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‘Surnames, status and schools: A long-term view of the social ladder in Colombia’

Colombia is considered among the most unequal and least mobile countries in the world. However, the analysis of the long term evolution of inequality and social status lacks historical empirical evidence. The goal of this study is to measure the persistence of social status in the long-term. We use different past and contemporary sources to define social status attributes for different historical groups. We analyse how stable is the social status of indigenous, encomenderos (Spaniard colonial officers), 19th century slave-owners, and members of different educational, social and business elites of the 17th, late 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Assuming that sufficiently rare surnames are part of the same extended family, we can trace dynasties from colonial times and observe if their social status has been persistent over time. Using micro-data from different administrative sources, we observe contemporary outcomes and define performance in educational categories. We test if the historical status of each social group is associated with disadvantageous or privileged contemporary social status, defined as the relative representation of historical social groups within high vs. low quality, and public vs. private education institutions (High-Schools and Universities). The results confirm that the original social status of our historical groups is highly associated with their contemporary performance. Namely, elites are over-represented in high quality private education, where indigenous and slave-descendants are underrepresented. Elites are underrepresented in public schools. Indigenous and slave surnames are practically absent in elite universities, whereas elite surnames are overrepresented in those institutions.

Colombia is a geographically and culturally fragmented country, with strong regional identities and economic specialization since the colonial period. Some regions. In particular, indigenous groups presence and slavery, have clearly differentiated characteristics between regions. We perform a similar analysis of social-status persistence at the regional level. We find interesting patterns as the presence of ethnic separation in the regions where slavery was more salient or where the indigenous populations are more abundant. Finally, taking advantage of the official use of maternal and paternal surnames in Colombia, we find suggestive evidence of contemporary homogamy within the historical elites and underclass surnames, both at the national and the regional level. Our results suggest the educational system has contributed to perpetuate the segregated nature of the social status structure in the long-term, reproducing patterns dating back to the colonial period.