and thus the people have remained poor and without access to education. Although ideally and theoretically the possibility of social and economic upward mobility has been open to all men without distinction of skin color, the rigidity of the Latin American class system has in fact denied the major proportion of the Latin American population the opportunity for economic and educational improvement. Discrimination based on socio-economic class lines worked in much of Latin America to prevent the realization of the American ideal.

In Anglo-America, particularly in the United States, the process of social and economic differentiation between men took a different turn. As in lowland South America and in the Antilles, the aboriginal population was relatively sparse as compared to the highland countries. The American Indians were not numerous enough to provide an adequate and regular labor supply. They were soon exterminated or driven into the more inaccessible parts of the country. In the south of what is now the United States, Africans were imported to man the plantations. Gilberto Freyre has pointed out the similarity of the way of life that developed on the plantations of the American South and in those of the north of Brazil.⁴ The plantation system as it developed in the New World made for similarities which in the 17th and 18th centuries bridged the Americas. But as Frank Tannenbaum has shown in his brilliant little book, Slave or Citizen: The Negro in the Americas,⁵ there was a real difference in the concept of slavery as held in Anglo-America and in Latin America. In the latter region, as he points out,

the slave had a legal status, derived perhaps from ancient patterns of slavery of the Mediterranean cultures, which gave him a position as a man before the law and which provided him with a legal right to manumission. And in these Catholic countries the Church taught that "... slave and master are equal in the sight of God. Whatever the formal relations between slave and master, they must recognize their relationship to each other as moral human beings and as brothers in Christ."⁶ The Catholic Church insisted that the masters teach their slaves Christian doctrine, bring them to church to participate in communion, and sometimes even have them baptized before they were embarked on slave ships from Africa. In the Protestant West Indies and in the United States, on the other hand, there was resistance to the movement to christianize the slaves, and antagonism among the slaveholders to the activities of the proselytizing missionaries for fear that conversion would impair the master's rights to his slaves.⁷ Furthermore, the Negro as a slave had no legal right; in Anglo-America he more closely approximated a piece of property to be bought and sold and used by the owner without any limitation from church or state.

In Latin America slavery came to an end peacefully, and at that time innumerable mulatto and Negro freedmen already were participating in national life. But in North America the end of slavery was cataclysmic, violent and abrupt, and followed by the trials of Reconstruction in the South. There was no pre-existing legal mechanism in Anglo-America whereby the slave might take his place as a citizen and be integrated into one national society. As all of us know, the result was the creation of a dual society or "caste-like" system. Between the two castes - namely the whites and the descendants of Negroes - inter-

marriage is taboo by custom and in many states prohibited by law. Particularly in the south of the United States, and to a lesser degree in the northern part of the country and in British possessions, segregation of the Negro-white castes in schools, in public conveyances, in housing, and in other aspects of normal life became the rule and even the law. Few people are able or willing to "pass" from the Negro caste into the "superior" white caste, and they do it surreptitiously.

Yet in Anglo-America the opportunity was provided for members of both the white and the Negro castes to improve their educational situation. The educational opportunities and facilities of the Negro caste have of course been inferior to those furnished the "superior" white caste. Still, a large number of Negroes have been able to improve their educational, social and material position. Paradoxically, more people of color have perhaps had the opportunity of higher education in the United States than in Latin America, and if statistics were available they would show a higher index of literacy among the Negroes of the United States than among those of Brazil. Yet when Negroes and descendants of Negroes raise their educational status and achieve high social and economic position in the United States, they do so within the Negro society or caste. In the United States, physical race is not an invincible barrier to educational opportunity, but it is an absolute barrier to membership in the dominant white caste; and the educational facilities furnished to the Negro caste have always been fewer and of a lower quality than those available to whites.

Despite this color-caste system, Anglo-America developed a more malleable system of socio-economic classes than Latin America. In the United States upward economic and social mobility has been frequent and

comparatively easy. Alongside its racial caste system, the United States has cherished the ideal that "all men are created equal" and made a national myth of the "log cabin to White House" story which implies equal opportunity for all men despite their social and economic status at birth. This paradox was called the "American dilemma" by Gunnar Myrdal in his masterful analysis of race relations in the United States. In this book he writes: "The Negro in America (i.e., in the U.S.) has not been given the elemental civil and political rights of formal democracy including a fair opportunity to earn his living, upon which a general accord was already won when the American Creed was first taking form. And this anachronism constitutes the contemporary 'problem' both to Negroes and to whites."⁸

This racial caste system appears as even more of an anachronism when we consider that the United States, as compared to most Latin American nations, is today a society with vaguely defined socio-economic classes. Social scientists have had a difficult time trying to delineate and define the hierarchy of social and economic classes in the United States. The most ambitious attempt, that of W. Lloyd Warner and his associates, postulates a traditional European system of lower, middle and upper classes, each of them subdivided into a lower and upper subdivision.⁹ It is true that once instructed in the criteria used by the social scientists in constructing this "class system," people are able to place themselves and others in the proper division; but such a system remains artificial - an artifice of the social scientist imposed upon a society for purposes of analysis of economic and social stratification. North American socio-economic classes do not have the traditional cultural, ideological, and legal foundations of the socio-economic classes of Latin America.

This does not mean that social stratification does not exist in the United States. The "open class system," as it has been called, without any clear and sharp limits between classes, results perhaps in more emphasis upon stratification than in societies with more clearly delimited socio-economic classes. Each family, each individual, competes for economic and social position. Studies of North American communities have shown people to be highly sensitive to relative rank, although denying the existence of any system of social distinctions.¹⁰ Most certainly, remnants of an elite, such as the "Boston Brahmins" or the "Tidewater Aristocrats" of Virginia still exist in the United States in a few communities, but they represent small segments of the total social universe. Most North Americans would claim to be "middle-class" - or in the words of people in Plainville, U.S.A., "good, honest self-respecting, average, everyday working people."¹¹ Even most people of the working or laboring class have "middle-class" ideals. (The full 9 realization of industrialization has produced a society in which the middle class is numerically superior to either the economic and social elite or the underprivileged proletariat.

Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, race prejudice and discrimination provided a serious barrier to access to education in the United States;¹² while in Latin America an entrenched feudal socio-economic class system achieved almost the same effect. Looking at the situation from the positive side, however, Latin America began the 20th century with a concept of relations among men of various racial stocks from which the world has much to learn; and the United States, with its concept of a "classless society," also had a real lesson to teach. In recent years, each region has done much to overcome its respective barriers to equal human opportunity. Recent years have

seen the gradual disappearance of feudal class lines in many areas of Latin America, and discrimination and segregation along race lines have certainly been ameliorated in the United States.

This healthy trend may perhaps best be seen in the field of public education. At the end of slavery, only a small proportion of the Negroes in North America were literate.¹³ In 1900, Negroes had the lowest educational level of any group in the United States. The few segregated schools provided them in the South were poor and inadequate. Only by migration to the North could Negroes find educational facilities anywhere equal to those offered the whites, and even then they were apt to be isolated in predominantly segregated residential districts such as Harlem where the schools were more crowded than, and generally inferior to, those in other districts of the same city. Educational facilities for Negroes, especially in Southern United States, are even today certainly inferior to those provided for the whites, but in the last two decades rapid improvement has been made. Private foundations and public organizations have given improved educational facilities to Negroes, and the growth of such famed universities as Howard, Fisk, Atlanta, Dillard and others for Negroes indicates the improvement of educational opportunity for Negroes and the presence of an educated group among them. Furthermore the growing Negro migration to the North, where Negroes freely attend unsegregated primary and secondary schools and universities, has raised markedly the educational standards of Negroes in the United States. Yet color-caste segregation continues to be a serious barrier to educational opportunity for a large segment of the American population.

Real progress is being made, however, in breaking down the color-caste system in education. First, under the "separate but equal" rule following a late 19th-century decision of the Supreme Court, Negroes have won a series of cases involving their right to attend public southern universities. "As a result... there are today thousands of Negroes attending unsegregated, state-supported institutions of higher learning in the South, whereas there were none a decade or so ago."¹⁴ And when Negroes have exercised their legal right to take up their studies at such southern universities, there have not been the "flair-ups" or even riots which those who advocate segregation had predicted. Instead, on the whole, the relations between Negro and white students have been peaceful and devoid of strife. The gradual disappearance of educational segregation is not accompanied by violence and bloodshed as some segments of the population had feared. And finally, the recent decision of the Supreme Court which declared segregation in schools on all levels to be unconstitutional is a gigantic step toward wiping out race barriers to education in the United States. Already several cities, even whole states, where segregation in education was in force, have moved toward established non-segregated school systems (the Federal District is a notable case). The United States has made considerable progress in the last twenty years toward overcoming this major barrier to the American ideal of equality of opportunity for all men.¹⁵

The effect of the Latin American system of socio-economic classes upon the educational level of its people, and as a barrier to equality of opportunity for education, is more difficult to judge. Statistics on literacy and school attendance are never given us in categories of socio-economic classes. Instead, the individual's level of education

becomes one of the criteria by which he is assigned to one or another social class. Still the high rate of illiteracy among the population of most Latin American nations at the beginning of this century (and even today) attests to the fact that the mass of the people have not had access to educational facilities. It is well known that the lower classes - those people who perform manual labor - were mainly illiterate and that the sons and daughters of the landed gentry and of professionals were able, generally by private means, to acquire primary, secondary, and even university education. Universities were founded in Latin America even earlier than in Anglo-America, but Latin American universities and even secondary schools until very recently served mainly the members of an economically, socially and politically dominant class. Attendance was never closed to others, but the sons and daughters of an Indian peon or a recently freed Negro slave seldom were able to achieve the educational prerequisites for admission or able to afford the leisure from earning a living which advanced study entailed. Just as it was the unusual individual of the Negro caste in the United States who broke the racial barrier and acquired advanced education, so in Latin America there were only ~~there were only~~ a few individuals who were able to overcome the economic and social barriers which stood between them and higher learning.

Recently, however, great progress has been made in extending educational facilities to the lower economic and social stratum in many Latin American nations. The expansion of transportation, of modern agriculture, of industry and of commerce has improved in many areas the economic conditions of a large segment of the population. And it is almost a truism that as "Freedom from Want" is achieved

people also seek the "Right to Education." In countries like Mexico, with a large number of Indians, there has been a special preoccupation to extend educational facilities to this segment of the population which hitherto had lived outside the mainstream of national life. During the last two decades in countries like Brazil, where the population is growing vertiginously and economic change is rapid, the demand for education on all levels has far out-stripped the expanding facilities. Although secondary schools have more than tripled in number in Brazil during the last ten years, they are not adequate to the demand. And each year a larger number of students with the necessary educational prerequisites seek admission to universities and to technical and professional schools.

12 X As a socio-economic middle class appears in Brazil its members seek education for their children, and education itself recruits members to the new middle class. This group is growing faster than the ability of the enlightened government and even of private organizations to provide educational facilities; there is a shortage of educated people to serve as teachers, and the expense of building an educational system for such large numbers from the ground up is enormous. And as the old class alignments disappear, there is also the problem of modifying the educational program and policy which once served a relatively small social and economic elite to one that will serve the great mass of the people. Most Brazilian educators agree that there is an "educational crisis" in Brazil. In a frantic effort to provide adequate educational facilities for its growing population and for those who now can afford to send their children to school, and in order to reform educational programs and policies in keeping with present-day

conditions, the Brazilian government has established two educational campaigns with liberal funds and special powers. One of them is aimed at surveying and improving primary and secondary education, and the other at stimulating the development of higher education by contracting foreign professors, granting fellowships to Brazilian professors and students for study abroad, and aiding research and teaching financially and otherwise in Brazilian universities.¹⁶ The case of Brazil is probably typical of the educational crisis that is now being felt in other Latin American countries. It is a result of improved economic conditions, the breakdown of feudal socio-economic class impediments to education, and the growth of a modern middle class.

Yet neither Latin America nor Anglo-America have in the middle of the 20th century overcome these historically inherited barriers to the equality of opportunity for all men and to one of his most essential human rights, namely the right to education and access to knowledge. The recent Preliminary Report on the World Social Situation published by the United Nations in 1952 shows Latin America as a whole to be one of the areas of the world with the highest illiteracy rate; and even in 1954, the North American South is perhaps one of the few places on earth where segregation on the basis of race still persists. This is the American reality which we must face and which each of us in terms of our own traditions must seek to improve so that our common American ideal may become a reality in all of our nations. If we do not increase by democratic means the tempo of our efforts to overcome these two barriers, we will become increasingly vulnerable to totalitarian ideologies which promise to wipe out these barriers by force. Each of

us must also cherish the positive values of our social systems. Latin America should take care to preserve its "racial democracy," and North America must not allow new social-class alignments to develop. Each of us has much of positive value to learn from the other.

Footnotes:

1. Brazil: An Interpretation (New York, 1945) and The Masters and the Slaves (New York, 1946, transl. Samuel Putnam).
2. The term "caste" is used here, in the sense in which it is often used by sociologists, to mean an endogamous and hereditary group such as the Negro and white "castes" of the United States (cf. Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York, 1944) and John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town (New Haven, 1937)). Such racial "castes" as those which prevail in North America and those which arose in colonial Latin America are not identical with the castes of India; perhaps the term "caste-like" would be preferable.
3. Cf. T.R. Crevena, ed., Materiales para el Estudio de la Clase Media en America Latina (Washington, Pan-American Union, 1950), 5 vols. Also Ralph Beals, "Social Stratification in Latin America," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. LVIII, No. 4 (1953), pp. 329-338.
4. Brazil: An Interpretation, op. cit.
5. New York, 1947.
6. Tannenbaum, op. cit., p. 63.
7. See Maurice Davie, The American Negro (New York, 1949), p. 176. In Family and Colour in Jamaica (London, 1953), Fernando Henriques writes: "Christianity, which might have led to monogamous marriage was discouraged among the slaves. Although the consolidated Slave Act of Jamaica laid down in 1793 that owners were to instruct slaves in religion and were to facilitate their baptism, it had no effect on the state of affairs. From the planter's point of view owning slaves who were Christians disturbed his conscience...." (p.26)
8. Myrdal, op. cit., p. 24.
9. Cf. W.L. Warner, M. Meeker and K. Fells, Social Class in America (Chicago, 1949).
10. Cf. James West, Plainville, U.S.A. (New York, 1945).
11. Ibid, p. 118.
12. The effect of race discrimination and prejudice on the Negro has been emphasized here because of its great importance to the nation; but to a lesser degree race prejudice and discrimination also affect other "color minority" groups such as Mexicans in the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in New York, and Orientals on the West Coast. Likewise, access to public education is stressed here; but of course both the Latin American class structure and racial discrimination and prejudice in the United States affect other rights of man such as equal economic opportunity, political expression, and even freedom of speech.

13. Myrdal, op. cit., p. 887 and footnote.
14. Monroe Berger, Racial Equality and the Law (Paris, UNESCO, 1954), p. 30.
15. See Harry S. Ashmore, The Negro and the Schools (Chapel Hill, 1954) for a recent discussion of the background of Negro education in the United States and the recent progress made in de-segregation.
16. These programs are known respectively as CILEME, which is aimed at reforming primary and secondary education, and CAPES, which is in charge of the development of higher education. Both are directed by the Brazilian educator, Dr. Anisio Teixeira.