

Racial Silence in the Face of Crisis: Bureaucratic Choices in Latin America's Pandemic Assistance

In the aftermath of WWII, race was contested and dismissed as a biological concept with most countries and social science communities eliminating it from their conceptual language, with the notable exception of the U.S. (Winant 2001). But in recent decades it has become clear that not talking about race does not prevent racism and racialization from continuously shaping the lives of people at the local, national, and international levels. Governments and institutions have strategically reintroduced racial categories to ensure representation and inclusivity across various social policies. A substantial body of literature has emerged that examines how and why the language of race has been adopted (or not) by states focusing on both the growth of (Morning, 2008, Loveman 2014) and resistance to (Simon 2008) the inclusion of ethno-racial categories in national censuses worldwide. Additionally, scholars have examined how affirmative action policies aimed at increasing the representation of historically marginalized groups have gone global (Jenkins and Moses 2014, Warikoo and Allen 2020). But the question of whether public policies should be colorblind or color-conscious remains deeply contentious across the globe, and is increasingly significant in the U.S., where race had been a salient, taken-for-granted category in social policies until recently.

This paper seeks to better understand how states' decisions to acknowledge race and address racial inequalities are translated (or not) into race-targeted policies. Specifically, we ask: Do redistributive policies need to be race-conscious to address racial inequalities? In what instances might colorblind policies foster racial equality, and how? How do policymakers rationalize their decisions to include or exclude race when they formulate public policies?

Latin America provides a particularly compelling case for understanding how national governments decide whether (or not) to address race in public policy formulation. Throughout much of the 20th century, many countries in the region adhered to variants of *mestizaje* ideologies that downplayed the privileges of whiteness while celebrating racial mixture and espousing race-blind approaches to public policy design and implementation. By the end of the century, however, the language of race and ethnicity returned to the agenda. Most countries have re-introduced racial and ethnic categories in their censuses (Loveman 2014, Telles and PERLA 2014), ethnoracial social movements have gained great visibility in the public space both nationally and globally (Paschel 2018), and ethnoracial inequalities are now discussed publicly and acknowledged in public debates as a structural problem (Moreno and Wade 2024). Over the past 25 years, countries such as Brazil and Colombia have introduced affirmative action programs in universities (dos Santos 2016), developed health policies targeting Black populations (Milanezi and Moraes Silva 2019), and implemented educational initiatives to promote African history, among other efforts.

The widespread adoption of race-conscious public policies has, however, been met with substantial criticism. Some scholars and critics argue that targeting race creates artificial divisions within society (Fry et al 2007, Kamel 2006, Restrepo 2013). Others contend that such policies represent a form of "neoliberal multiculturalism," where governments adopt a broad lexicon of race and utilize it as a politically salient category, without necessarily achieving meaningful socioeconomic redistribution or promoting greater equality between racialized groups (Hale 2005).

We approach these debates from the perspective of policymakers who needed to decide whether to target beneficiary populations by race when formulating pandemic cash transfer programs in Brazil and Colombia. We focus on how these bureaucrats interpreted and justified their option to *not* use racial targeting, which can be particularly puzzling in contexts where race is otherwise a politically salient category, such as in Brazil and Colombia. The epidemiological, socioeconomic and political crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic provides a particularly good case to examine the nuances of colorblind policies, since bureaucrats had to make quick decisions about who and how to distribute cash assistance (more or less two weeks in both contexts). As Blyth (2003) has explained, crisis situations don't come with "instructions sheets" and are characterized by uncertainties, conflicting expert advice, and incomplete information. In this context, we find that the decision to *not* target racialized populations is a consequence of, on the one hand, a historical resistance to racial framings, and on the other, a belief that race can be tackled through class.

By focusing on how racial silence was mobilized and justified by bureaucrats, we found a mix of defenses of colorblind universalism and resistance to race and an idea that a focus on socioeconomic vulnerability could be racially consequential. More conceptually, we argue that the dichotomy between race-conscious policies as racially redistributive and race-blind policies as racially regressive should be nuanced. Maybe, following Wade (2024), being racially aware does not necessarily mean adopting racially targeted policies. In fact, the difficulties and controversies around the ways the state "sees" race in countries historically shaped by discourses of racial mixture can lead to unintended consequences for broader racial justice goals (Moraes Silva et al 2024).

Cases, Data and Methods: Empirically, we rely on 48 in-depth interviews with bureaucrats involved in the formulation of COVID-19 pandemic transfers in Brazil and Colombia. In the two contexts, federal governments launched massive cash transfer programs to combat the short-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Brazil, the federal government created *Auxílio Emergencial* (or Emergency Aid) that reached 30.7% of the population, with five US\$160-transfers during 2020-2021. In Colombia, the government created a pandemic transfer called *Ingreso Solidario* (or Solidarity Income), which reached 23% of the population, with eleven transfers varying from US\$42 to US\$130 (depending on the beneficiary poverty level) during 2020-2022. In the official language used by the Brazilian government, the transfers targeted mostly "workers" who had lost their jobs because of the pandemic, while the Colombian government referred to "families" that needed extra income in face of a crisis. Yet, despite the widespread and official acknowledgement of racial inequalities in the two countries, the Brazilian and Colombian federal governments did not explicitly mention race (or racial groups) in their official communication about the pandemic transfers.

We conducted our interviews with Brazilian and Colombian bureaucrats between 2021 and 2023. Because of the ongoing pandemic, our research team conducted most of the interviews virtually (although five were in person). Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes and were conducted and coded in Portuguese and Spanish. The translations presented here are our own. We constructed our sample based on the institutional positions that interviewees occupied during the formulation and implementation of the pandemic transfers, in relation to the state structure of each country. Our interviewees, therefore, were active participants in the making of pandemic transfers, and represent decision-making stakeholders in distinct public agencies within the Brazilian and Colombian federal governments. We adopted a semi-structured interview protocol, using different prompts and probes at specific moments in the interview, following the methodology proposed by Jimenez and Orozco (2021).

We used interviews to understand how interviewees understood “who” (class, race, gender) the target beneficiaries were for the pandemic transfers, and to understand how the social construction of target populations impacted how policymakers understood poverty, vulnerability, and deservingness. Following Lamont et al. (2016), our interviewees did not know beforehand that the interview would include questions about race/ethnicity and gender. Therefore, the first half of the interviews focused on questions about the process of formulating pandemic transfers, the main bureaucratic challenges, and who interviewees thought the ideal beneficiary would be, with no mention to race, ethnicity or gender. Only during the second half of the interview did we probe interviewees regarding issues related to race and gender. In our analysis, we paid special attention to the context in which references to race and ethnicity appeared—prompted, unprompted, or within their rationale for constructing target population groups.

By conducting interviews with bureaucrats, we gained a clear window into what Scott (1990) termed the “public transcripts” of the making of pandemic cash assistance programs—the official narratives through which race-blind approaches were rationalized, and through which knowledge, politics, and power were managed (de Souza Leão 2022). These conversations, in turn, uncovered the “ethnographic discourse” of state officials (Steinmetz 2007), shedding light on how they constructed the ideal welfare recipient, as well as the racialized portrayals underpinning those constructions.

Findings: The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the spotlight racial inequalities in access to healthcare and formal employment that were directly associated with greater vulnerability to the impacts of COVID-19. The numbers are striking: In Brazil, black and brown individuals were two times more likely to die from COVID-19 than their white counterparts. In Colombia, in the 9 municipalities with the largest numbers of Afro-Colombians, 7 were among the 10 places with highest infection rates, and 6 were among the municipalities with highest death levels in the country (CEPAL 2021). Even so, pandemic cash assistance programs remained mostly racially blind in their formulation and implementation.

For the bureaucrats whom we interviewed, the discourse around the design and implementation of COVID-19 pandemic transfers as well as the socioeconomic and health consequences of the pandemic focused primarily on class, the formal/informal status of workers, unemployment levels, and regional economic differences and vulnerabilities. Race or racism was almost never mentioned in official publications about the pandemic transfers or in our interviews with bureaucrats. Although both countries historically have high levels of socioeconomic inequalities between racial groups (e.g., in 2018, while 11.7% and 27.8% of white individuals were poor in Brazil and Colombia, these values were 25.5% and 40.8% among black Brazilian and Colombians, respectively), bureaucrats insisted that race was not an important determinant of increased vulnerability due to adverse effects of the pandemic, and therefore not crucial to take into consideration in the formulation of pandemic transfers.

This is particularly puzzling because both countries have undergone significant transformations where race became an important part of public policies. We engage with this (apparent) puzzle and ask: Why? More conceptually, how does one interpret racial silence? Below, we present our findings around three discursive strategies bureaucrats mobilized to deal (or not) with racial inequalities in their countries.

1. Overlooking Race: Overwhelmingly, we found a recurrent racial silence among Brazilian and Colombian bureaucrats when they discussed the formulation and implementation of pandemic cash transfers. In other words, race (or different racial/ethnic groups) was not spontaneously brought up in our interviews when we asked bureaucrats to explain their

decision-making process around cash transfers, or who they perceived their main beneficiaries to be. The way bureaucrats overlooked race in their rationale is striking given the statistical data showing that black Brazilians and Afro-Colombians had higher rates of informal employment and unemployment during the pandemic and were overrepresented among those who died because of the COVID-19 virus (CEPAL 2021).

The silence about race resonates with what other scholars have found when studying how street-level bureaucrats react to racially targeted policies in Brazil and Colombia. For example, Milanezi and Moraes Silva (2019) analyzed how health bureaucrats reacted (or not) to a national health program targeting Brazil's black population and found what they called silence, questions, delimitations, and denial around these policies. These authors identified racial silence in the absence of specific medical procedures targeting the black population, in the fear that social workers had of (mis)using the language of race, and in a commitment to colorblind national ideologies. Similar silences and resistance to talking about race were found in studies about the implementation of African and black history in Brazilian public schools (Cavalleiro 2000, Coelho e Coelho 2012). According to these authors, the consequence of racial silence is the reproduction of racial inequalities and the continuation of racial stereotypes (due to the misinterpretation of the justifications for these policies). In Colombia, Mosquera and León-Díaz (2013) studied street-level bureaucrats responsible for providing social assistance, finding what they called “discursive contradictions” these actors produced when referring to poor black and indigenous populations. For example, despite recognizing the need for targeted social policies for poor black people, they criticized the administrative burdens resulting from such a possibility and the ethical constraints associated with potential revictimization. In this case, bureaucrats worried that such racial differentiation would imply devaluing black people as “less capable” of overcoming poverty than the rest of the population.

But our findings are different from these previous studies for a few reasons. First, pandemic cash transfers were *not* officially racially targeted policies, although they benefited large percentages of racialized populations in both countries. Second, our interviewees were mid- and high level bureaucrats who were well versed in debates about racial inequalities in their countries. In fact, as we discuss next, when probed most bureaucrats admitted that the pandemic strongly impacted ethnoracial groups that had historically been discriminated against, but they did not see race as a central element that should be tackled in the pandemic assistance policy and often resisted the idea of making such a link explicit. Finally, different from the broader and longer-term policies analyzed in previous studies, our focus is on a cash assistance policy created in the context of a health, political, and socioeconomic crisis. In short, Colombian and Brazilian bureaucrats chose not to talk about, focus on, or target race in this moment of crisis. Next, we analyse how, when probed, they justified their silence.

2. *Resisting Race:* As mentioned above, interviewees did not know in advance that we would ask them about the role of race in their rationale for constructing pandemic assistance. But when we probed them on this question, many bureaucrats forcefully resisted talking about race as a meaningful category in their decision-making process. In the two countries, the resistance to using race was explained using three types of justifications.

First, resisting race was based on a race-blind commitment to universalism—i.e., the idea that we should focus on those in need, regardless of their race or color. In this case, bureaucrats perceived the socioeconomic status of beneficiaries as a more objective criteria that would benefit all of those in need, regardless of their racial group. In this type of reasoning,

bureaucrats underplayed particular mechanisms of racial exclusion as not so important, and downplayed ethnoracial differences as subsumed by class.

The commitment to color-blindness is partly illustrated by the contrast some of our interviewees made between *racial* inequalities, which scholars and pundits tend to understand as inequalities based on skin-color and which are often associated with inequalities between white and black individuals, and *ethnic* inequalities, which may be explained by cultural differences between indigenous groups or so-called “traditional populations” and the rest of the population (Wade 1998). For example, in Brazil, bureaucrats explained that targeting the black and brown population would have been superfluous as these groups already represent 50% of the population, but that targeting indigenous groups might have made sense. In Colombia, bureaucrats also contrasted urban Afro-Colombians and rural indigenous groups in their justification for resisting race as a meaningful category for receiving pandemic assistance. In their reasoning, while indigenous groups lived on indigenous reservations (legally defined *resguardos*) set apart from the rest of the country and hence could have different, unique vulnerabilities that the state should address, Afro-Colombians were either part of the urban economy and as such not distinctive from the rest of the population, or their rural contexts were perceived as similar to the white-mestizo rural geography. Or, as a state official responsible for Colombia’s poverty classification system explained, “*We did not target Afro-Colombians because culturally they are part of Western culture. So, in terms of vulnerability, they were the same as the rest of the population.*”

Second, bureaucrats resisted race because they perceived race as invisible or irrelevant. Race can be invisible because the policy technologies available to identify beneficiaries do not “see” race, since racial self-identification is not part of the basic socioeconomic questionnaire used to target populations. The emergency character of both *Auxilio Emergencial* and *Ingreso Solidario* reinforced this idea. Bureaucrats claimed that including new racial targeting variables was not necessary since Covid was impacting the entire country, and those whom they already defined as vulnerable for other welfare purposes would continue being more vulnerable during the pandemic crisis. The latter point is clearly illustrated by the contrast between race and gender, which they saw as a more relevant (and mainstream) categorical variable that could be used to target pandemic cash transfer programs.

Finally, a third justification that bureaucrats mentioned for resisting race was to avoid what they considered to be a political controversy. In this case, racial targeting was presented as a controversial choice that could make their work harder, and not as consensual as targeting, for example, single mothers as described above. To understand this concern, it is crucial to remember that even after the “anti-racist” turn, when blackness went from being marginalized to becoming institutionalized into the law, state bureaucracies, and mainstream politics in the two countries, race-conscious policies are still very controversial (Paschel 2018). In fact, the idea of racial mixture and widespread blurred racial lines is still very much present in the two countries and may inform bureaucrats’ perception that racial targeting would be controversial. A Brazilian bureaucrat explained this point well when she said that she “*wasn’t sure that [allowing beneficiaries] to self-declare their racial identification would have been positive for the program, since it could bring legitimization problems because it is a challenge to validate who is from each racial group in Brazil.*”

3. Seeing Race Through Class: The resurgence of race in Latin American political debates has led to the formation of a dichotomy, where pundits and left-wing politicians frame racial consciousness as progressive and redistributive while framing colorblindness as conservative

and as reinforcing white privilege (Telles and PERLA 2014). This divide emerged because of decades of racial silencing in the region, which enabled the persistence of overt racial inequalities, often concealed under the rhetoric of racial democracy and *mestizaje*.

While criticisms of “neoliberal multiculturalisms” have questioned the idea that the language of race necessarily leads to redistribution, there is much less debate about what Peter Wade (2024) calls a “racially-aware class consciousness.” Through such a grammar, racial identity may not be front-and-center in the way people make sense of poverty (or of who qualifies to be a cash transfer beneficiary), but neither is race entirely hidden from the discourse. More importantly, the racialized consequences of public policies are seriously taken into account, even if they are not prominent in the political debate (Peria and Bailey 2014).

In the interviews, we found that, when probed, one third of the bureaucrats were aware that the COVID-19 pandemic had racialized consequences, and that black Brazilians and Afro Colombians were more vulnerable to both the epidemiological and socioeconomic effects of the pandemic than other racial groups. Yet, in their understanding, this did not necessarily mean that racial targeting would be better or more inclusive for these groups. In this case, the underlying logic seems to be that, in a crisis, the government should have a policy target that is as broad as possible, and that vulnerable (racialized) groups will naturally benefit consequently.

I think that the pandemic impacted people that had informal jobs much more, and you have a concentration of black and brown people in the informal labor market [...] One issue, for example, that I think it was a mistake in our definition of target population was to [initially] target single parents just as women, since afterwards we had to account for men as single parents too. So, for me, if the focus is on single parents, we should not have this [gender] differentiation. Benefits Coordinator in Brazil

In other words, several interviewees recognized (and even defended) the importance of race in shaping socioeconomic vulnerability in both countries but also believed that targeting race in pandemic benefits would be unnecessary because these groups would already benefit from broad socioeconomic targeting. As such, because some bureaucrats understood the pandemic assistance programs as an unusual, one-off “crisis” cash-transfer program, they believed that the bureaucratic goal was to make sure that racialized groups, named or not, benefited from the money transfer, rather than to bring salience to racial structural inequalities underlying pandemic impacts as could be the case with more intentional racial targeting.

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