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Hurdles and paternalism: the long way to overcome discrimination and sub-representation of hispanics and afro-americans in economics. An analysis for the United States between 1995-2019

Brechas y paternalismo: el largo camino para superar la discriminación y sub-representación de hispanos y afroamericanos en la disciplina económica. Un análisis para los Estados Unidos entre 1995-2019

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HURDLES AND PATERNALISM: THE LONG WAY TO OVERCOME DISCRIMINATION AND SUB-REPRESENTATION OF HISPANICS AND AFRO-AMERICANS IN ECONOMICS. AN ANALYSIS FOR THE UNITED STATES BETWEEN 1995-2019

Luis Eduardo Castellanos Rodríguez¹

Summary

The debate on whether there is racial exclusion in economics is open. There is a strong contrast between the position of those who consider that there is still discrimination in the field and those who believe that this phenomenon has disappeared (or became insignificant) in recent decades. This document analyzes the evolution and change in the dynamics related to the representation of Afro-American and Hispanic minorities in economics within the US post-secondary educational system from 1995 to 2019. I present data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) and show that there is not only a low representation of Hispanic and Afro-American people in degrees awarded at post-secondary institutions but negligible employment of these groups within leading academic institutions. I evaluate some of the possible reasons for the persistence of socioeconomic barriers, like discrimination, exclusion, and self-isolation attitudes, that block academic and professional advancement in the discipline for these minorities. The analysis is important for economists outside the US due to two factors: the "Americanization" of economics and the influence of the US top centers over the curriculum of other institutions around the world.

Keywords: discrimination, minority representation, cognitive biases, post-secondary education, barriers, political economy.

JEL Classification: A23, I210, I240, J150, J710.

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BRECHAS Y PATERNALISMO: EL LARGO CAMINO PARA SUPERAR LA DISCRIMINACIÓN Y SUB-REPRESENTACIÓN DE HISPANOS Y AFROAMERICANOS EN LA DISCIPLINA ECONÓMICA. UN ANÁLISIS PARA LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS ENTRE 1995-2019

Resumen

El debate sobre si existe exclusión racial en la economía está abierto. Existe un fuerte contraste entre la posición de quienes consideran que aún existe discriminación en la disciplina y quienes creen que este fenómeno ha desaparecido (o se ha vuelto insignificante) en las últimas décadas. Este documento analiza la evolución y el cambio en la dinámica relacionada con la representación, en la carrera de economía, de las minorías afroamericanas e hispanas dentro del sistema de educación superior de EE. UU. Se presentan y analizan datos del *National Center for Education Statistics* (2020) y se demuestra que: en primer lugar, hay una baja representación de hispanos y afroamericanos en los graduados de instituciones de educación superior. En segundo lugar, se muestra que el empleo en el interior de importantes instituciones académicas de personas que se identifican dentro de estas minorías es insignificante. En el artículo se evalúan algunas de las posibles razones de la persistencia de barreras socioeconómicas, como actitudes de discriminación, exclusión y autoaislamiento, que obstaculizan el avance académico y profesional de estas minorías dentro del campo de la economía. El análisis es importante para los economistas fuera de Estados Unidos debido a la "americanización" de la disciplina económica y a la influencia de los principales centros universitarios estadounidenses sobre el plan de estudios de otras instituciones alrededor del mundo.

Palabras clave: discriminación, representación de minorías, sesgos cognitivos, educación superior, barreras, economía política.

Clasificación JEL: A23, I210, I240, J150, J710.



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We find ourselves, as so often happens in these ugly police cases, having to prove that acts of discrimination are exactly that - discrimination.

–Bill Spriggs (2020)

1. Introduction

In June 2020, the American Economic Association (AEA) issued a statement claiming that racism and discrimination are in force in the United States, and that “its impact on the profession and economic discipline is only beginning to be understood” (American Economic Association, 2020, para. 3). Likewise, economists such as Bill Spriggs (Spriggs, 2020) and Lisa Cook (2019) have joined the voices that point out that this problem is systematic and that it should not continue to be invisible. In contrast, renowned economists such as Harald Uhling, who is currently co-editor of the *Journal of Political Economy*² and Professor at the University of Chicago, have criticized the growing importance of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Larry Kudlow, who serves as director of the White House National Economic Council took a strong position on the debate asserting that he “does not believe that systematic racism exists in the United States” (The New York Times, 2020, parr. 4).

In this context, I analyze the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to evaluate if the data reveal systematic discrimination against Hispanic and Afro-American people at US universities, and particularly, at economics departments. Since the IPEDS is conducted by the NCEES, statistics have revealed that the proportion of Hispanic and Afro-American students within the US postsecondary education system is below its relative weight in the total population (CSMGEP, 2019c). In this document, I show that this trend has continued and that it may indicate the persistence of social, cultural, and economic obstacles. Those obstacles probably hinder access to careers such as economics or obstruct the link to labor markets associated with the economics discipline for non-white people (Goldsmith et al., 2007).

² He was temporarily placed on leave as an editor at the *Journal of Political Economy* "pending a determination of the Board as to whether it would be appropriate for him to continue given recent accusations of discriminatory conduct in a University classroom setting." He has been reinstated after a finding that "there is not a basis for a further disciplinary proceeding" (The University of Chicago, 2020).

To demonstrate what I have set out, the first part of this paper introduces a brief historical context about the institutionalization of discrimination in economics. In the second part, I analyze the IPEDS data about the representation of Afro-Americans and Hispanics in economics and provide some stylized facts. Third, I relate my findings to other authors' proposals and examine the consequences of the existence of racial discrimination in economics. Finally, I present some conclusions.

2. (Brief) historical context

The birth of the concept “economy” in the first half of the 20th century was mediated by sharpened discriminatory biases against minority groups. In general, the first generation of American economists, including the founders of the AEA, were white men that fostered an environment of academic and labor marginalization for black people, women, immigrants, and disabled people (Leonard, 2016; Pinzón Fuchs, 2020). As illustrated by George J. Stigler’s article *The problem of the negro* (1965), Afro-Americans were classified as lazy, problematic, and signaled as the main culprits of their lower social and cultural status.

In that environment of institutionalized segregation, the construction of statistics made it possible to classify events, institutions, and social groups within cognitive and political categories, according to the dominant social circles (Perlman & Marietta, 2005). As I argue in the third section of this article, those classifications lead not only to the systematic devaluation of minorities’ opinions and needs but to the internalization of negative racial biases by both discriminated and discriminators. Nevertheless, as shown in section two, statistics are also helpful to identify the existence of barriers in the access to the economics profession for Afro-American and Hispanic groups, which is the first step to pursue a solution to systemic discrimination.

3. The IPEDS data and some stylized facts

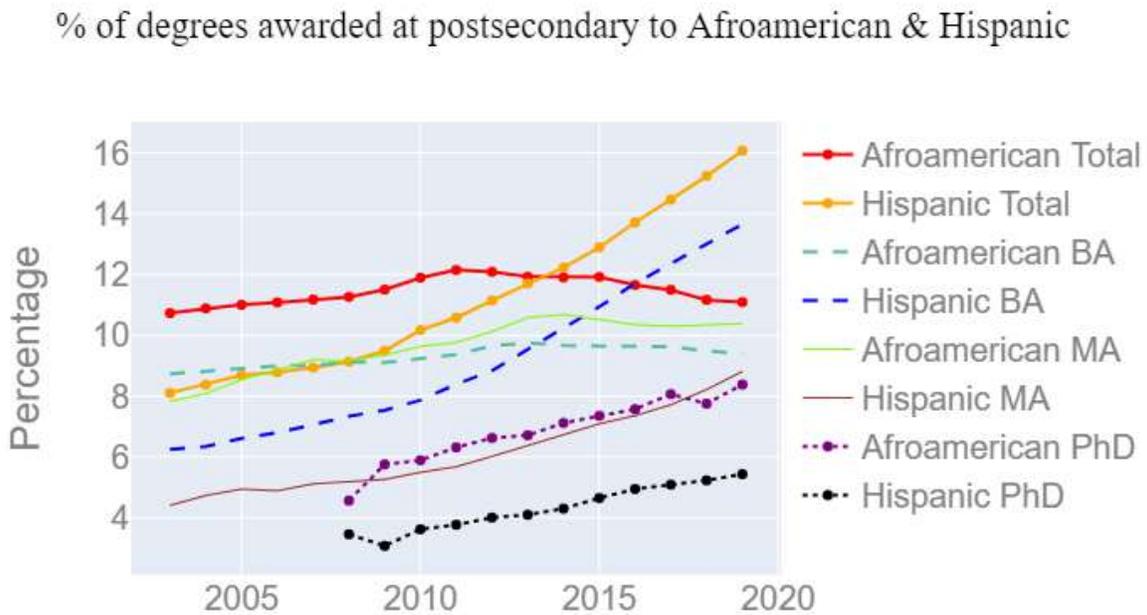
The change in the representation of Hispanic and Afroamericans within economics was assessed by the construction of an integrated database from 1995 to 2019 with the information included in the IPEDS³, as carried out by CSMGEP until 2017 (CSMGEP, 2019a). The study included all the degree-granting institutions participating in the survey, although

³ The survey is published annually by the NCES (2020).

students who were not permanent residents of the US were excluded. Some data used for the comparative analysis is presented from 2003 onwards due to availability on the IPEDS.

Figure 1 shows all the degrees awarded to Hispanics and Afro-Americans according to IPEDS data. Hispanics have significantly increased their representation in all higher education programs since 2003, going from 8% to 15.24% in 2019. Afro-Americans reached a peak of graduates in 2012 with 12.14%, but since then their participation decreased to 11.16% in 2019.

Figure 1. Degrees awarded to Afro-Americans and Hispanics in all subjects between 2003 and 2019



Source: own elaboration with data taken from IPEDS (2020).

The proportion of Afro-Americans and Hispanics within the US population was estimated at 12.8%⁴ and 18.45%⁵ respectively, in 2019 (US Census Bureau, 2020). In contrast, the participation of these groups was 9.40% and 13.64% at the undergraduate level. At master level, the proportion was 10.38% for Afro-Americans and 8.81% for Hispanics. For PhDs, the

⁴ According to Black Demographics, it is estimated that the proportion of Afro-Americans within the total population will continue increasing and will reach 13.4% in 2020 (Black Demographics, 2020).

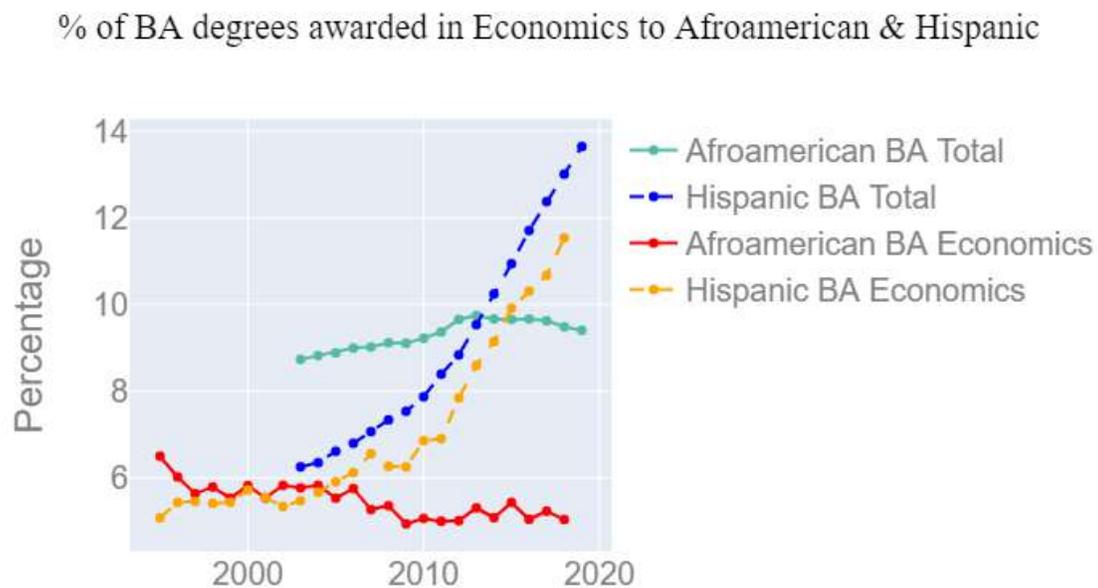
⁵ The US Hispanic population reached a record of 60.6 million in 2019. “Between 2010 and 2019, the Latino share of the total US population increased from 16% to 18%. Latinos accounted for about half (52%) of all US population growth over this period. They are the country’s second-largest racial or ethnic group, behind white non-Hispanics” (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020).

participation of both groups has been increasing, but it remains minimal, at 8.38% and 5.44% respectively.

The participation of Hispanics in undergraduate degrees has doubled between 2002 and 2019. However, their underrepresentation in graduate schools would indicate that –even though some of the barriers that limit their entry to higher education in the US have been gradually mitigated, the changes are so recent that they are not significantly reflected at the master’s and doctoral levels.

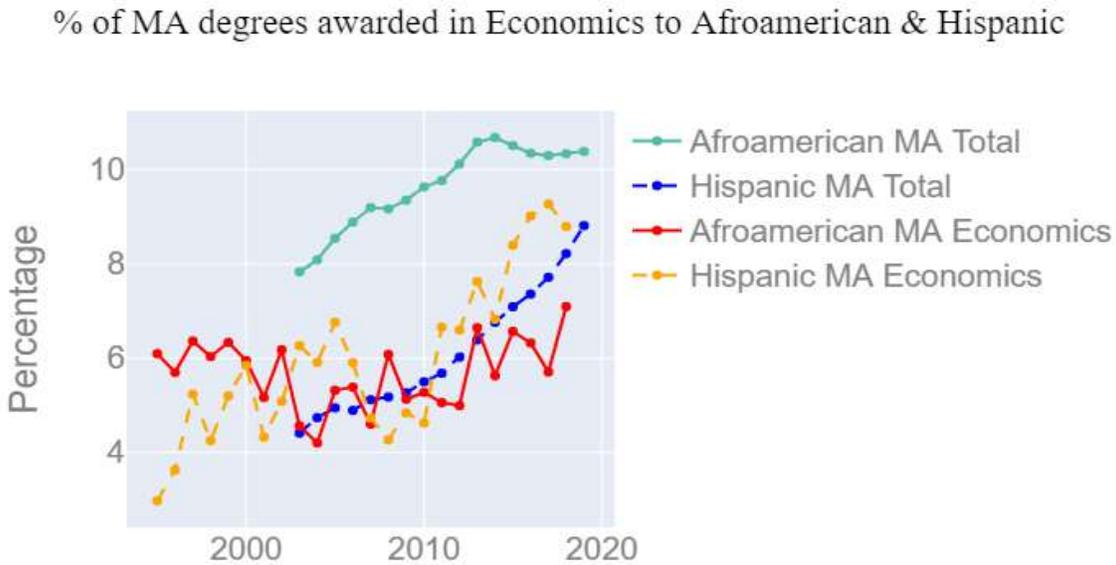
Figure 2 shows the dynamics of undergraduate degrees awarded to Hispanics and Afro-Americans in economics and all subjects between 1995 and 2019. The participation of both groups in undergraduate degrees in economics is below the all-subjects proportion. Although Hispanics follow a very similar trend to that of the total and reach 11.53% in 2019, the outlook is concerning for Afro-Americans. Their representation among economics graduates at the bachelor’s level has fallen since 1995, remaining around 5% since 2009. These facts may reflect the hardening of hurdles and obstacles that they have to face to aspire to a career in economics.

Figure 2. Degrees awarded to Afro-Americans and Hispanics in Economics BA between 1995 and 2019



Source: own elaboration with data taken from IPEDS (2020)

Figure 3. Degrees awarded to Afro-Americans and Hispanics in Economics MA between 1995 and 2019

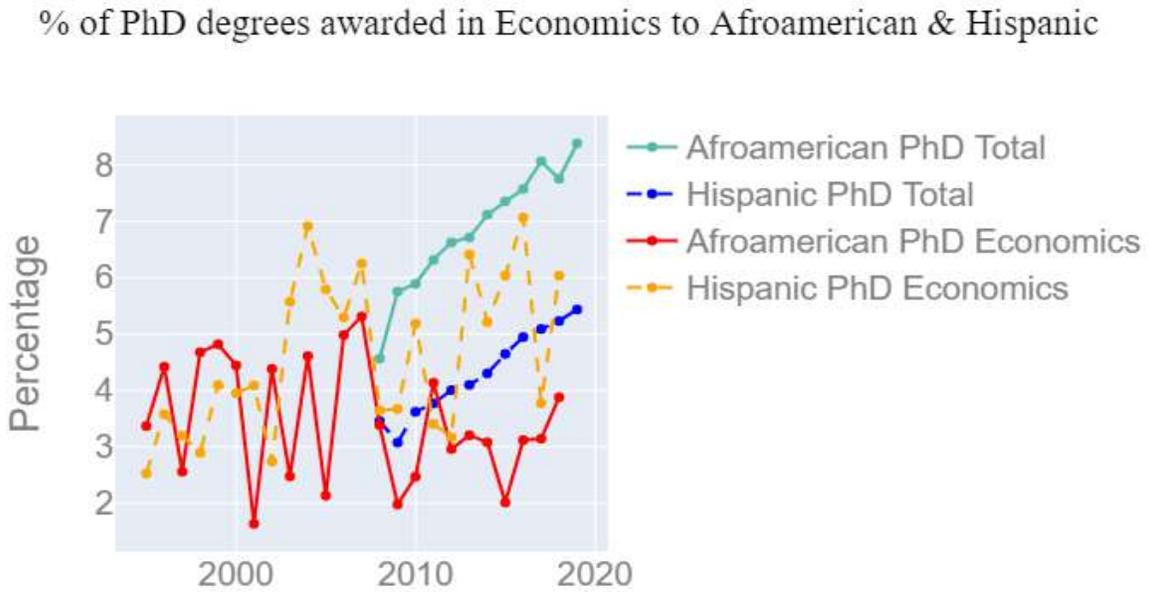


Source: own elaboration with data taken from IPEDS (2020).

Figure 3 presents the historical proportion of Afro-American and Hispanic master's graduates in economics and all subjects. At master level, the general participation of Afro-Americans is higher, but it shows a decline since 2012, reaching 10.38% in 2019. Although their participation in economics master's programs reached a maximum of 7.09% in 2018, the behavior of the variable has been erratic and does not seem to reflect a growing trend. In contrast, Hispanics reached participation of 8.81% in all masters, but it is growing steadily. Additionally, their participation in economics master's programs is higher than in the average master's degree since 2011, but it is still well below their share in the US population.

The participation of Afro-Americans and Hispanics in doctoral graduates has increased since 2002. However, as shown in figure 4, the representation of Afro-Americans in economics PhD programs has been low and variable. For Hispanics, representation in economics PhD programs is also variable, but it has been more significant compared to the representation of Afro-Americans since the mid-2000s. The low proportion of these minorities in PhD graduates could be attributed to two factors. First, the existence of obstacles to access higher levels of education, and second, the imaginary that a PhD will not be useful for them to improve their employment perspectives in the field of economics (Goldsmith et al., 2004).

Figure 4. Degrees awarded to Afro-Americans and Hispanics in Economics PhD between 1995 and 2019



Source: own elaboration with data taken from IPEDS (2020)

Table 1 shows the representation of Afro-Americans and Hispanics in the faculties of economics for the academic year 2018-2019. In most cases, teachers that identified themselves with any of these racial groups did not represent more than 5% of the total at a given level of degree or type of association with the educational institution. The presence of Hispanic or Afro-American professors in economics departments is far below their proportion in the US population; which, in turn, makes difficult to study and address adequately the specific problems that affect these communities. The AEA reports that “only 3% of the profession identifies as Black and almost half (47%) of Black respondents reported experiences of discrimination in economics” (AEA, 2020, par. 3).

Tabla 1. Afro-American and Hispanic professors in economics faculties. The academic year 2018-2019

Degree	Full prof.	Associate prof.	Assistant prof.	Other	Total full time	Total part-time
Afro-American						
BA	2,0%	4,7%	3,7%	0,0%	3,2%	3,9%
MA	1,7%	5,2%	2,3%	2,6%	2,9%	0,8%
PHD	1,5%	2,3%	2,3%	2,9%	1,9%	3,2%
TOTAL	1,6%	3,5%	2,7%	2,2%	2,4%	3,1%
Hispanic						
BA	1,6%	3,6%	3,7%	0,0%	2,5%	2,3%
MA	1,1%	2,6%	8,5%	0,0%	3,6%	4,8%
PHD	4,9%	6,8%	9,0%	2,9%	6,2%	2,5%
TOTAL	3,6%	5,1%	7,1%	1,7%	4,8%	2,8%

Source: own elaboration with data taken from CSMGEP (2019).

4. Exclusion, paternalism, and psychological barriers

It cannot be denied Afro-Americans and Hispanics' participation in the economic discipline is greater than half a century ago or even 20 years ago. Incentives to integrate them into the community have increased, and many institutions have become aware of the problem. For example, the AEA and the American Society of Hispanic Economists⁶ (ASHE) have implemented a series of courses such as the Summer Training, the Mentoring, or the Summer Fellows Programs, which focus on encouraging minority representation in economics (CSMGEP, 2019b). However, many of such incentives are conducted under a complex narrow-minded paternalism (Phillips, 2020). Also, the prevalence of racial biases of the "American progressivism ideology" has led to proposals and ideas engendered in minority intellectual circles of the US being systematically ignored (Leonard, 2016).

The idea of the supposed "superiority" and "neutrality" of the economic technocracy permeates the top centers of economic thought in the North-American society (Fourcade et al., 2015). Its persistency is evident since the social protests against violence and racial discrimination have provoked intense discomfort among certain groups of white men. These groups believe that they know what is best for everyone and, therefore, that what they have already done is

⁶ American Society of Hispanic Economists (ASHE), is a "professional association of economists who are concerned with the underrepresentation of Hispanic Americans in the economics profession" (Sharpe et al., 2018).

sufficiently advanced on the subject. It is illogical to think that a person who has never faced abuses, can propose effective solutions and policies to combat them, especially if they do not consider the affected groups' opinions. The belief that "they [i.e. the minorities] must first be taught what to want" (Leonard, 2016, p. 15) often leads to the implementation of policies that exacerbate racial disadvantage and conflict.

Discrimination persists in more subtle ways than in the past; however, it still has significant effects on the quality of life of minorities, and their ability to exercise civil and political rights. For example, in the context of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, deaths within the African Americans have risen disproportionately compared to the rest of the population (Scientific American, 2020)⁷. Hamilton (2017) found evidence that rhetoric emphasizing that "hard work, individual agency, and personal responsibility are enough to close the job gaps" (p. 5) has taken its toll. The pressure on socially stigmatized groups to achieve their goals imposes physical and psychological costs on their health. "They are required to exert considerable energy on a daily basis to cope with conditions of high anxiety or uncertainty" (Hamilton, 2017, p. 14). In consequence, the individuals belonging to these groups tend to have worse health than an average white individual with their same income or grade of professional achievement.

Many Afro-Americans have done everything society has asked of them, but they have rarely reached the top of their careers' leading institutions. As Montecinos (2001) indicated, sometimes the excluded manage to get new rights attributed, but the hierarchical social orders of democracy do not change. Economists tend to propose their models having in mind the mainstream economics, which is given by the top think tanks in the US. This situation makes impossible for them to explain phenomena such as unequal wages or strong stratification between people with similar training or ability, but with different sexual or ethnic identities (Fourcade et al., 2015)⁸.

Not only do minorities find it difficult to access the academic and work environments of the discipline, but their classification as "different" individuals has induced many of them to change their aspirations, habits, and objectives (Goldsmith et al., 2004). Goldsmith et al. (2004)

⁷ Scientific American's editorial exposed this fact as a reason to endorse Joe Biden in his career to the US presidency.

⁸ Bourdieu (1984) argues that "this dynamic is characteristic of unequal situations: those in a central position within a field fail to notice peripheral actors and are also largely unaware of the principles that underpin their own domination".

explain that this is a way to avoid the psychological discomfort produced by participating in hostile work and educational environments in which they feel discriminated. Exclusion can generate cognitive dissonances, which leads to internalizing the belief that they have negative or inferior characteristics; which are attributed to them from the dominant circles of society (Aronson et al., 1998). Then, the obstacles for Hispanics and Afro-Americans to access the economic discipline go beyond the institutional structure and have become embedded in the imagination of many of those that are discriminated.

5. Is the glass half empty or half full?

More and more white youth men and women are galvanized by racial equality movements like BLM, e.g. in several historically “white cities”, more posters were supporting the movement than there were African American residents (The Economist, 2020). Hispanics are making their way into the American workforce and academic field. The trend seems to indicate that their representation’s growth in the study of economics is proportional to their increasing share in the population. However, both groups are still under-represented in all areas of the economics profession. The stagnation of the proportion of Afro-Americans graduates in economics is worrying, given that their weight in the population is expected to continue growing and reach 13.4% in 2020 (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

Many public and private agents try to provide support to these discriminated groups. However, more times than expected, these efforts end up re-victimizing them. “Neoliberal paternalism” has tended to focus on black male youths’ motivations and behaviors, rather than addressing the labor market conditions that they confront, which is consistent with the economic orthodoxy of market primacy in distribution and allocation (Aja et al., 2014).

This type of racial biases has even been learned by algorithms that are responsible for regulating what we see on social networks or managing care for about 200 million people. In recent months, an experiment on Twitter has become famous: a user discovered that “the way the platform automatically cropped its images was racist, which lead to several experiments from various users” (Anagha Srikanth, 2020, par 2). They showed that by posting a white person’s photo next to one of a black person, the algorithm tends to show the white’s photo first⁹. Also, the algorithm “automatically cropped the image around the fairer skin tone – white faces over

⁹ Regardless of the order or the position in which the pictures are posted.

Black faces and lighter-skinned Black faces over darker-skinned Black faces” (Anagha Srikanth, 2020, par. 2). In a much more concerning example, an algorithm used by the US healthcare system was found to be “less likely to refer black people than white people who were equally sick to programs that aim to improve care for patients with complex medical needs” (Ledford, 2019; Obermeyer et al., 2019).

6. Conclusions

Although there is an increase in efforts by certain institutions, such as the AEA and the ASHE, to provide programs and scholarships that encourage the representation of ethnic and racial minorities in the economic discipline, there are still socioeconomic, political, and cultural barriers that discourage access to studies in economics for Afro-Americans and Hispanics. These barriers are prevalent and usually manifest themselves after individuals have started training in the discipline. This situation causes dropouts from academic programs or truncates the educational and employment achievement of graduates.

The IPEDS data reveal that the representation of Hispanics in economics has grown during the 21st century; however, it still is under their weight in the total population. The landscape for Afro-Americans is more concerning, their participation in economics has notably declined. This could worsen their involvement in the identification of socioeconomic problems and in the formulation of policies and solutions that consider the needs of stigmatized minorities. There are many studies and papers about the social obstacles that have affected the participation of Latinos and Afro-Americans in economics, the labor market, and the educational environment in general. These kinds of investigations should not only continue to be encouraged but should be used to propose new policies that help give a voice and a vote to those who have been systematically ignored.

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