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Whiteness as Capital: Constructing Inclusion and Defending Privilege

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Brazil's New Racial Politics

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2

Whiteness as Capital: Constructing Inclusion and Defending Privilege

Bernd Reiter

Exclusion is mirrored by inclusion. Thus, instead of focusing on the mechanisms that produce and reproduce exclusion, in this chapter I analyze the mechanisms and strategies used by those historically included to defend their privileged access to crucial resources and a system of rights that upholds their status as first-class citizens in contrast to the second-class citizenship of the excluded. According to James Holston and Teresa Caldeira (1998: 276), in Brazil, “The protections and immunities civil rights are intended to ensure as constitutional norms are generally perceived and experienced as privileges of elite social statuses and thus of limited access. They are not, in other words, appreciated as common rights of citizenship.” Whiteness functions as an important capital in the construction of social status because it overdetermines those able to claim it and it indicates an elevated position in the existing social hierarchies (Reiter 2009a: 5).

Discussing the ways that inequality is maintained and reproduced in Brazilian society is highly relevant to the discussion of Brazilian democracy, because although Brazil’s political system is troubled, its social problems are by far worse and more consequential. In their treatment of Brazilian democracy, authors like Diamond (1999), Linz and Stepan (1996), Mainwaring (1997), and Mainwaring and Scully (1995) typically point to a weak party system and problems resulting from an unstable balance between parliamentary and presidential systems as the causes for unfinished democratic consolidation in Brazil. Although this approach has improved our understanding of the importance of institutional settings to achieve certain outcomes, such analyses only provide partial answers to the question of why Brazilian democracy has remained shallow, exclusionary, elitist, and plagued by a seemingly never-ending string of political scandals. The debate over which political institutional settings are more likely to improve the functioning of democratic systems runs

the risk of confounding means with ends, because although institutions are important to provide incentives and channel expectations, they cannot guarantee a desired outcome.

By the same token, although states must be seen as important and partially autonomous actors, most authors following the pathbreaking work of Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (1985) have overestimated state autonomy and neglected the relationship between autonomous states and the societies into which states are embedded. Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (1985: 9) were certainly right when pointing out that “states conceived as organizations claiming control over territories and people may formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society.” Many researchers following this tradition, however, have transformed malfunctioning states into independent variables in their explanations of broader outcomes, such as the failing of democracies. By focusing on structure alone they have neglected the very *raison d’être* of structures, namely their function of reproducing processes.

Although Brazil’s democracy undoubtedly suffers from the shortcomings of its political system, the gravest impediments to consolidating Brazilian democracy are not of a political, but of a social, nature. Weak state structures cannot explain the much broader problem of extremely distorted and skewed processes that characterize the daily interactions and communications that occur and characterize Brazilian society and the interactions between society and the state.

Accordingly, it is not the failing state that causes Brazil’s democracy to fall short of its promises, but the extreme societal inequalities that distort communicative processes of Brazilian society and hence provide the Brazilian state with too much autonomy from the will and needs of its majority and not enough autonomy from the interests of a relatively affluent minority. Due to extreme inequality, distorting the quality of societal processes in Brazilian society, privileged groups have long captured the state and used it to advance their goals without feeling or effectively being accountable to the masses. I thus propose to test the usefulness of treating societal inequality as the independent variable for explaining Brazil’s faltering democratic regime.

To achieve this goal, which implies a shift of optics, it becomes necessary to step beyond the disciplinary limits of mainstream political science and integrate the work of other social sciences, because it appears that many of the limitations of currently available approaches in political science result from a narrow scope of research that is not necessarily dictated by the need for stringency, but by accepted borders of the discipline. Imprisoned by disciplinary borders, many social scientists seek out empirical examples that help prove or falsify their discipline-based theories, instead of developing explanations and models that are able to take into account a more complex reality. In short, our aim as researchers should be to adapt our theories and explanations to reality,

and not seek out segments of reality that fit into our conceptual frameworks. State autonomy and new institutionalism cannot provide reliable answers to all questions related to democracy and democratization. So instead of making reality fit the confinements imposed by mainstream political science theory, I seek to take adequate account of the different available theoretical frameworks for the analysis of a necessarily complex reality. Insights and theoretical frameworks borrowed from history and sociology have proven especially helpful for this endeavor. The work of German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1996) on the general functioning of social systems provides the entrance point for an analysis of the nature of *embeddedness*, as well as the interactions between the political system and broader society.

Power in Brazilian Society

Understanding the impact of societal inequality on Brazilian democracy requires a detailed understanding of the centrality of inequality in structuring the daily routines and the quality of interactions and processes of Brazilian society and its everyday reality. I contend that inequality is indeed the main structuring force of Brazilian society. The core reason for this is that inequality is functional to the maintenance of privilege of historically privileged sectors of Brazilian society, a group I call *the included*. To capture the workings of inequality, one needs to focus on the historically included and the strategies they apply to uphold inequality, and through inequality defend their privileged access to crucial resources and rights. Focusing on the included also helps to correct a very common mistake of reification, routinely committed by social scientists. By constantly examining the excluded, sociologists and anthropologists, in particular, have contributed to creating them as a problem and have helped consolidate the erroneous idea that there is something wrong with the poor, the indigenous, blacks, or other historically marginalized groups.

To be exact, by focusing on the excluded, social scientists involuntarily help the included to escape analysis. They also risk becoming functional to the ongoing process of consolidating the idea that blacks, indigenous groups, women, homosexuals, and the poor are *Others*, whereas the included represent the norm. In my own empirical research, I consistently found nothing to be wrong with the excluded and a lot to be wrong with the included. A shift of focus away from the excluded and onto the included thus necessitates a shift away from an anthropological gaze focused on those historically constructed as *Others* and a redirection of focus onto the men and women who have the power to decide what counts as right or wrong, normal or deviant, beautiful or ugly, worthy or unworthy of social esteem, and who is to be considered an equal participant in the public sphere and who is not.¹

A first implication, or maybe complication, resulting from this shift of optics is the question, *who are the included?* Everybody knows who the excluded are, but it is very difficult to find a good definition of the included. Political scientists have traditionally dealt with this problem by differentiating between social and political elites and the masses, or *the people*, by analytically separating the rulers from the ruled. Sociologists have long drawn sophisticated pyramids and “onions” to explain the inner divisions of societies, sometimes creating sophisticated diagrams constructed on the basis of income, wealth, status, and patterns of consumption.²

The problem with all these attempts, which becomes immediately apparent to anyone conducting empirical research, is that when asked, almost everybody self-identifies as belonging to the middle class. Almost no one ever self-identifies as belonging to the elite. Avoiding self-classification as belonging to the elite must be seen as part of a strategy to evade being classified and examined, and this strategy is a common repertoire among privileged groups. Doing so, included groups obfuscate their relative power and their elevated position in existent social hierarchies and avoid scrutiny and potential blame. To avoid comparison that might lead to being considered elite and therefore to being blamed for existing social and political problems, most members of included groups, instead of comparing their life situation to that of the majority of the country, apply a much broader domain for comparing their income, wealth, and general lifestyle. Among Brazilian elites, this domain habitually includes international comparisons to middle classes in much richer countries of per capita incomes on average ten times higher than Brazil, typically the United States or countries of the European Union (EU). Comparing themselves to US or European middle classes, included Brazilians avoid comparison with the national average and the situation of most Afro-Brazilians and native Brazilians. Hence, earning R\$3,000 a month as a university professor is not a lot when compared to the salary of full professors in the United States, where per capita GDPs are approximately US\$46,000; however, in Brazil, where the per capita GDP is approximately US\$9,700 (in 2008, at purchasing power parity), earning R\$3,000 per month (about US\$1,500 in 2008) is reserved for a small elite. By using international, rather than national, comparisons, Brazilian elites thus reiterate a postcolonial frame of reference, as many included Brazilians are more familiar with the lifestyle of Europe or the United States than with the living conditions of blacks or indigenous groups in their own country.

The capacity to escape classification is unequally distributed in any society. The poor, stigmatized, and historically marginalized, in most cases, do not have the choice to opt out of a system that makes them the objects of inquiry and exposes them to the classifying and hierarchizing gaze of the included classifier. The phenomenon of avoiding self-classification as a member of the elite has three important analytical consequences. First, it points to the necessity

to use subjective, instead of objective, categories of social stratification. Inclusion, just like exclusion, is not absolute, but relative to other groups in society, mainly the excluded groups, and becomes absolute in perspective. Inclusion is not an absolute phenomenon and must be understood and analyzed in relation to exclusion. Second, inclusion, just like exclusion, is multidimensional and must have, at the minimum, economic and cultural dimensions, and these two dimensions must be interrelated.³ Third, inclusion is maintained on the interpersonal and subjective level and reproduced in daily interactions among different groups. I will elaborate on each of these three consequences.

In the absence of specific literature on inclusion, the vast literature on exclusion, inequality, and injustice provides initial insights. Judith Butler (1998: 41), for example, asks rhetorically, “Is it possible to distinguish, even analytically, between a lack of cultural recognition and a material oppression, when the very definition of legal ‘personhood’ is rigorously circumscribed by cultural norms that are indissociable from their material effects?” For Butler, the answer is no. In her essay, she explains that the cultural and material are indeed intimately intertwined. She traces this insight back to Marx’s *German Ideology* (1846) and Engels’s *Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). Marx points to the connection of the mode of production that produces a certain and corresponding mode of cooperation and social organization.⁴

Much of Butler’s critique takes issue with Nancy Fraser’s distinction between injustices of distribution and injustices of recognition. Fraser (1998) argues that both kinds of injustices are equally serious, but that they operate differently. For Fraser, to be misrecognized means “to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life—not as a consequence of a distributive inequity (such as failing to receive one’s fair share of resources or ‘primary goods’), but rather as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem (Fraser 1998: 141).” Accordingly, Fraser defines misrecognition as an “institutionalized social relation, not a psychological state” (Fraser 1998: 141). Fraser also points to the connection she makes between the symbolic and the material. For her, “the norms, significations, and constructions of personhood that impede women, racialized peoples, and/or gays and lesbians from parity of participation in social life are materially instantiated—in institutions and social practices, in social action and embodied habitus, and yes, in ideological state apparatuses. Far from occupying some wispy, ethereal realm, they are material in their existence and effects” (Fraser 1998: 144). This discussion is confusing in that it mixes epistemological with ontological claims, but no matter how the material and the cultural relate in real life, the Butler-Fraser debate clearly demonstrates that exclusion can be separated into two analytical dimensions for the sake of gaining a better understanding of how they work. It necessarily follows

that inclusion can also be usefully divided into two separate analytical realms, namely as constituted by material and symbolic or cultural variables. I will first focus on the material dimensions of inclusion.

Material Dimensions of Inclusion

In the absence of data on inclusion, the vast amount of data and analysis of exclusion in Brazil provides important clues for constructing a working definition and an analytical framework for the included. Initial insights can be gained, for example, from a comparison of educational data. Data from the PNAD, the Brazilian household survey conducted annually, demonstrate that a consistent gap of nearly two years in schooling separates white Brazilians from black Brazilians during the years of 1993 and 2004 (Reiter 2009a: 56). Although educational levels in general have been slowly rising in Brazil, the gap that separates white from black Brazilians has remained the same. Along with skin color as a clear indicator for inclusion, these data also suggest that having completed at least twelve years of formal education sets one part of the population apart from the other. Being white and having completed at least twelve years of formal education are therefore strong indicators of inclusion. The fact that over 80 percent of Brazilians attend public schools alludes to the fact that attending a private middle or high school is reserved for only a select few and makes it a strong indicator of inclusion.

Another criterion to differentiate between included and excluded groups can be elaborated by comparing income and wealth disparities. According to the same source (PNAD), in 2004, 41.7 percent of Brazilian blacks and 19.5 percent of whites were poor. In the poorer regions, for example the northeast, 56.7 percent of all blacks and 44.6 percent of all whites were poor.⁵ Being poor, that is, living with less than one-half per capita minimum wage per month, is therefore a condition that characterizes between 40 and 56 percent of all Brazilians. In other words, it is the Brazilian norm. Not being poor, accordingly, is a privilege in Brazil and represents not the norm, but the exception. Given that the average monthly per capita income in Brazil in 2004 was R\$586 (less than US\$280), it follows that all those earning more than R\$600 per month are a minority and are likely to belong to the group of the included. In 2006, R\$100 equaled US\$48.

In a country with extremely high unemployment rates, especially when the percentage of the economically active population working in the informal sector is considered, having a regular job must be seen as another characteristic of the included. Research on the informal sector in the city of Salvador has demonstrated that about 40 percent of the economically active Bahian population works in precarious jobs of the informal sector. These jobs do not offer any

job security, health coverage, unemployment, or retirement benefits.⁶ Having a regular job that offers job security and benefits is therefore another indicator that characterizes the included.

Additional indicators to characterize the included can be gained from reversing data on *digital exclusion*, that is, the number of households with telephones and personal computers. According to the Brazilian Institute for Applied Research in Economics (IPEA) in 2004, 23 percent of white-headed households and 8 percent of black-headed households had a personal computer at home. Furthermore, 60 percent of black households and 40 percent of white households had no telephone. Accordingly, having a telephone serves as a criterion to characterize included sectors, and having a personal computer must be seen as an extreme privilege in Brazil, only open to a small minority of Brazilians.

One last material criterion to differentiate included from excluded Brazilians is ownership of a car. In 2005, 12 percent of Brazilians owned a car.⁷ Given the average household size in Brazil of 3.73 persons per household, an average of 44 percent of Brazilian households owned a car in 2005. This information is complicated by very expressive regional differences in car ownership and by the fact that rich households may own more than one car. Despite these distortions, it is nevertheless safe to say that the majority of Brazilian households do not own a car. Not owning a car in Brazil subjects those affected to severe restrictions with regard to time-efficient mobility and access to certain exclusive regions (e.g., certain beaches).

These data permit making a first step toward analyzing who the included Brazilians are and what they look like. When focusing on material dimensions and comparing national averages, included Brazilians are likely to have a regular job offering job security and benefits (*com carteira assinada*), have more than twelve years of education, earn more than R\$600 per capita per month, have a telephone at home, own a car, and they may own a personal computer. More likely than not, included Brazilians successfully claim to be white. Although this is a very crude assessment of inclusion that does not further differentiate among included groups, it provides a first step toward a more sophisticated analysis.

Symbolic Dimensions of Inclusion: Whiteness as Capital

In Brazil, whiteness is an extremely desirable characteristic and, as we have seen, a strong indicator for inclusion. Brazilian history is marked by state-led efforts to whiten the nation, which was seen as a necessary condition for achieving civilizational progress. But the national project of whitening ultimately failed, as not enough northern Europeans were willing to settle in Brazil to whiten the nation (Lesser 1999). In addition, Brazilian elites themselves had

long been exposed to racial mixing, which by their own standards and, according to some European and North American visitors, endangered their prospects of catching up to the civilized European ideal.

Whiteness, anything but a biological reality, is used as a symbolic indicator of civilizing potential.⁸ Lesser (1999) demonstrates that what it meant to be white shifted in Brazil between 1850 and 1950, but whiteness remained a cultural category, signifying superiority and well-deserved privilege. Brazilian elites openly discussed and compared the different degrees of whiteness of such potential immigrants as Arabs, Japanese, and southern Europeans, associating whiteness with aptitude (Lesser 1999). The idea of whiteness was therefore constructed and used as a form of capital, strongly associated with merit and progressive, developmental potential. But claiming to be white was not a viable option for all.

During the 1930s, Brazilian elites found a solution to the problem of reluctant whitening by embracing the doctrine of racial mixing, proposed by Freyre's influential work *The Masters and the Slaves*, first published in 1933. Freyre's work provided a welcome solution for the racially impure Brazilian elites who "wished to be white and feared they were not" (Stepan 1991: 45). The 1930s was a time of populism and nationalism, under the extended rule of Getúlio Vargas, who was president from 1930 to 1937, dictator from 1937 to 1945, and again president from 1951 to 1954. Freyre's work allowed for a strategy of incorporating Afro-Brazilians into the *imagined* Brazilian community instead of separating or isolating them. Placing them at the bottom of the social hierarchy, this integration demanded from Afro-Brazilians, and any other group that potentially stood in the way of Vargas's project of building one nation, a complete negation of cultural distinctiveness. For the nationalistic state, Freyre's vision offered a solution not only for integrating former slaves; it also provided the slightly nonwhite members of the newly emerging urban elites with a way to save their own status. As well, this form of integration blocked any kind of separate group formation and therefore was very functional in suffocating the formation of collective grievances even before they could arise. When Freyre's theories were transformed into official state doctrine, Brazil became a *racial democracy*, populated by only one race, namely the mulatto. Freyre's theories served the project of nation building under the Vargas regime, offering a founding ideology upon which the Brazilian elites could imagine themselves, as it allowed them to cope with the historical fact of far-reaching biological mixing without abandoning European cultural values, which served as the guiding values for themselves and the nation. It also undermined Afro-Brazilian solidarity and mobilization, as under such a system, upward social mobility had to be achieved through the assimilation of European values, manners, and aesthetics. In other words, through this move, Brazilian values and social hierarchies could remain monolithic and European despite the country's biological and cultural diversity. During the 1930s, Brazil became a tropical Europe.

After the 1930s, the corporatist political institutions that sustained Brazilian social and racial hierarchies were never effectively restructured, which would have allowed for a reconfiguration of traditional social hierarchies. Instead, the Brazilian military, joined by state elites, avoided such an attempt at restructuring with a military coup in 1964, when the threat of social revolution became imminent, carried by an emerging class-consciousness among urban workers of the industrial south. The military coup not only avoided social restructuring, it also blocked the formation of a separate group identity, in this case class-based (Erickson 1977). Instead, during military rule (1964 to 1985), Brazilian social hierarchies were perpetuated, as great parts of the Brazilian population remained marginalized from participating in political and civic life.

Although the analyses provided by Erickson (1977) and Wiarda (1981) do not address the racial dynamics that permeate the Brazilian social body, their analyses nevertheless allow for the conclusion that those at the top of the Brazilian social and political body used whiteness as a tool to legitimate their privileges. Afro-Brazilians remained at the bottom of social hierarchies and dark skin complexion remained a signifier of low status, making all blacks suspect of being poor and potentially dangerous. This perception of Afro-Brazilians is so deeply rooted in Brazilians' perception that it has escaped scrutiny. It has become one of the ways Brazilians make sense of their everyday reality. Simpson (1993), in her study about "The Mega-Marketing of Gender, Race, and Modernity," demonstrates how in Brazil a "normalizing" discourse continuously associates whiteness with merit and blackness with unworthiness and danger.⁹ Simpson analyzes the career of Xuxa, an ex-playmate and ex-soft-porn star emerging in the 1980s, who later became Brazil's most famous TV star, hosting afternoon prime-time programs for children. Simpson argues that, "in her celebration of whiteness, Xuxa not only taps deep and jealously guarded feelings among Brazilians about race but also asserts the validity of a nearly universal ideological construction wherein the blond female is presented as the 'most prized possession of white patriarchy.'"¹⁰

Whiteness is a highly desirable good to all those that are able to claim it with success. Because of Brazil's long history of associating whiteness with civilizational potential, whiteness has developed into the strongest marker of elevated social status. It symbolizes education and holding a regular job. Additionally, most Brazilians almost automatically associate it with being middle-class, having money, owning a car, and having access to other private services, most importantly private education.

Relational Aspects of Inclusion

As stated above, inclusion is not only multidimensional, it is also relational. This insight goes back to Hegel's classic discussion of the master-slave relationship. According to social psychologist Henri Tajfel (Tajfel and Turner

1986), groups constitute themselves in relation to other individuals and groups. A sense of identity is fostered through the drawing of borders that separate those inside from those outside. This drawing of borders not only permits the effective separation of one group into two or more, it also constitutes each group with reference to the others. Tajfel's main dialectic insight was that one group can only exist by defining itself as different from another. Difference and identity are constituted together. The economist Fred Hirsch (1976) has added another component to this insight. In his book on the *Social Limits to Growth*, Hirsch points out that certain goods are relational. He refers to these as "positional goods" that can be defined as goods that derive their value not from their absolute position, but rather from their relative position to others. Hirsch argues in the case of education that if everyone has access to higher education, the effect of leading to better jobs is thereby neutralized. Job requirements simply rise, making higher investment necessary, giving the better-off an advantage over the less well-off. At the same time, the cost in terms of investment required to have the same outcome rise is a process he calls "screening" (Hirsch 1976: 41). When overall educational levels rise, a job formerly open to high school graduates now demands a college degree. The maintenance of the privilege of access resides in a better starting position. The traditional included are able to maintain their distance from the historically excluded by simply raising the value of the positional good. Historically excluded groups will therefore never be able to catch up. Under such circumstances, education becomes a means to create and protect social prestige, potentially losing all of its emancipatory potential and its functionality of producing knowledge. It becomes a sticker that is displayed as a marker of social distinction.

Hegel's and Hirsch's work alerts us to the fact that even though educational standards might grow in absolute terms, the historically included are likely to maintain the distance that separates them from the historically excluded. Under conditions of increased competition in very scarce markets, border maintenance becomes extremely important, because it provides the historically included with additional financial, social, and cultural capital. In short, inclusion can only produce the desired effect if it is contrasted with exclusion. Maintaining one's own inclusion therefore requires maintaining the exclusion of others.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction provides an entrance point for conceptualizing whiteness as highly effective capital, functioning in a social space that is constituted in relation to other social positions, where each one uses the other for reference. Although Bourdieu ignores ethnicity and race entirely in his theory, his thoughts on gender point to a direction that allows further development. He argues that "the volume and composition of capital give specific form and value to the determinations which the other factors (age, sex, place of residence, etc.) impose on practices. Sexual properties are as inseparable from class practices as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity: a class is defined in an essential respect by the place and

value it gives to the sexes and to their socially constituted dispositions” (Bourdieu 1984: 107).

In this way, whiteness constitutes a capital in addition to the other capitals Bourdieu detects, namely financial, social, and cultural. Their importance, however, does not follow a simple additive logic. One capital rather connects to the others and together they determine the social place an individual will hold in a society. This allows for some flexibility, as one capital can be used to partly compensate for the lack of another, although this flexibility is limited precisely by the grouped condition of the different capitals. In that way, as Bourdieu points out correctly, each single capital tends to overdetermine the social position of its carrier, as the presence or absence of each single one is perceived as being indicative of the presence or absence of the others. It is in this sense that whiteness overdetermines its carrier, bestowing on him a social position that might not be warranted. Because of the composite character of the different capitals, whiteness signals the presence of other capitals, even though they might not be present. Blackness, at the same time, signifies the absence of other capitals and equally overdetermines its carrier.

The resulting social position then becomes a social expectation and reflects back on the carrying individual. “The homogeneity of the disposition associated with a position and their seemingly miraculous adjustment to the demands inscribed in it result partly from the mechanisms which channel towards positions individuals who are already adjusted to them, either because they feel ‘made’ for jobs that are ‘made’ for them . . . or because they are seen in this light by the occupants of the posts . . . and partly from the dialectic which is established, throughout a lifetime, between dispositions and positions, aspirations and achievements” (Bourdieu 1984: 110). In other words, individuals tend to conform to the social positions they hold and to internalize the role expectations associated with these positions.

What matters, then, is not the objective position an individual holds in the social space, but the subjective experience of living with and through this position and rather having to uphold and defend it in daily interactions, or trying to change or masquerade it to escape the negative effects resulting from potential overdetermination. Defending or challenging one’s social place is a daily struggle and bears very tangible consequences for one’s capabilities to live life.

In sum, given that inclusion is relational and works on the subjective, rather than the objective, level, statistical data can only provide very basic approximations to begin with. The more important dimension of defining one’s inclusion vis-à-vis the exclusion of others must operate on a symbolic level. To reproduce a social structure that secures privileges and advantages to one group and denies it to others, the maintenance of the border that marks inclusion and separates it from exclusion becomes extremely important. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Brazilian daily life is full of symbolic acts to fulfill this border-maintenance function. This is even more the case where racial

capital is not clearly demarcated and, therefore, illusive for providing clear borders of belonging, as under conditions of uncertainty, people will be more anxious to demarcate their belonging to one group or the other.

State and Society

Once we have reached an understanding of the mechanisms and processes that characterize Brazilian society and dominate everyday reality, we are equipped to examine how these processes that lead to the reproduction of inclusion and exclusion affect Brazilian democracy. The last part of this chapter thus offers a reflection on the ways in which political systems interact, and are influenced by, the broader social system into which they are embedded. My main argument is that state autonomy only refers to the operational structures of states—their institutions and bureaucracy. Nevertheless, states can only reproduce the processes of broader society. The work of Luhmann (1996) helps clarify the relationship between societies and states and also sheds light on the nature and extent of embeddedness.

The main argument I seek to advance with this analysis is that it is impossible to have a democratic (political) subsystem embedded in an undemocratic broader societal system. The reasons for this impossibility are many, and they operate on different levels (individual, family, and group). From a systemic standpoint, any subsystem operates by using and transforming the processes from its environment. The basic operation of any system, according to Luhmann, is the reduction of complexity and the creation of internal sense by imposing ordering principles onto the different processes, or media, in Luhmann's terms. A political subsystem is operationally autonomous (or "autopoetic"), but subject to operate using the media it finds in its broader environment. The medium of society, according to Habermas (1984), is communication. In the case of the state, the main medium is power. Hence, a state can operate autonomously in any type of society by creating an internal structure (a bureaucracy) that allows it to reduce complexity; establish, through its internal structure, criteria able to create internal homogeneity; and maintain its own border. But again, the media, or processes, that are available to do so originate in its environment. The immediate environment of any political subsystem is the broader societal system, although it also contains other political systems, other societal systems, and, to some extent, an incipient broader political system of worldwide reach (there are, however, no signs of an emerging worldwide societal system). If the medium of communication, which structures the societal system, is skewed and distorted by extreme inequality and the distorting exercise of power, then the state is likely to reproduce this distortion. In other words, a political subsystem embedded in a society whose main structuring force is the

reproduction of inequality will necessarily reproduce inequality in its own internal operations, as well as in the outcomes it produces.

Thus, to capture the workings, achievements, potentials, failures, and shortcomings of states, instead of focusing exclusively on the internal processes that together constitute its operational structure, one needs to focus on two additional elements. First is the nature and content of the quality of processes, that is, the media used for internal communication within the system. Second, one needs to include an analysis of the broader societal system and other subsystems constituting the environment into which the subsystem of the state is embedded to capture the whole picture. After all, the subsystem of the state constitutes itself by processing information from its environment, reducing complexity, and thus differentiating itself from its environment.

How can these rather abstract categories be applied to the analysis of Brazilian democracy? An analysis of the quality of processes that constitute Brazil's broader society is needed. If the processes that constitute a society are extremely skewed and inequality becomes the main structuring force of a society, then inequalities pollute the operation of the state system, which ends up reproducing them.¹¹ Understanding how inequality structures a society thus leads us to an understanding of the ways that states reproduce these inequalities. In the case of Brazil, if the struggle over access and privilege is the main characteristic of its broader society, the Brazilian state will necessarily reproduce the mechanisms and processes associated with this struggle, because although structurally autonomous, the state relies on the processes of broader society as core media for its functioning.

Indeed, the Brazilian state has been consistently plagued by political scandal ever since its redemocratization was completed in 1985. The main trait of these political scandals can easily be detected as a spillover of societal inequalities into the political system, which typically takes the form of establishing patron-client relationships. Clientelism thus became an endemic phenomenon of post-1985 Brazilian democracy, where political officeholders use their office not to serve the general public, but as a tool to establish their own membership in the group of the included. Once there, instead of perceiving themselves—and being perceived by the majority—as public servants, they become arbitrary administrators of privatized public goods. Once in office, state representatives, as well as higher-ranking bureaucrats, join the political class, a term that reflects their elevated status as belonging to a distinctive group. As members of the political class, or even simply as administrators of power, they reproduce their belonging to a privileged group by differentiating it from those that do not. Disrespect, clientelism, nepotism, and the like are thus manifestations of a problem that has much deeper roots and a much more diversified repertoire, which routinely includes manipulation, intimidation, infantilization, and co-optation of the historically excluded.

Conclusion: Inclusion, the Society, and the State

Taken together, the concept of inclusion has material and symbolic dimensions. Whiteness is a crucial element of its construction, as it overdetermines those able to claim it with success. Most importantly, inclusion functions in relation vis-à-vis exclusion, and, as such, it requires the maintenance of exclusion to be effective. Being effective refers to its ability to demarcate the social terrain of all the included. This terrain is homogeneous and depends critically on its border maintenance. If individuals that are not clearly identifiable as included penetrate its borders, inclusion runs the risks of losing its main function, namely to secure and defend privilege. The main importance of conceptualizing inclusion is that it allows for an analysis of the strategies used by historically privileged groups to maintain their inherited privilege. In addition to its analytical power, inclusion has an ontological dimension, because Brazilians actively apply strategies to reproduce inclusion through exclusion. The effects and outcomes of applying these strategies bear very real and tangible outcomes for all those affected by them. Inequality also penetrates the state, because states are structurally embedded in societies and rely on the processes, or media, produced in broader societies for their interaction, constitution of identity, and the creation of institutions. These institutions provide the structures that guide and channel the substratum of their agency, namely processes, or media, but they cannot change them. In the final analysis, the struggle over privilege characterizes the quality of daily interactions in Brazilian society, and hence distorts the quality of societal processes in broader society, as well as the processes that constitute the interactions within its political system.

Notes

1. I am, of course, influenced by Foucault's analysis of "Discipline and Punish" and his analysis of the different ways power influences our societal relationships.

2. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) undoubtedly advanced our understanding of the inner divisions of societies when he offered his own diagram of social distinction based on group-specific habitus.

3. The most helpful discussion about the interrelation between economic and cultural exclusion is also the most helpful for the discussion of inclusion, namely the seminal articles written by Nancy Fraser (1998: 140–149) and Judith Butler (1998: 33–43).

4. Engels wrote, "According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing, and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species" (quoted from Butler 1998: 41).

5. Being poor is defined by Brazilian convention as earning less than one-half a minimum wage per capita, i.e., less than R\$175 (US\$80) per month.

6. Luiza Bairros, Vanda Sá Barreto, and Nadya Castro, 1992.

7. Global Auto Report, August 2006, www.scotiabank.com.

8. Harris (1993), studying race relations in the United States, demonstrates how symbolical whiteness was constructed and used in the United States as a form of capital to justify undeserved privilege.

9. The concept of “normalization,” developed by Michel Foucault (1995), refers to the elevation of whiteness to a standard against which other groups have to be measured. Selden (2000) uses a similar approach when writing about *Eugenics and the Social Construction of Merit, Race, and Disability* in the United States.

10. Simpson (1993: 8). Simpson’s quote is from Dyer (1986).

11. Although inequality is inherent to the operation of power, and states necessarily reproduce inequality, states reproduce more inequality, the more a society is structured by inequality.