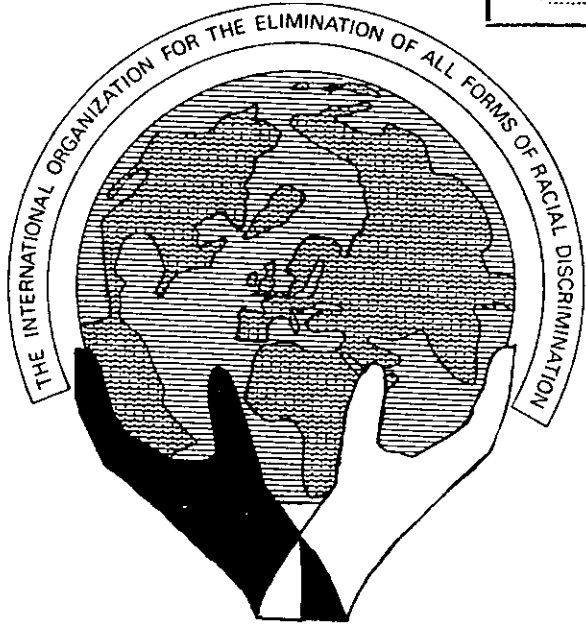


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## RACISM AND TRIBAL POPULATIONS\*

by

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In this paper we intend to discuss, once more, the problem of the occurrence of racism in a Society that has two liberal images of itself: the first being the belief in a white western country that results from the multiple fusions involving Portuguese, Indigenous and African components, besides the more recent contribution of European and Asian immigration. This image presupposes, moreover, the predominance of Portuguese influence, justified by the adopted language, and has consequently the idea of cultural and economic domination by the white group, more precisely of Portuguese origin. The second image is that of this country as a true racial democracy, worthy of serving as a model in a world troubled by ethnic conflicts.

On another occasion (“Relacoes entre Negros e Brancos no Brasil – Resenha Bibliografica” in *Boletim Informativo e Bibliografico de Ciencias Sociais*, no.7, Suplemento de *Dados*. no.21, 1979) we discussed this same theme and tried to show that the first image has no empirical foundation. Indeed, using only statistical arguments, we know that at the beginning of the XIX century, 80% of the population of Brazil was made up of blacks, and 20% of whites. This situation was inverted one hundred years later as a result of the intense flow of immigration that began in the last quarter of the XIX century. It should be remembered that the indigenous population is not taken into account in the above data.

Thus, the first image clashes directly with the reality of a multiethnic country in whose formation the contribution of numerous Ameridian, African, European and Asiatic cultures should not be underestimated. In contradiction to the reality of such a diversified society, there remains only the official desire to present Brazil as a white country, as the ambassador Meira Pena disclosed in two articles of the special supplement of the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*, in 1972, where he denounces the prejudice and discrimination, saying that “there remains, however, the problem of our personal image, that we continue to desire to be white and European” (according to a quotation of Thales de Azevedo, in *Demoncracia Racial*, Bozes, 1975, p.25).

As for the second image, the myth of racial democracy, a lot has already been written by those who study the problem of the black, the Indian, or the immigrant. Various authors have refuted the different arguments of those who aspire to keep the myth alive. For example, Thales de Azevedo (whose

\*translated from Portuguese

work has been quoted), refutes those who try to defend the myth through statements that insist that the racial question in our country is not a serious problem, with the allegation that the segregationist behaviour verified represents only sporadic facts. Azevedo confronts the “prejudice of having prejudice” and negates the arguments of those who proclaim the “absence of violent events and the lack of support of a systematized racist doctrine”. For Florestant Fernandes (1965), the myth of racial democracy is nothing more than a “false consciousness” which allows the existence of “a false state of spirit, that permits to attribute the human drama of the “coloured population” of the city to the incapacity or irresponsibility of the “black”, against what they were witnessing as unquestionable indices of economic, social and political inequality in the ordering of racial relations”. Such conduct absolved the “white from any moral obligation, responsibility or solidarity” seeking the conclusion of the “inexistence of racial problems in Brazil”.

The fact that until now, we have referred more to the black than to the Indian, which is the theme of our panel in this Symposium, is due to our intention to demonstrate the existence of a racist thought that favours one sector of our society, in detriment to those others that are classified under the label of social minority, regardless of whether they are blacks, descendants of Africans; Indians, coming originally in the remote epochs from distant parts of Asia; or even whites, coming from the Near East or from some regions of Europe (see: Otavio Ianni, “Do Polones ao Polaco,” in *Revista do Museu Paulista*, Vol.XII, Sao Paulo, 1960). Finally, our complementary objective is to demonstrate how racism acts against the Amerindian populations and, more than this, how racist thought goes beyond the different stratum of our society and penetrates even into the domain of the academic world.

In the XVI century, the vision that “white society” had of the Indian varied from the discrimination, expressed by the negation of his humanity, to curiosity or a naive admiration. Indeed, it was necessary for Pope Paul III to promulgate a bill that assured the Indian of freedom and respect as a human being. This bill was, thus, one of the first documents, among many, that have in mind the protection of Indians. Nevertheless, none of them achieved practically any valid results.

Thus, in 1557, Henry II, King of France, distributed as presents to his friends ten young Indians from the French Antarctic. Villegaignon, in his turn, took with him about 50 Indians (men, women and children) that were distributed among his acquaintances. Three of these Indians had the famous meeting with Montaigne that resulted in the essay “Of the Cannibals”, in which, preceding Rosseau, the philosopher praises what he called natural simplicity. “They make war – he wrote – in a noble and magnanimous way and it is excusable in their case and fine in as far as this

sickness in humanity can be excusable and fine . . .”

Because of reports such as this, the Indian came to be seen in Europe, at least in learned circles, as a naturalistic model. The romantic desire to return to the natural state, expressed in “Utopia” by Thomas Moore, contributed a lot to this. Afonso Arinos de Melo Franco (*The Brazilian Indian and the French Revolution*, Rio de Janeiro, Livraria Jose Olimpio, 1976) shows that Moore was concerned, in his book, with themes such as, for example, natural breast-feeding, being revolted by the habit of aristocratic women who gave their children to be looked after by hired wet-nurses. This is the same position of Erasmo and also Jean de Lery, who visited the Bay of Guanabara in the XVI century. Lery wrote: “The ladies of these parts without any reason that prevents them from sucking their children, as American women do, are so inhuman that as soon as they can, they send them away”. Thevet, contemporary of Lery, confirmed in his *Cosmography*: “The food of the child (among the Brazilian Indians) is the mother’s milk because another source of feeding is not even spoken of”. Among other indigenous customs, the daily bath was also a theme for discussion and chosen as a naturalistic example in old Europe.

However, if the image of the Indian was naively admired in Europe, the treatment that the natives received from the European immigrants was different. Death and slavery were the alternatives brought about by the contact. Documents of the epoch are full of descriptions of atrocities practised by the Portuguese, despite the fact that some authors still believed in the myth of the friendly colonizer. The alternative that the Jesuits offered was no more than forced settlement – the so-called “reducciones”, responsible for the disappearance of many tribes – or imposed indoctrination.

Julio Cezar Melatti (*Quatro seculos de politica indigenista – Atualidade Indigena*, Ano I, No.3, 1977) wrote that “The Portuguese legislation always oscillated between the freedom and slavery of the Indians, often remaining in a compromise, reflecting the interest of groups that had influence in the government”. For example, the law of 10th September 1611, altered the prohibition of slavery, permitting it inasmuch as the Indians were seized in just wars (sic).

It is not my intention, now to continue relating the atrocities that were responsible for the disappearance of the greater part of the Indian population, but to analyse the prejudice that has been created historically by relations that were always conflictive. These prejudices are found in an explicit form in the works of important Brazilian thinkers. One of our first historians, Friar Vicente do Salvador (1624) in his first book – From the discovery of Brazil – described the native peoples as being “all brown in colour and without beard, only distinguishable by the fact that some are more barbaric than others (although all of them are near barbaric)”. The opinion of Friar Vicente Salvador remains alive, more than two centuries

later, in the work of Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen, who, in his *General History of Brazil* (1854), considers the primitive inhabitants of the earth to be lacking traditions and therefore susceptible of accepting “with the greatest gullibility everything that was imposed on them”. This author recognizes that the image that he makes of the Indians is not very flattering and piously concludes: “Unfortunately the deep study of human barbarism, in all countries, proves that without the bonds of laws and religion, the sad mortal has such a tendency to favoritism, that he almost turns into a wild beast” (quoted work, volume 1, p.52).

This idea of “fallen angel” is also shared by Rocha Pombo, a historian of the beginning of the century, who considered the Brazilian indigenous cultures as regressive transformations of superior cultures, in terms of long periods of migration. However, in contradiction Rocha Pombo has a more flattering vision of the Indian and defends him from the constellation of negative stereotypes constructed by the conqueror.

Even the great historian Capistrano de Abreu has his restrictions with reference to the Indians when he asserts: “it seems that the Indians have bequeathed to their successors the same absence of cooperation, the same incapacity for incorporated and intelligent action, limited only by the division of labour and its consequences”. (*Caminhos Antigos e Povoamentos do Brasil*, 1930.)

The contemporary historian Arthur Cezar Ferreira Reis, in his chapter dedicated to the Portuguese occupation of the Amazon Valley (volume 1 of *Historia Geral da Civilizacao Brasileira*, 1963) wrote: “A typical region, differentiated in its geographical, social and economic faces from the rest of the Portuguese colony in South America, the Amazon constituted an exotic enterprise, which was undertaken without hesitation and brought impressive results”.

The presence of the European in the form of the Portuguese and his mestizo descendant will certainly not have any bearing on the violent and decisive modification in the natural state of the Amazon. But this presence constituted a striking page in the history of Portugal’s effort to dominate and possess this region just like its physical effort which began to humanize it”. With this Freudian slip, Ferreira Reis ignores the thousands of years of effort of other sectors of mankind in the domain of big forests and their conservation, aspects in which the white man has continued to fail.

Leaving aside the historians and analysing pioneering works in the study of anthropology, little difference emerges.

To begin with, Nina Rodrigues focused all his attention on the study of black populations, which he considered culpable for our whole underdevelopment. Adherent of a primary evolutionism, it is probable that he also considered the Indian as a problem of the same kind as the Negro.

It is, however, in Oliveira Vianna that racist thought shows itself with

greater intensity, as for example, at the beginning of his book *Raca e Assimilacao* (1932), when he criticises those who proclaim equality between races, affirming emphatically that “As all races are equal, why waste time with research on the differential biology of races, the psychological differences of races, the question of the mixture of races, and the problem of races capable of adjusting to civilisation and those who happen not to be?” (1932: 14).

In *Evolucao do Povo Brasileiro* (1922), Oliveira Vianna had already expressed strong adherence to the myth of white superiority and he considers that the Black is superior only to the Indian, who is completely immuned to “any educational influence towards Aryanisation”. In the aforementioned work, he first classifies the Indian from the point of view of an effective constitution, as an autistic and in most cases behaving like a typical schizoid (1932: 42-43).

At another point, Oliveira Vianna puts both the Blacks and the Indian in the same basket when affirming: “Both form a passive and unprogressive mass over which the formative action of the white man works with not always happy results”. Moreover, “These two barbarian races only constitute agents of civilisation, that is, they only cooperate with eugenic elements for the formation of superior classes, when they loose their purity and cross with the whites”. (1922: 152).

Finally, the mentioned author proposes a solution to this “double problem”. This solution is European migration capable, according to him, of “rapidly increasing the coefficient of pure Aryan mass in our country, but also crossing repeatedly with the mestizo population, of contributing to the increase of the Aryan percentage in our blood with equal rapidity”. For him the great task of scientists is that of joining their efforts towards the solution of “some more urgent and imperative problems, like the ones related to the formation of our nationality in its quantitative and qualitative aspects. For example, the problem of crossing of races or the eugenic selection of immigration” (1932: 86).

Arthur Ramos (1947), when referring to the Indian, is not so explicit, only making a negative reference when he states that “in Brazil, he [the colonizer] suddenly came across an Indian population of primitive culture”. Despite having criticized Nina Rodrigues for what there is in his work of Gobineau, he commits an equivalent error when, leaving aside the thesis of biological inferiority, he replaces it with one of cultural inferiority. Like Levi-Bruhl, he believes in the division of mankind into two layers: one superior in which logical thought prevails, the other one in which pre-logical thought reigns. This solution is based on the belief in a “true culture”. He states “only the slow work of true culture – the culture which is destroying the magical illusion of our emotional life-will attain the ascent to more advanced levels, with the substitution of pre-logical elements by

more rational ones” (1951: 296).

Finally, among those academics who gave more importance to desk work, is Gilberto Freire. It is true that in his major work, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, little attention was given to tribal populations, to which he dedicated a single chapter and where together with the demonstration of a good ethnological knowledge at that time (1933), he revealed a measure of ethnocentricity. It was the ethnocentricity which appears when he classifies tribal populations as one “of the lowest of the continent” (1980: 89), constituting real “bands of evergrown children” (*idem*, 90), who are “carriers of backward cultures” (*idem* 108) apart from incorporating negative stereotypes which have not been confirmed empirically as when he affirms that “the natives of Brazil were at the time of discovery still in the situation of relative parasitism on the part of men and an overburden of women” (*idem*, 116). Beside this tacit admission of the existence of a cultural hierarchy, the main characteristic of Victorian evolutionism, Freire even accepts the idea that the crossing of races acts as a form of enrichment. Although his intentions are different from those of Arthur Ramos and Oliveira Vianna, all three positions go against the present consensus of science, expressed in the 1950 declaration set down in the Unesco Headquarters in Paris by a group of specialists who agreed the “proof the mixing of races in itself produces bad results at a biological level does not exist. On a social level, the good and bad results that are attained are due to factors of a social order”.

It is clear, from the interpretation of the above statements, that racial prejudice existing in Brazil is based on two premises:

- a) the superiority of the white race and, consequently, the admission of a greater participation on its part in the development of the national society;
- b) that the solution to diminish the negative effects of co-existence with inferior groups lies in the mixing of races. It is obvious that this premise arises from the belief in the predominance of the virtues of whites in the process of miscegenation. From this comes the euphemism of terming this process “embranquecimento”.

We can understand the stereotype image of the Indian found in national society. This is the image that varies from the accusation of Indians being carriers of negative qualities such as indolence and imprudence, etc, which turn them into an obstacle to the development of civilisation to the native image of a pure being, free of the evil attributed to mankind, of poor children in need of support and protection.

In 1965, Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira† in his article *O Índio na Consciência Nacional* enumerated the different types of “mentality” developed in various sectors of national society which, viewed through

†Recipient of EAFORD’s International Award for Furtherance of Human Understanding. See his paper, *Self Fulfilment*, published by EAFORD, Paper No.8 (EAFORD).



various perspectives, distort the image of the Indian. He mentioned: "Statistical mentality, romantic mentality, bureaucratic mentality and entrepreneurial mentality". It should be mentioned that in all these types of mentality, responsible for the existence of prejudice, a high degree of paternalism is prevalent. The paternalism of a society that considers itself superior and is thus capable of deciding the destiny of populations that are considered inferior. In this way Indians are frequently regarded as overgrown children. This is the point of view that was confirmed by the inadequate and unfortunate application of the Torschach and Passalong tests by Dr Ezio Ponzo from the University of Rome to the Uapes Indians. The results attained correspond to those arrived at with eight year old French children. The validity of these tests was promptly accepted by a Salesian who was worried about the bad performance of his mission in understanding "a religious truth or a simple arithmetical problem". This prejudiced view prevented a recognition of the difficulty of any student who attends classes given in a language different from his own, and the student's small interest in abandoning his traditional beliefs in favour of a so-called "religious truth".

The Victorian presupposition that these societies are culturally placed in the childhood of mankind permits the paternalistic behaviour which results in the constant lack of respect towards the cultural and economic patrimony of these groups.

The very institution of official tutelage has frequently been exercised with a large limitation of group autonomy, denying the tribal communities the capacity of leading their own lives and establishing their own economic projects. From this arises the repeated failure of development projects elaborated in theory by technicians who do not know the specific nature of each culture and even of each eco-system. The capacity of representing the needs of its community in society at large has been frequently denied to Indian leadership. What is more serious is that the integration of these populations into the national society is thought of in a mechanical way, the Indian version of "embranquecimento", contrary to an organic integration in which each part of the components preserves its ethnicism intact.

The paternalism mentioned here is no more than a rationalisation of racism. It is, moreover, this racism that insists on denying the multi-ethnicity of society, as to accept it would mean putting the white man in his proper place.