Beyond Mestizaje

Contemporary Debates on Race in Mexico

Tania Islas Weinstein and Milena Ang, EDITORS

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and Milena Ang

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The Double Standard of Success: Narratives of Inequality, Social Mobility, and "Meritocratic Mestizaje"

Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina Translation by Ellen Jones

Introduction

It is increasingly common to find social movements, civil society organizations, and other actors who seek to identify and visibilize the injustice of inequality and the fallacy of the meritocratic narrative, as well as the historical presence of racism in Mexico. Despite this, society is still structured according to a stratification that is hugely unequal: the majority of wealth remains in the hands of the few, while everyone else has almost nothing.

In 2019, Credit Suisse (2020) estimated that the poorest 50% in Mexico owned 4% of the country's wealth, while the richest 10% had accumulated 65%, which means that Mexico has a Gini coefficient—a standard measure of inequality—of 0.77 (a coefficient of 0 means that all the wealth is distributed equally among the population, whereas a coefficient of 1 means that all the

wealth is concentrated in a single person). Worse still, several institutions estimate an exacerbated increase in inequality (economic and otherwise) in the context of the economic crisis related to the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (CIEP et al. 2021). Moreover, this inequality is not only economic, but also intersects with other social categories beyond class, such as gender, ethno-racial characteristics, and age (Solís et al. 2019).

In the light of this, there are questions that need to be asked about the exacerbated and sustained increase in inequality over recent decades, as well as the observable increase in the frequency with which meritocratic, racial, and stigmatizing narratives are made public: what relation (if any) is there between classist and racial narratives in Mexico? What effect do ethno-racial characteristics have on the various narratives of inequality? Do they have any effect on the perception of "success" or "failure," or in general on social mobility?

This article attempts to explore in depth how society perceives, reproduces, and legitimizes narratives of inequality. In short, it analyzes narratives about meritocracy, mestizaje, poverty, inequality, and social mobility, with the aim of creating hypotheses, finding some answers, and posing questions about how these narratives are legitimized. In this way, it seeks to make connections with categories of stigmatization, which tend to have a differential value (or double standard) when it comes to how we perceive and value the achievements and responsibilities (or culpabilities) of different social groups. The objective is to provide evidence so that future studies can continue to explore the topic of the legitimacy of inequality by observing the intersection between different narratives, with the term "meritocratic mestizaje" offered as one possible term for that intersection.

The second section details the sources of information used. The third section focuses on the perception of social mobility and possible associated variables. The fourth section involves a detailed analysis of interviewees' social mobility alongside their skin color. The fifth section uses qualitative analysis tools to deepen our understanding of the narratives that have already been discussed. Finally, the chapter closes with some conclusions.

Sources of Information and Methods

In order to find connections between narratives of meritocracy, inequality, poverty, wealth, and social mobility, all of which play important roles in the broad process of reproducing inequality, this article combines information

gathered in interviews for quantitative analysis, with qualitative information acquired using digital ethnography techniques.

In principle, data from the Social Mobility Survey (EMOVI) from the year 2017 are used (Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias [CEEY] 2019). But given the limitations of a survey in terms of the amount of information that needs gathering for analysis and the level of depth required by the object of study, in this article the data is complemented by qualitative information: a corpus built using web scrapping tools. In short, a set of information was gathered from different social networks. More than a thousand tweets associated with the hashtags #CosasRarasDeLosPobres (#StrangePoorPeopleThings) and #PrietosEnAprietos (#PrietosInAPredicament) were downloaded and then analyzed according to the number of times they were shared and their relationship to the narratives mentioned above. In addition, I also analyzed social media posts (specifically Facebook) posted by the Mexican government and the comments left by users on these posts: most posts advertised social policy programs, and one asked about the perceived causes of poverty.

The Illusion of Betterment

Social mobility can be defined as "the changes people experience in their economic condition" (CEEY 2019). When this mobility is vertical, that is when someone passes from one socioeconomic stratum to a higher or lower one, they are experiencing upward or downward social mobility. It is also important to distinguish absolute social mobility from relative social mobility: the first refers to an absolute change in the standard of living between different generations, while the latter refers to a person's change in position in the social hierarchy relative to the rest of society in comparison with their parents. Both are forms of objective social mobility.

Studies of subjective or perceived social mobility[1] have very different, and especially important results. In general, at a global level, people are more likely to *think* that they have had upward social mobility compared to their parents (Evans & Kelley, 2004) than to have actually experienced it.

What studies of social mobility in Mexico find depends in large part on their methodology, and especially on the type of question used for analysis. For example, Torche (2010) finds, using data from 2006, that 51% of people in Mexico perceive themselves to have experienced upward social mobility. However, information from Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias (CEEY 2013) using data from 2011, found that people in Mexico perceive greater

immobility (or at least limited social mobility) than they actually experi-ence. And finally, Yaschine (2015) finds that 19% of the population consider themselves to have experienced upward social mobility, 70% do not think their situation has changed, and 11% think they have had downward social mobility.

One of the most interesting and important dimensions of analysis of these data is the difference or "social mobility bias," which is to say, the differ-ence between subjective and objective perceptions of social mobility. Why would someone who had experienced upward social mobility not perceive that to be the case? What explains why someone who, in objective terms, has experienced downward mobility believe themselves to be better off? These discrepancies become important given the size of the population group that presents them. For example, Duru-Bellat and Kieffer (2008) found that nearly half of the population has these subjective and objective social mobil-ity biases: 30% of the population overestimates their social mobility and 20% underestimates it.

As well as those authors, Heath, de Graaf, and Li (2010), Torche (2010), and Yaschine (2015) sketch out possible reasons for these biases: 1) confu-sion between absolute and relative objective social mobility on the part of the interviewees; 2) the assessment being made based on the people around them (rather than on society or the country as a whole); 3) different dimensions being evaluated (rather than just wealth, income, or work, on which analyses of objective social mobility are usually based), and 4) the father's occupation being assessed in terms of its current relative stratification.

EMOVI's data on subjective or perceived social mobility are shown in the Table 4.1. In sum, Table 4.1 shows that 41.5% of the Mexican population per-ceive themselves to have experienced upward social mobility with respect to the home they now live in, while 37.1% perceive themselves to be in the same social stratum (totals can be obtained by adding the percentages in the main diagonal in the table) and the remaining 21% perceive themselves to have experienced downward social mobility.

First, Table 4.1 shows a perception bias when it comes to social mobility, similar to that found in previous studies. In fact, according to these results there is a greater percentage of the country's population that perceives them-selves to have had social mobility (42%) compared to those who have objec-tively experienced it (34%). In other words, this result indicates that people's perceptions of social mobility are more optimistic than reality.

Table 4.1. Quintiles of perceived childhood and current living conditions, 2017.

		Current living conditions					
		I	II	III	IV	V	Total
Childhood living conditions	I	7.1	13.5	6.5	0.6	0.1	27.9
	II	3.4	9.7	11.5	3.0	0.1	27.7
	III	1.0	6.1	14.2	5.4	0.2	27.0
	IV	0.3	2.5	5.6	5.5	0.4	14.3
	V	0.1	0.3	0.9	1.3	0.6	3.2
	Total	11.9	32.1	38.7	15.9	1.5	100.0

Source: Author's own, using data from CEEY (2019)

How is the perception of upward social mobility closely linked to objective experience? Of the population that perceives themselves to have had upward social mobility, only 4 out of 10 objectively presented it, with 6 out of 10 remaining in the same income quintile or having moved to a lower one (the results can be observed in Table 4.2). Put a different way, for most people who believe themselves to have experienced upward social mobility, this is nothing more than an illusion in objective terms.

Does "Success" Depend on Skin Color?

Beyond the relationship between subjective and objective social mobility and the biases that accompany them, it is essential to try to understand the reason behind the subjects' perceptions of their "successes" in life. For example, perception of upward social mobility might be related to other contextual variables or associated factors, beyond simply objective or experienced social mobility. For example, the interests, aspirations, and relative social mobility of people around you, the demands of social norms, as well as mobility observed in the press and on social media, can all help shape our perceptions of social mobility.

Among these associated factors, ethno-racial characteristics may determine the formation of subjectivity about upward or downward social mobility or, relatedly, perception of one's own successes or failures. For example, Sánchez et al.'s (2011) study of Afro-American people in the United States found that 1) it is clear that there are fewer opportunities for this ethno-racial minority, which means they therefore achieve lower results (for example,

Table 4.2. Objective and subjective social mobility, 2017.

Subjective social mobility	Objective social mobility		
	Not upwardly mobile	*Upwardly mobile*	Total
Not upwardly mobile	**42%**	**17%**	**59%**
Upwardly mobile	24%	17%	41%
Total	**66%**	**34%**	**100%**

Subjective social mobility	Objective social mobility		
	Not upwardly mobile	*Upwardly mobile*	Total
Not upwardly mobile	**71%**	**29%**	**100%**
Upwardly mobile	58%	42%	100%
Total	**66%**	**34%**	**100%**

they earn lower salaries); 2) for this reason, everyone else tends to have lower expectations of Afro-American people's performance, and 3) their skin color and ethno-racial characteristics always weigh heavily on them, and will be the first thing other people observe about them, before their social class (whether lower, middle, or upper), and regardless of any upward social mobility they may have experienced. In the same way, when Oh and Kim (2016) studied students from two different ethno-racial contexts (Asian and Mexican) living in the United States, they found that their families and other people close to them shaped students' expectations and the criteria for them to be perceived as having "achieved success" in very different ways.

In sum, there is a robust body of literature showing the close relationship between ethno-racial belonging and the formation of expectations, the perception of "success" (especially in very academic contexts), and those who have achieved it (Enriquez, 2011; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lamb, 1999; Jiménez and Horowitz 2013; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Qian & Blair, 1999; Solorzano, 1992).

Relatedly, a couple of important hypotheses have emerged from work with low-income Afro-American and white people in the United States with regard to their aspirations: the first mentions that their aspirations in life are shaped more by the position they occupy within their ethno-racial group than by the position of said group in relation to society in general, while the alternative hypothesis suggests the contrary, in which the position of the ethno-racial group with respect to society in general is more important than the position of the individual within the ethno-racial group (Lorenz 1972).

In Mexico, there are no studies that directly link ethno-racial characteristics and/or belonging with subjective social mobility. On the one hand, there is research that shows subjective factors that are linked to subjective social mobility, such as the formation of expectations about life or subjective wellbeing, but especially Indigenous identity or belonging to an Indigenous community. For example, Segura Salazar et al. (2016) analyze Indigenous university students' expectations about the workplace and about success in life, focusing on students from the Autonomous University of Chapingo, while other studies indirectly analyze those expectations in relation to strategies Indigenous students must adopt due to their experience of discrimination in certain spaces (Arellano 2008). Another study shows that subjective wellbeing, specifically satisfaction with life, is experienced less often by people who speak an Indigenous language, once the effects of social class or level of education have been controlled for (Jaramillo-Molina 2016).

But in all these cited studies, the ethno-racial dimension is only approximated through Indigenous community belonging, which in turn is usually approximated through ability to speak an Indigenous language or through self-identification (Carrasco & Alcazar 2009). In fact, the distinction made by Hopenhayn and Bello (2001) when studying ethno-racial discrimination and xenophobia in Latin America is that "race" tends to be associated with "biological distinctions attributed to genotypes and phenotypes," among which they highlight skin color, while ethnicity is associated with "cultural factors." The authors also highlight that these two dimensions of discrimination—race and ethnicity—tend to be difficult to separate, which is why this chapter prefers the concept of the "ethno-racial."

It has been only a few years since the concept of the ethno-racial began to be studied widely, beyond whether or not someone belonged to an Indigenous community. Practically speaking, the key variable that has often allowed for recent studies of the "ethno-racial" has been skin color (Aguilar Pariente 2011; Arceo-Gomez & Campos Vázquez 2014; Campos Vázquez & Medina-Cortina 2019; Flores & Telles 2012; Monroy-Gómez-Franco et al. 2022; Solís et al. 2020; Torres et al. 2019; Villarreal 2010). In fact, discrimination based on skin color in Mexico is almost as prevalent (23% in men, 15% in women) as discrimination based on social class (25% in men, 21% in women) (INEGI 2020).

Perhaps the most relevant study was carried out by Campos Vázquez & Medina Cortina (2017). Using an experimental design, they found that stereotypes associated with skin color in Mexico affect young people's expectations, aspirations, and even performance (in this specific case, young people in middle school in Mexico City). Will these effects on expectations and aspirations reflect a probable effect on how people with different skin colors in Mexico evaluate their own social mobility?

Given all the above, it is clear skin color can be extremely interesting when analyzing the subjectivity of social mobility. Although no research has been conducted in Mexico that delves specifically into the relationship between, on the one hand, the appropriation of narratives of success and subjective social mobility, and, on the other hand, this proxy variable for the ethno-racial, the body of research already indicated generates certain hypotheses about its relationship with our perception of social mobility. For example, a first hypothesis is simply that there is a significant link between skin color and subjective social mobility, with an additional effect on other

socioeconomic and demographic variables that may also be related. A second hypothesis, regarding the direction of the effect, is that darker skin tones associated with discrimination and related inequalities lead people to underestimate change to their own socioeconomic conditions and social mobility. An alternative hypothesis would be that, faced with the disadvantages recognized as being associated with having darker skin, their achievements are overvalued, and therefore subjective social mobility outstrips objective social mobility.

The EMOVI data help provide answers here. The descriptive statistical analysis shows that people with lighter skin tones are less likely to perceive themselves as having experienced social mobility, although the difference is not especially great (see Figure 1). While 27% of people with lighter skin tones (from I to K on the PERLA scale) perceive themselves as having experienced upward social mobility, 42% of people with darker skin tones (from A to H on the PERLA scale) report having experienced social mobility. This rises to 42% for everyone else (from A to H on the PERLA scale). In addition, it is once again people with the lightest skin tones who most often think they have experienced downward social mobility or simply no mobility at all (although here the percentage is almost the same as for people with the darkest skin tones, from A to E).
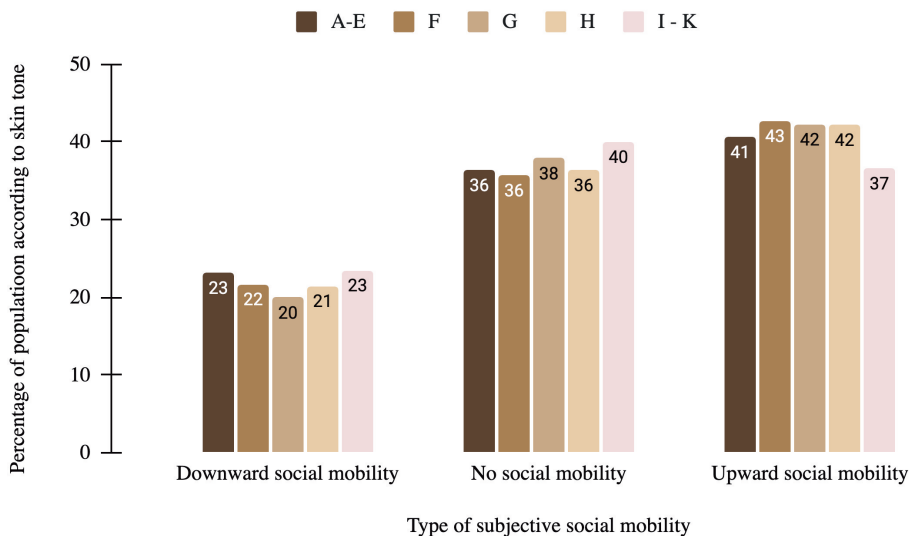

Figure 4.1. Subjective social mobility, according to skin tone (PERLA scale).
Source: Author's own with data from CEEY (2019).

This would indicate that people with darker skin more often perceive themselves to have had upward social mobility than people with lighter skin. But such results do not take into account the objective prevalence of social mobility in accordance with the skin color of the interviewee. Put a different way, they do not consider how many of those people who *perceive* themselves as having had social mobility truly had it in objective terms. To control for this skin color variable, and also to account for the effect of other variables that could intervene in perceptions of whether or not someone is socially mobile, the following binominal logistic model was considered.

This binomial logistic model was created to estimate the chances of the interviewee perceiving themselves as having experienced upward social mobility with respect to the independent variables shown in Table 4.3. With respect to the control variables, the results show that the chances of someone perceiving themselves as having experienced (subjective) upward social mobility increase by 65% if the person actually experienced that social mobility in objective terms. On the other hand, currently living in poverty and being over 45 years old also increases those chances, with statistical significance. On the contrary, having felt discriminated against due to a lack of money is associated with a lower probability of reporting subjective upward mobility.

For its part, the effects of skin color on one's perception of social mobility are interesting because it shows that, once all the previously mentioned variables are controlled for, the coefficient for lighter skin tones (I to K) turns out to be significant, and reduces the chances of perceiving oneself as having had upward social mobility by 18% (taking skin tone G as a reference category, the median category of the skin tones used). In turn, the coefficient for darker skin tones (A to E) is also significant, where changes in perceptions of social mobility are reduced by 18% compared to the reference category. The effect seems to be equally great for both categories at the extremes of the skin tone spectrum.

These results show that skin color is significantly associated with subjective social mobility, even after taking into account variables, including objective social mobility, which explain it to a large extent. These results confirm the first of the hypotheses mentioned above: skin color is significantly linked to subjective social mobility, and has an additional effect on other socioeconomic variables and demographics that may also be related.

The results of the statistical model do not reject the second hypothesis (to remind readers: "a darker skin color, associated with discrimination

Table 4.3. Odds ratio (OR) of the binominal logistic regression model to estimate the probability of perceiving upward social mobility.

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	Odds ratio	Lim. Sup.	Lim Inf.	Odds ratio	Lim. Sup.	Lim Inf.
Skin tone (ref. G)						
A–E	0.819	0.719	0.933	0.812	0.713	0.925
F	0.995	0.904	1.096	0.988	0.897	1.088
H	1.020	0.943	1.104	1.053	0.973	1.139
I–K	0.818	0.731	0.915	0.886	0.791	0.992
Objective upward social mobility	1.650	1.543	1.765	1.490	1.390	1.598
Poverty (quintiles I and II)	1.417	1.319	1.523	2.263	1.998	2.563
Financial discrimination	0.895	0.818	0.980	0.913	0.834	0.999
Age (ref. under 30)						
Between 30 and 44	1.088	0.989	1.197	1.003	0.910	1.106
45 and over	1.199	1.088	1.322	1.076	0.973	1.190
Sex/Woman (ref. man)	1.053	0.986	1.123	1.025	0.960	1.095
Region						
North-West	0.945	0.842	1.061	0.920	0.819	1.033
Center-North	1.094	0.984	1.216	1.092	0.982	1.214
Center	0.938	0.854	1.031	0.963	0.876	1.059
South	0.960	0.865	1.064	0.913	0.822	1.014
Wealth of childhood home (ref. quintile I)						
Quintile II				1.024	0.929	1.128
Quintile III				1.986	1.774	2.225
Quintile IV				1.573	1.409	1.757
Quintile V				1.000		
Constant	0.580	0.459	0.734	0.420	0.330	0.537
	Number of obs =		16,441	Number of obs =		16,210
	LR chi2(16) =		569.5	LR chi2(16) =		700.39
	Prob > chi2 =		0	Prob > chi2 =		0
	Pseudo R2 =		0.0253	Pseudo R2 =		0.0315

Source: Author's own with data from CEEY (2019).

and related inequalities, leads people to underestimate their own change in socioeconomic circumstances and social mobility"). They show that people with the darkest skin tones tend to underestimate their achievements and do not perceive their own upward mobility, even when it is objectively present. But the results are yet more complex, because the same effect is observed in people with the lightest skin tones: they too underestimate their own upward social mobility compared to their actual experiences.

It is a little complicated to know how to interpret this last result. What it shows is that regardless of the social mobility people have actually experienced, and regardless of sociodemographic and discrimination variables, people with the darkest and lightest skin tones are less likely to perceive their own upward social mobility. We can investigate the mechanisms at play by proposing various hypotheses. In the case of those with the darkest skin tones, we can hypothesize that underestimating personal achievements (and having a lesser propensity to perceive upward social mobility) is linked to inequality, discrimination, stigma, and stereotyping that weigh on people according to their ethnic and racial characteristics. We can even make a link with the results of Campos-Vázquez and Medina-Cortina's (2017) study, which shows how skin tone affects expectations, aspirations, and even performance. Is the perception of success or of upward social mobility less reported by people with darker skin tones, who are also those who experience most discrimination? Despite their objective mobility, do these people not claim a success narrative because of the discrimination they continue to experience? Or, coinciding with Sánchez et al. (2011), are people with the darkest skin always judged, on first impression, based on their ethno-racial characteristics, before their current social status is perceived, and might this in turn affect their perception of their own social mobility? In colloquial terms, if you were born "moreno," is it true that you'll always be moreno, even if you climb up the social scale?

On the other hand, regarding people with the lightest skin, we can pose questions and create hypotheses that are equally complex to interpret. Can we explain the fact that people with lighter skin are less likely to perceive their own social mobility (despite that perception not corresponding with objective experience) in part because of a greater demand for achievements (such as upward social mobility, wealth, or higher academic degree) that are markers of success for this group of people? Or are they less likely to perceive their own social mobility because of higher expectations or aspirations,

given the advantages they started off with in life, at least in stereotypical terms (because actually the effects of that start in life are controlled for in the logistical model)? Another hypothesis might be that, given that in large part this social group begins from a more advantaged position than those in other social strata, perhaps there is no more space available above in the pyramid of social stratification in which upward social mobility could be perceived. Similarly, the distance between the richest stratum at the top of the pyramid and everyone else is growing wider, which makes social mobility more difficult to achieve in this context.

In this way, and in summary, the main result of the statistical model is that skin color has an important, particular effect over and above sociodemographic factors, childhood wealth/poverty, objective social mobility, and perceived discrimination. Skin color matters. While the results are not conclusive when it comes to exactly how skin color affects the perception of upward social mobility, there is evidence that there are different standards of evaluation when it comes to people's success, that these standards vary along with ethno-racial characteristics, and that people with the darkest and lightest skin tones seem to have a self-perception that seems more biased than people in the middle range of skin tones.

The Double Standard of Deserving Success

The previous analysis showed a significant relationship between ethno-racial characteristics and the perception of social mobility, and proposed some hypotheses regarding the different understandings of "success" among different social groups. The current section provides some more concrete ideas about the possible relationship between ethno-racial characteristics and certain narratives of achievement, success, or meritocracy itself. To further deepen the understanding of the relationship between these aspects of distributive justice, the results of the qualitative analysis on the subject are shown below.

In order to deal with narratives of success, let's analyze the other side of the coin: narratives about "failure"; that is, narratives about the causes of poverty. The stigmatization of poverty is caused by a series of assessments that use different yardsticks (or standards) to judge people in such a situation (i.e., socially identified as poor) with respect to the rest of the population, imposing different demands on them and legitimizing them in different ways in terms of the degree to which they are deserving. Moreover, this classist

assessment often has a clear racist correlate, so that ethno-racial characteristics cannot be left out of the analysis.

In Mexico, in 2019 (a year after president López Obrador began his term in office there were changes in the discourse around redistributive policies discursive, changes that unleashed or increased the visibility of *stigmatizing* or *meritocratic*, *classist*, and *racist narratives* that questioned the legitimacy and deservingness of beneficiaries.

Among the most important changes in the social policies of the current presidential administration is the strong criticism of previous social programs, based on the suspicion of corruption and inefficient use of intermediaries in the rollout process, which led to a restructuring of social programs. The most important program during the 1997–2018 period was the PROSPERA program that sought to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty through investment in "human capital" for the youngest members of those households, which was roundly criticized for years but also made some important achievements. It came to represent up to 25% of income for the poorest households (Boltvinik and Jaramillo-Molina 2019; Valencia and Jaramillo-Molina 2019). This program was criticized and replaced by a program of grants (called Becas Benito Juárez) that replicated most of PROSPERA's problems, but which had a considerably smaller budget. On the other hand, the Pension for Older Adults program (for over 65s) takes up over half of the total budget dedicated to social programs for 2022, and does not prioritize people suffering from poverty, but rather seeks to be universal.

While in objective terms the social programs implemented during this new term in office do not have bigger budgets or a greater effect on the reduction of poverty (although it has been proven that they are less effective at reducing inequality), they are more often debated on social media and in the press and have caused particular controversy for their perceived risk of creating clientelism. This frequent public discussion might be behind the greater stigmatization of beneficiaries of these social programs.

As previously mentioned, there are numerous historical studies that point to the stigmatization of beneficiaries of redistributive policies, especially those aimed at people affected by poverty. "The undeserving poor" (Katz 1989) is a socially constructed category that stigmatizes the beneficiaries of social programs, especially those aimed at people living in poverty, since it blames them for their situation and classifies them as lazy, dependent on the state, and not legitimate recipients of "social assistance" through taxpayers'

money. In this way, meritocratic perceptions of the causes of poverty, so important and generalized in Mexico, start to materialize, undermining any sense that those living in poverty have a legitimate claim to or are deserving of redistribution.

This stigmatizing representation of poverty is extremely frequent in the opinion columns of newspapers and other media outlets in Mexico. For example, Barba and Valencia (2019) show that the narratives about poor people in national newspapers are stigmatizing and that they depict the poor as a danger to public security and to society. Maria Amparo Casar (2019), a famous opinion writer, characterized social programs as "clientelist"—thus portraying beneficiaries of such programs as "clients"—because "nothing is asked of them in return." Such examples abound.

Stigmatizing narratives about the working classes are common in Mexico. According to the National Discrimination Survey (INEGI, 2017), at least two out of every five people agree that "poor people make little effort to pull themselves out of their poverty." Moreover, 65% of the population agrees that the programs aiming to fight poverty make people dependent on the government, and 57% believe that they incentivize them to not work, according to my own calculations based on the National Poverty Survey data (Cordera 2015).

Combined with this, the stigmatization of poverty in Mexico has historically had a racial element. The narrative of mestizaje has for centuries spread scorn on the working classes and often on people with darker skin, qualifying them as backward, immoral, chaotic, and threatening (Leal 2016). There is therefore a historical aspect to the racialization of the urban poor to be discussed (Knight 1990), one that has been denied by the ideology of mestizaje (Leal 2016). Based on the above, a hypothesis proposed in this chapter is that the working classes, who are "dangerous" to society (Barba and Valencia 2019), and the beneficiaries of social programs, who are "dependent" on the state (Casar 2019; Riva Palacio 2019), tend to also be racialized under these stigmatizing narratives.

Let's try to go a couple of steps further: why is this type of stigmatizing narrative about people who are identified or perceived as poor or with dark skin and who are beneficiaries of social programs in Mexico so popular? A second hypothesis put forward in this section is that the social construction of someone who deserves to benefit from social programs (also a reflection of whether they deserve to achieve "success") is based principally on a series of myths about the beneficiaries of these programs, especially about

people who are socially identified as poor and/or with ethno-racial features that point to an Indigenous origin—myths that are taken as truths despite being completely removed from reality. These myths tend to relate people living in poverty, people with dark skin, and single mothers, among other stereotyped figures, with individualist and meritocratic narratives that hold them responsible for their own situation.

In this section I will use a corpus compiled from social media analysis to provide evidence of stigmatizing narratives of poverty and redistribution. Table 4.4 shows some comments in response to a publication in which the question "What do you think the causes of poverty are?" was asked.

The meritocratic narrative and the ideology of mestizaje coincide in their depiction of the "failure" of the lower classes and racialized people, who are blamed for the vulnerable conditions in which they live, which are seen as the simple result of their actions, culture, customs, and way of life. In this sense, some of these opinions shared on social media reproduce narratives in which specific behaviors of those identified as poor are questioned. These behaviors, it is important to mention, would not be questioned or reproached for any reason in people who are not socially classified as poor, or in people who have light skin (without racialized features). One source of various comments on this topic was the social media trend that took off in 2019 (although it has had sporadic new life since then) with the hashtag "#CosasRarasDeLosPobres" (#StrangePoorPeopleThings), which allows people to share criticisms of behavior characterized as "illogical" or "naco"[2] by people identified as poor according to familiar stereotypes.

These viral tweets confirm ideas already presented above, such as fecundity ("To have a bunch of kids and not be able to afford them. #StrangePoorPeopleThings" or "StrangePoorPeopleThings to have kids and then complain you can't afford to feed them"), or the idea of dependence on the state ("Believing you deserve to be maintained by those of us who actually work").

Like these tweets, there are also others who question the aspiration to success when it is linked to skin color. The popular trending hashtag "#PrietosEnAprietos" (#PrietosInTightSpots) gave rise to tweets such as: "Calling lack of talent victimization. When will they understand that success is achieved through effort and true talent, not self-pity. #PrietosEnAprietos" in reference to a tweet by Yalitza Aparicio with the hashtag #PoderPrieto

Table 4.4. Comments on the perceived "causes of poverty."

ID	Comments
1	Ignorance. Both on the part of those managing the economy and on the part of the layabouts waiting for everything to be handed to them on a plate.
2	The first cause is to feel poor and the second is to feel incapable of no longer being poor.
3	Mentality.
4	All the prejudices you're fed since birth like, for example, that money is bad, that if you are born poor you die poor, because of mediocre comments that you believe.
5	Laziness
6	Overpopulation, lack of desire to be productive. Living under the expectation that someone else will do it.

Source: Author's own

(#PrietoPower) (Faure 2021) which sought precisely to vindicate the situation of people in Mexico who have historically been oppressed because of their skin color.

In another example, an account titled "PrietosMX" shared a photo of a young man on the metro wearing a suit, with the ironic caption: "Lowly skin color is no impediment to SUCCESS. Interested? Go on, mate, ask me how." It's clear that this reference to success is entirely formed through the stigmatization of people based on their ethnic characteristics and skin color, rather than just because they live in poverty. Why should it be surprising that a person with dark skin is "successful"? As I have mentioned, meritocracy and mestizaje form a double narrative in which poor people (and people with Indigenous ethno-racial characteristics or dark skin tones) are blamed for "being poor," but it is also assumed that these people cannot be successful, so others are "surprised" if they do indeed "achieve."

As the above cited phrases make clear, there is widespread stigma within individualist and meritocratic narratives and the narrative of mestizaje, of

people living in poverty, people with racialized features, and people who are beneficiaries of social programs. But these stigmas are not extended to other social actors who receive transfers from the government, directly or indirectly. When have you seen, for example, people who are entitled to government subsidies or IMSS (the country's main social security organization) or ISSSTE (social security for state employees) recipients being stigmatized? When have those who benefit from electricity, water, or gas subsidies, or from taxes such as "la tenencia" and "el predial" (the country's main property taxes) been questioned in this way? Why is it only poor people benefitting from these redistribution efforts who are stigmatized?

There is obviously a double standard in the evaluation of merit and justice around the distribution and redistribution of funds that individuals and social groups receive from the state and in general from society. But it is not only redistribution: this double standard means people's success and the "value of their effort" are judged in different ways.

I will outline at least two hypotheses to try to understand the cause of the existence and reproduction of this double standard. The first is proposed by Mettler (2011) and mentions that many citizens are critical of direct transfers but are more likely to promote and accept what are called "submerged policies"—indirect transfers that are less visible, such as fiscal incentives and subsidies. The role of these submerged policies is not clear to citizens, who often do not understand their function fully, much less their impact on the reproduction of inequality, which is why there are few who oppose them or stigmatize their beneficiaries.

The second hypothesis (Jaramillo-Molina 2019) is an explanation of the stigma contained in these narratives, due to a belief that the beneficiaries of those social programs lack legitimacy and merit, summed up in tweets and other social media: "they do not legitimately deserve society's help." As I mentioned before, this narrative ensures that "a poor person is to blame for their own situation. They need to be taught to fish. Unless something is done, they'll end up dependent on the government." This narrative tends to be extended to racialized people, through the narrative of mestizaje. The obvious consequence is that these people are not considered deserving of any social program.

But within that narrative there are several exceptions. It is possible for poor people to become deserving if there is a hint of "effort," "initiative," or "merit" involved. The evidence is clear, both in the results of related

studies (Jaramillo-Molina 2019; Oorschot 2000, 200; Reeskens & van der Meer 2019) and in comments on social media. Thus, proof of "effort" becomes the bargaining chip to diminish stigma against beneficiaries of social programs: good qualifications, "entrepreneurism," ingenuity, etc. At the end of the day, according to the dominant view, poverty caused by structural factors is not legitimate enough to deserve justice. This double standard reinforces the idea that it is illegitimate to provide redistribution to the poor, but simultaneously justifies giving to "deserving," non-poor, non-racialized people.

Conclusions: Meritocratic Mestizaje

This article provides evidence of the existence of a double standard in the dominant discourses and narratives that operate in Mexico around the perception of success and failure, of "effort" and "conformism," of deserving and undeserving. Such narratives establish a double standard about what it takes to be considered successful at the same time as perpetuating stigmas based on a biased understanding of "failure," to the detriment of the working and racialized classes. In this way, we can identify a kind of double linked narrative that we can call the narrative of "meritocratic mestizaje," a term that ought to be used more widely in order to highlight the close correlation between the two narratives and their mutual dependence on one another.

To get closer to the evidence on this matter, the results of the analysis clearly show that skin color, as a proxy for the interviewees' ethno-racial characteristics, plays an extremely important role in the judgement of success, approximated from the subjective representation of social mobility.

Moreover, the effect of skin color on the assessment of upward social mobility goes over and above the variables of childhood wealth, experienced (objective) social mobility, and other sociodemographic variables that were integrated into this analysis. Despite this, there remain some open questions about the different ways skin color affects the perception of mobility, especially when the results show that not only people with darker skin tones, but also those with the lightest skin are less likely to perceive upward social mobility. In any case, the evidence clearly shows that the perception of social mobility in Mexico is racialized.

On the other hand, analysis of the corpus compiled through the observation of narratives related to classism and racism on social media, including the narratives of meritocracy and of mestizaje, clearly shows how people

living in poverty with racialized features are held responsible for their own situation. By referring to habits or customs that are supposedly "incomprehensible" or "detrimental to themselves," the double narrative of "meritocratic mestizaje" explains, justifies, and legitimizes the precarity of the working classes in this country.

Pointing to a supposed generational and historical inheritance of a certain 'backward," "vulgar," and "inefficient" culture that weighs on poor and racialized people, "meritocratic mestizaje" is an example of how classist and racist discourses are intimately linked in societies such as Mexico, although the existence of both stigmatizing and exclusionary processes is often denied.

Notes

1   In terms of analysis of subjectivities, this study begins with a theoretical framework drawn from the sociology of valuation and evaluation (SVE), which allows us to analyze the narratives of deservingness and of distributive justice from the point of view of the subject, pointing out that valuative and evaluative practices are permeated by a series of conditions and factors that give rise to such a valuation, by stabilizing and institutionalizing it (Lamont 2012, 7).

2   Translator's note: See Hugo Ceron-Anaya's chapter in this volume for a full discussion of the historical and current usage of the insult "naco," which he defines as "a person who is unrefined or lacking formal education, who belongs to the working classes; they can also be an Indigenous person."

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