

## Classism: The Root of Problems in Mexico

When foreigners look at Mexico they assume there is only one race. However, the country is surprisingly diverse having more than 6,000 indigenous languages. <sup>1</sup>Mexico is composed of mestizo people. This refers to those who are a mixture of Natives (Aztecs and Mayans), and European (primarily Spanish). The mixture leads to colorism in Mexico, which is directly tied with classism. In Mexico, a lighter complexion is seen as a trait of the elite class, while a darker skin shade belongs to the lower class. Classism and racism go hand in hand in Mexico. Both concepts are essential to understand the income inequality gap in Mexico, making the intersectionality of race and class its biggest problem.

The child of the Aztec interpreter La Malinche, and Spanish Conquistador Hernan Cortez was the first meztizo, making him the first Mexican. However, the idea of “mestizaje” in Mexico is not to do with the inclusivity between whites and indigenous people, but rather to westernize the indigenous and make them appear white. <sup>2</sup> For indigenous people to be accepted or blend into society they have to “desindigenisarse,” or to abandon and alienate their indigenous culture to adopt a European way of being.

One of the first socioeconomic divides in Mexico was in 1856. The land was illegally taken away from the indigenous people of Mexico by those of European descent creating haciendas.<sup>3</sup> The natives were allowed to work the land, however, their severely underpaid, and

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<sup>1</sup> Czarniecki, Lukasz. “El Coneval. La Institucionalización Del Concepto Oficial De La Pobreza En México.” Revista Barataria, n

<sup>2</sup> Pérez, David Marcial. “El Mestizo Mexicano Quiere Ser Lo Más Blanco Posible.” EL PAÍS,elpais.com/cultura/2017/06/23/actualidad/1498245328\_147788.html.

<sup>3</sup> “Agrarian Reform in Mexico.” Economywatch, www.economywatch.com/agrarian

had a codependent relationship with the landowner, the caudillo, because they were unable to find a different job or regain the land that was once theirs. This created a staggering socioeconomic divide in Mexico's population; the divisions between classes were mainly between those who had more Spanish ancestry than Indigenous ancestry.

The income inequality gap in Mexico is massive. Mexico has a GINI of 48.20 as of 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The higher the number, the further away it gets from equal distribution of money. It ranks 4th in the world with the worst income inequality.<sup>5</sup> "In 2016, 43.6% of the population (53.4 million) lived in poverty."<sup>6</sup> The income inequality gap has led to frustration amongst the poor class in Mexico. The Elite class seems luxuriant and unattainable. Class plays an important role in Mexico's culture. It is a big part of society, where being the elite class is the end goal of many. This leads to the poor class to turn to cartels to join the Elite. Cartels provides what is known as "la escalera." This translates to ladder, which allows those of a lower class to climb their way up to the elite. Being in a cartel is easy and big money. BBC news reported the story of a young man, who remains unnamed, who worked for a cartel for 8 months. He was being offered 25,000 Mexican pesos when the minimum wage in Mexico is 102 pesos per day.<sup>7</sup> He also said that a big contribution to joining the cartel was the access to luxury restaurants, designer clothes, and clubs.<sup>8</sup> He got access to the world of the elite.

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<sup>4</sup>"Mexico - GINI Index (World Bank Estimate)." *Mexico - GINI Index (World Bank Estimate)*, [www.indexmundi.com/facts/mexico/indicator/SI.POV.GINI](http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/mexico/indicator/SI.POV.GINI).

<sup>5</sup>"Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Ranking by Country 2017." Statista, [www.statista.com/statistics/268173/countries-with-the-largest-gross-domestic-product-g.p](http://www.statista.com/statistics/268173/countries-with-the-largest-gross-domestic-product-g.p)

<sup>6</sup> Czarnecki, Lukasz. "El Coneval. La Institucionalización Del Concepto Oficial De La Pobreza En México." *Revista Barataria*, n

<sup>7</sup> Person. "I Spent Eight Months Working for a Mexican Drug Cartel!" BBC Three, BBC, 13 June 2019, [www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/b2d059be-35ec-4f68-9c87-01a398696051](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/b2d059be-35ec-4f68-9c87-01a398696051).

<sup>8</sup> Person. "I Spent Eight Months Working for a Mexican Drug Cartel!" BBC Three, BBC, 13 June 2019, [www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/b2d059be-35ec-4f68-9c87-01a398696051](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/b2d059be-35ec-4f68-9c87-01a398696051).

The Mexican government created a national survey of discrimination in Mexico in 2010. They concluded that the number one social division in Mexico is wealth having 59.5% of the people surveyed say it influences their life. In the same survey, 60% said that they have been mistreated due to their skin tone.<sup>9</sup> As of 2016, 77.6% of the indigenous-language-speaking population, which would be the darker skin Mexicans, is in poverty and 34.8% in extreme poverty.<sup>10</sup> The elite has even created discriminatory slang to refer to the lower class, such as “elado, lépero, naco, chusma, gato, guarro, and indio.”<sup>11</sup>

A contribution to the big social divide is also attributed to the isolation of indigenous groups. Mexico’s population is 30% indigenous, compared to only 4.3% white, yet this group is the poorest.<sup>12</sup> A clear example is Sierra Tauramaura, which is located in Mexico's northern Sierra Madre Occidental. They are one of the indigenous tribes that have remained with their culture and language intact.<sup>13</sup> They experience extreme rural poverty due to geographical isolation.<sup>14</sup> The isolation of indigenous groups prevents them from further mixing in society. Their lack of exposure leads them to be more marginalized by the elites of Mexico.

The lack of “mestizaje” leads to Mexico’s money to be contained amongst the white elites. In Latin America the idea of “mejorando la raza” associates the white complexion with money and opportunity. As generations progress, *mejorando la raza* suggests we should aim to make our descendants lighter and lighter and look for a partner who has a light complexion. This

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<sup>9</sup> Conapred. “Clasismo y Racismo, Sin sentido De La Democracia.” Consejo Nacional Para Prevenir La Discriminación,

<sup>10</sup> Czarnecki, Lukasz. “El Coneval. La Institucionalización Del Concepto Oficial De La Pobreza En México.”

<sup>11</sup> “Milenio.” Milenio, [www.milenio.com/tribuna/clasistas-o-racistas](http://www.milenio.com/tribuna/clasistas-o-racistas).

<sup>12</sup> Aguila, Emma, Alisher R. Akhmedjonov, Ricardo Basurto-Davila, Krishna B. Kumar, Sarah Kups, and Howard J. Shatz. “Inequality, Poverty, and Social Policy in Mexico.” In *United States and Mexico: Ties That Bind, Issues That Divide*, 103-28. Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg985rc.20>.

<sup>13</sup> “Tarahumara People, Language & Culture - Eco AlterNATIVE Tours.” Eco, [www.ecoalternativetours.com/tarahumara-people/](http://www.ecoalternativetours.com/tarahumara-people/).

<sup>14</sup> Czarnecki, Lukasz. “El Coneval. La Institucionalización Del Concepto Oficial De La Pobreza En México.” *Revista Barataria*, no. 16, 2016, doi:10.20932/barataria.v0i16.81.

further the income inequality gap in Mexico. The pressure of Mexican families into marrying someone of lighter complexion also increases the marginalization of the darker skin Mexicans.

As Mexican culture has evolved, a new class has been born — the "Whitexicans." This term was first popularized by Twitter and used to make fun of the elitist class of Mexicans in a series of memes. A Whitexican is a person who shows pride in Mexico when abroad, but are classist and have racist attitudes within the Mexican population.<sup>15</sup> They are supposedly a class of Mexicans that live in a bubble, where their money (usually their parents) shelters them from experiencing the hardships of the country. They believe that all the opportunities are the same for all for them, life is relatively easy.

The American Sociology Review conducted a similar study, asking Mexicans to classify their skin tone in a char numbered 1 (lightest) to 17 (darkest). The study concluded that in fact skin color is linked to class “to produce and reproduce social inequality in Mexican society.” Surprisingly the primary factor it affects its education. “Darker children are especially likely to attend lower quality schools where graduation rates are lower, because their (also darker) parents are more likely to be poorer, which could be a reflection of discrimination in earlier generation.<sup>16</sup>

Whitexicans are more likely to get a better quality of education, higher salary, and better job opportunities. A study done at Vanderbilt revealed 45% more of Whitexicans are educated compared to darker skinned Mexicans, and a Whitexican household income salary is an average of \$220 a month versus a darker skinned Mexican \$137.<sup>17</sup> Minimum wage in Mexico is one of

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<sup>15</sup> “What Is a 'Whitexican'?” *Mexicanist*, 27 June 2019, [www.mexicanist.com/l/what-is-a-whitexican/](http://www.mexicanist.com/l/what-is-a-whitexican/).

<sup>16</sup> Flores, René, and Edward Telles. "Social Stratification in Mexico: Disentangling Color, Ethnicity, and Class." *American Sociological Review* 77.3 (2012): 486-94. Web.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Zizumbo-Colunga and Iván Flores Martínez, *Is Mexico a Post-Racial Country? Inequality and Skin Tone across the Americas*. Center for Research and Teaching in Economics, CIDE

the lowest in Latin America.<sup>18</sup> This leads to social polarization which then arises more sentiment towards classism.

Mexican media also influences the representation of light complexion as the elite. Telenovelas and advertisements feature light complexion actors and actresses. Even those roles who are supposed to be played by an indigenous person. Ironically, their primary audience would be the lower class, hence darker skin Mexicans. These portrayals emphasizes that having a lighter complexion should be the aspiration of everyone. The Mexican media portrays Mexico as more lighter than it's reality. "BuzzFeed Mexico analyzed the content in 15 of the most popular magazines in Mexico to see how they represent Mexican diversity."<sup>19</sup> The representation of dark skinned Mexicans was only 5-8% and most of them were depicted in cases of philanthropy.<sup>20</sup> This idea of the white media was also highlighted during the World Cups. At World Cups the camera turns to the fans and usually picks the most attractive fans to broadcast, it repeatedly chose man and woman of a light complexion, never a darker one.<sup>21</sup> The same 'white out' process happens with billboards. There is not a single one that showcases a darker skin Mexican, unless it is for a charity.

Regardless, the movie "Roma," which was nominated for 10 Academy Awards, does an amazing job of representing Mexicans with darker skin tones. This movie does not only give representation towards white Mexicans, but also exposes the Whitemexican society, which expects dark skinned Mexicans to be housemaids and they treat them as inferior. Roma star Yalitzia

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<sup>18</sup> Editors, The. "As Inequality Grows in Mexico, So Does Social Polarization." World Politics Review. January 19, 2017.

<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/20957/as-inequality-grows-in-mexico-so-does-social-polarization>.

<sup>19</sup> Armitage, Susie. "Mexican Magazines Are Way Whiter Than The Actual Mexican Population." BuzzFeed News. December 14, 2016.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/susiearmitage/how-mexican-magazines-reflect-racial-discrimination>.

<sup>20</sup> IBID

<sup>21</sup> Human Connections. "Is Mexico Experiencing a Media White Out?" Human Connections. August 15, 2016.

<https://humanconnections.org/blog/2019/2/2/is-mexico-experiencing-a-media-white-out>.

Aparicio experienced a backlash from the white media, where other actresses tried to discredit her Oscar nomination calling her ugly, and claiming she was unprepared.<sup>22</sup> Aparicio gave representation to the majority of Mexico, making her a trend setter towards eradicating the white wash media.

There has to be a rule of law in Mexico. There is a lack of regulation in Mexico that has led to a more anarchic state. This allows people to behave and take what they please. This has been clearly seen by El Chapo paying ex president Enrique Peña Nieto \$100 million to keep him from facing the juristic system.<sup>23</sup> This shows how the president is not the most powerful man in the country, but rather the ones who are the wealthiest. The lack of rule of law encourages people to do as they please. If a workplace is being racist, and does not hire darker skin Mexicans, there is no one to enforce them to do otherwise. People have turned to accept that as their reality, rather than fight it because no one is there for support.

A way to dismantle classism would be to end corruption in the country. The elite are so powerful that they own the government. Constantly presidents have been fair skinned Mexicans, aside from current president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO); where a main reason why he got elected was because the indigenous communities were fed up with not having representation. Dismantling corruption would equal the power in Mexico. This would allow for more equal opportunities. This will also allow for a redistribution of wealth. Politicians and government officials steal a tremendous amount of money that should be going towards improving living conditions alone. Ex Veracruz Governor Javier Duarte stole \$3.5 billion in the

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<sup>22</sup> Colás, Julieta. "Perspective | 'Roma' Is a Start. But We 'Whitexicans' Still Need to Reckon with Our 'muchachas.'" The Washington Post. February 08, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/30/roma-is-start-we-whitexicans-still-need-reckon-with-our-muchachas/>.

<sup>23</sup> Feuer, Alan. "Former Mexican President Peña Nieto Took \$100 Million Bribe, Witness at El Chapo Trial Says." The New York Times, The New York Times, 15 Jan. 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/01/15/nyregion/el-chapo-trial.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/15/nyregion/el-chapo-trial.html).

presidential term of Enrique Peña Nieto.<sup>24</sup> The lack of a strict government and regulations make it easy for corrupt politicians to exist and continue to profit from what should be money used in Mexico. Current president AMLO estimates that \$25 billion get stolen from government funds every year.<sup>25</sup> Ending corruption would just be the beginning of the dismantlement of racism.

Just by ending corruption there will be a redistribution of wealth. Mexico would now have access to the money that is rightfully there. A big portion of it should go towards improving education, which will allow for equal opportunity. Disproportionately darker skin have been affected by levels of poverty that prohibit them from attending higher levels of education that wealth can easily allow for, as in the case with the elite class. Without this equal opportunity, darker skinned Mexicans will be perpetually stuck in an endless cycle of poverty, not being able to climb their way up in society to make a decent living or wages.

As a country we need to be willing to accept new laws and bills. There is a fair amount of deflection that prevents Mexico from making a systematic change. AMLO recently sent a letter to the king of Spain demanding “an apology of the abuses inflicted on the indigenous peoples of Mexico by Spain, in view of what the Spaniards now consider “human rights violations.”<sup>26</sup> This shows how Mexico keeps deflecting the problem, blaming it on outside forces when part of the problem starts with the Mexican culture. Mexicans are raised with racist and classist values. The whitexican would oppress the brown Mexican, the brown Mexican oppresses the darker skin Mexican and the darker skin Mexican would oppress the indigenous Mexican. Those values

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<sup>24</sup>Ramos, Jorge. “How to Steal \$3.5 Billion.” Splinter, Splinter, 9 July 2018, splinternews.com/how-to-steal-3-5-billion-1794632489.

<sup>25</sup> Partlow, Josh. “If He Becomes President, This Man Will Turn Mexico's White House into a Public Park.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 5 June 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/if-he-becomes-president-this-man-will-turn-mexicos-white-house-into-a-public-park/2018/06/04/750e4d4a-169e-11e8-930c-45838ad0d77a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/if-he-becomes-president-this-man-will-turn-mexicos-white-house-into-a-public-park/2018/06/04/750e4d4a-169e-11e8-930c-45838ad0d77a_story.html).

<sup>26</sup>Castañeda, Jorge G. “Reparations: A Conversation Worth Having.” The New York Times. April 12, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/opinion/international-world/reparations-a-conversation-worth-having.html>.

cascade through the class system. By fixing the way people are educated at home, along with real material redistribution, would create a more inclusive environment. There has to be an eradication of ideology, where ‘mejorando la raza’ is not a goal, and the possibility of bi-racial relationships. However, for this cultural change to happen it has to be cross generational, meaning it could take over 100 years to change.

Paying a livable wage is essential to solve the problem. As of 2018, minimum wage in Mexico is \$80.04 pesos a day.<sup>27</sup> That makes it \$2480 pesos a month. This is not enough to sustainably live. A single adult livable wage would be \$3080 to \$4630 pesos a month.<sup>28</sup> By raising the minimum wage we would ensure that the government would have more money for the development of Mexico, due to the increased revenue in taxes, and there will be an increase in the living standard.

There has to be education in regards to inclusion and diversity. Schools and workplaces need to implement programs where other skin colors are welcomed and encouraged to join. There should be an encouragement of indigenous people to mix more within society. For that to happen they need to feel welcome, and there has to be an increase in infrastructure to prevent isolationism.

Mexico has a classist culture, making it’s biggest problem being the intersectionality of race and class. Classism and racism go hand in hand. In order to fix the problem with the classist ideology of Mexico there has to be a new ideology implemented allowing for the inclusivity of dark skin and fair skin Mexicans. An end to corruption is essential to redistribute the wealth and

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<sup>27</sup> Mexperience. “Mexico's Minimum Wage in 2018.” *Mexperience*, 10 Jan. 2018, [www.mexperience.com/mexicos-minimum-wage/](http://www.mexperience.com/mexicos-minimum-wage/).

<sup>28</sup> “Living Wage Series - Mexico - January 2018 - In Mexican Peso, per Month.” WageIndicator.org, [wageindicator.org/salary/living-wage/mexico-living-wage-series-january-2018-country-overview](http://wageindicator.org/salary/living-wage/mexico-living-wage-series-january-2018-country-overview).

lead to educational reform. Access to equal education will lead to equal opportunities. Mexicans need to understand that there should not be a difference in colorism, but rather embrace themselves as ‘hermanos y hermanas de la misma patria.’

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