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THE PREDICAMENT OF BRAZIL'S PLURALISM

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The Brazilian nation has been constructed on the basis of two main premises: one is its territorial and linguistic unity; the other is its purported social homogeneity resulting from the combination of three "races" - Indians, Blacks, and Europeans. While the first premise, especially regarding territoriality, has been empirically sustained, the second is a clearly mystifying ideology. This paper calls attention to the fictional character of homogeneity and focuses on indigenism to analyse the reasons why pluralism continues to be denied as a social reality in Brazil.

First, the question of territorial unity. The Tordesillas Treaty celebrated between Portugal and Spain in 1494 divided the New World, both known and unknown, into two equal parts by means of a vertical line running "from pole to pole" (Ribeiro and Moreira Neto 1993: 71). The eastern part was allotted to the King of Portugal and his descendants "for ever," the western part to the King and Queen of Spain and their descendants equally "for ever." By this treaty Portugal had rights over less than half of present-day Brazil.

Six years later, Portuguese Admiral Pedro Álvares Cabral (not Christopher Columbus as most of the world may suppose) "discovered" Brazil. What he discovered was well inside the Tordesillas limit, but through the centuries, the Portuguese colony was vastly expanded westward, first by the greed of the Creole population that was engaged in Indian slavery and in gold mining, and later by Brazilian diplomatic shrewdness that succeeded in incorporating large portions of land from the neighboring Hispanic countries. Still in the fifteenth century, the arrival of other European colonial powers, particularly France and the Netherlands intent on founding colonies in Brazil, reduced the Iberian fantasy of keeping the Tordesillas treaty "for ever" to a historical joke.

The national destiny of the Hispanic countries sharply contrasts with Brazil's. While the Spanish colonial world in the Americas was fragmented into more than a dozen independent states, Portugal retained its domain over one single undivided gigantic colony. Some authors (Buarque de Holanda 1989, Carvalho 1996) have attributed this contrast to the manner in which Spain and Portugal conducted their policies of colonial education. Universities were created in Spanish colonies as early as the fifteenth century, whereas in Brazil, the sons of the creole elite went to Portuguese old university at Coimbra for higher education. No university was built in Brazil before the 19th century. Hence, the moulding of nationalist consciousness was necessarily different for Spanish and Portuguese creoledom (Bernand and Gruzinski 1999). In Hispanic countries local universities contributed immensely to the formation of the nationalist consciousness that drove the colonies to independence. Each one of those universities corresponds to the capital city of the modern Hispanic states.

The different effect of national education in the case of the Spanish colonies as opposed to metropolitan education in the case of Brazil also helps explain the different ways in which independence was achieved. Whereas Hispanic countries gained

independence from colonial powers after prolonged warfare brewed by strong nationalist ideals, in Brazil independence was the result of a negotiation between the Portuguese crown and the Brazilian elites, difficult as this negotiation might have been. The 1822 Brazilian independence was proclaimed in a non-violent and rather abrupt way with popular approval but no direct participation (Fausto 1994: 127-134). Not only that, but it was the Portuguese Prince Regent himself who entered Brazilian history as the hero of independence and the first emperor of the new Brazilian nation under the title of Pedro I. Nine years later, creole elites forced Pedro I abdicate his Brazilian throne. He returned to Portugal where he was later enthroned as Pedro IV. His Brazil-born five-year old son was to become Pedro II, the second and last emperor of Brazil, ousted by the military coup that installed the republican regime in 1889. Numerous rebellions and a few separatist movements took place in various parts of the country both in colonial times and after independence, but most had a regional character and none posed a serious threat to the integrity of the Brazilian political dominion.

Now let me turn to the second premise, that is, social homogeneity. Part of the mental resources that feed the national imagination regarding internal minorities is the country's creation myth according to which nationality has been the result of the happy mixture of three races: Indian, Black, and European, more precisely, Portuguese. But the Brazilian version of the myth of the three races, known elsewhere in South America as *las tres potencias* (for instance, in Colombia and Venezuela), was not created to accommodate racial or ethnic legitimate differences in a style of multiculturalism. What the bricoleurs of these myths expected was that the genetic vigor of the whites would overwhelm the others in a process *mestiçagem* also known as *branqueamento* or "whitening." The three races are simply ingredients of a new recipe for homogeneous nationality, if not in racial, at least in cultural terms. Unlike the model of multiculturalism, the Brazilian people would be an amalgam of whitened races with a unique and uniform national flavor. Rather than having differences sorted out in a separate-but-equal ideological pattern, one would have a mixed-but-unequal national design.

As recently as 1995, Darcy Ribeiro, a celebrated politician-anthropologist, declared: "Unlike, for example, Spain in Europe, or Guatemala in America that are multiethnic societies ruled by unitary states, hence torn by interethnic conflicts, *Brazilians are integrated into a single national ethnic category, thus making up one single people incorporated into a unified nation in a uni-ethnic State.*" He continued: "The only exception are the numerous tribal microethnic groups, but they are so imponderable that their existence does not affect the national destiny" (Ribeiro 1995: 22. My emphasis). Ribeiro, who had prophesied the total extinction of Brazilian Indians by the 21st century, repented in the 1980s in view of the fast growth of the indigenous movements and the ethnic revitalization on the part of various indigenous peoples, but never really believed in the political agency of Brazilian Indians outside the scope of their own societies. Although he was right in saying that the impact of the indigenous population in national affairs is insignificant, he failed to perceive or grant the symbolic importance of indigeneity in the national mind. Matter-of-fact considerations such as demographic size or economic affluence, important as they are in the arena of interethnic power, do not exhaust the possibilities of ethnic empowerment. There is more to nationality than state rationality. I will come back to this later.

In the last 20 years, Canada and 16 Latin American countries, including Brazil,

underwent constitutional reforms that incorporated provisions to guarantee fundamental rights to ethnic minorities. Several of these constitutions explicitly state that the country in question is a pluriethnic nation. Not Brazil. Although its 1988 Constitution guarantees the rights of the Indians to continue to be Indian in cultural, social, and territorial terms, at no point does it declare the country a pluriethnic nation. In fact, this seems to be a thorny issue among the juridical elite of the country. During a recent seminar on Minorities and the Law congregating attorneys and anthropologists held with much pomp and circumstance at a high court of Justice in Brasilia, an attorney dedicated to defend minority rights publicly objected to my statement that the Brazilian Constitution does not recognize pluriethnicity. In her presentation she went on to show that although this is not explicitly stated, the many provisions of the Constitution for the defense of minority rights in fact establish Brazil as a pluriethnic nation. During coffee break, I insisted on the silence of the Constitution regarding this issue, and, with an anxious expression on her face, she advised me not to say that in public, particularly in the presence of the conservative jurists attending the seminar. As I suspected, there is indeed a taboo around pluriethnicity as official policy. Behind the scenes of that solemn seminar, my point could not have been better made.

As my focus is on indigenism, I shall not address the equally complex and equally relevant issue of Blackness in Brazil regarding the predicament of the country's ethnic and racial pluralism. I concentrate on the Indian issue to highlight how the nation resolves, or rather fails to resolve, its ambiguities toward its significant others. Or, in the clash between ideology and practice which arises from the belief and enactment of myth of the three races, how to dissolve the Indians and have them too.

Since the fifteenth century when the Jesuits were the major force in promoting indigenous policies, the history of Brazilian indigenism has been a long exercise in attempting to combine what is virtually impossible to combine: assimilationist policies and segregationist actions. The Jesuits aimed at transforming the Indians into Christians, incorporating them into the European world order, but at the same time segregated them in truly concentration camps, confining them within the rigid discipline of the missions. When the eighteenth-century Portuguese Minister, the Marquis of Pombal, expelled the Jesuits from Portugal's colonies, he installed the *diretório dos índios* (directorship of the Indians?), a special control system designed to integrate the indigenous population into the mainstream of colonial production. But the "directors," the managers of that policy, kept the Indians under constant surveillance which did not differ very much from the Jesuits' missions. When the Indian Protection Service, the first republican bureaucracy in charge of indigenous affairs, was created in 1910, its ultimate goal was to assimilate the Indians into the national society, but, until they were prepared for it, they were "preserved" in reservations from the rapacity of private groups and individuals. In the explicitly Comtean positivist ideology that inspired the founders of the Indian Protection Service, with loving care the Indians could be guided out of their "fetishistic state" and directly propelled to the scientific level of civilization, thus bypassing the obscurantist metaphysical stage embodied in the missionaries. Under the banner of progressive indigenist policy, this position actually expressed the official separation of Church and State under the Republican regime installed in 1889. As in other nervous moments of Brazil's history, at the Republican turn, the Indian issue neatly encapsulated the quests and contradictions of the nation's rulers.

"You are part of us but you should be kept away from us" has been a constant riddle cast, like a spell, on the Indians. The man in the street may often say that his Indian

grandmother was caught with a lasso, by which he means to authenticate his Brazilianness with a metonymic bond with the proverbial "first inhabitants of the land." But notice that he keeps his personal myth of the three races at a safe genealogical and gender distance: it is never his mother, father or grandfather. An Indian grandmother is like an ornament that one wears one day and puts away the next. Coevalness is much more difficult to tolerate. In the national imagination, a good Indian is a remote Indian, be it in terms of time or of space. A good Indian is the first inhabitant of the land who contributed his, or much more to the point, *her* blood in the process of fertilization that led to the birth of the Brazilian nation.

It is interesting to examine the data presented in an unpublished manuscript by the Brazilian political scientist Simon Schwartzman (n.d.) on race categories used in a 1998 population sample carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. The sample covered 90 thousand people over 10 years of age from six metropolitan areas in the country. All of them declared themselves to be 'Brazilian' but with specific origins. Ten major origins were listed, ranging from African, Spanish, Jewish and Black to Arab, German, Indigenous, Italian, Portuguese, and Japanese, besides unspecified 'others'. Although the data do not reveal how the questions were asked and answered, they indicate that rather than privileging the mixture of races in melting pot fashion, attention is concentrated in one specific origin. In a fragmented version of the myth of the three races, the highest percentages were: Black, Indigenous, and Portuguese. This statistic might give the impression that the indigenous component of the national population is substantial, which is not the case at all. What it in fact signals, at least in my judgment, is the desire to meet the expectation that "the oldest populations in the country," that is, the three races of the founding myth, mark Brazilian identity more strongly than do later immigrants. In the case of declared indigenous origin, this seems to be particularly evident, considering the small number of Indians in the country and their relative segregation from the national society.

Unlike South American countries such as Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia whose indigenous population is very large, if not demographically predominant, Brazil holds the miserable record of having the smallest Indian population in the Americas. Even in Argentina, after the brutal warfare against Indian peoples euphemistically known as the *Conquista del Desierto*, there are perhaps more Indians than in Brazil in absolute terms, and certainly more in proportion to the national population. Whereas in Brazil the Indians represent about 0.25 percent (about 350 thousand in a total of nearly 170 million people), in Argentina they are estimated to be one percent of the country's population (Hernández 1995: 267, note 14; see also Hernández 1992). Although there has been a steady demographic increase since the 1950s when Indians numbered less than 100 thousand, the indigenous population in Brazil is far from representing a serious political or geopolitical threat to the State. There are over 200 different ethnic groups speaking about 170 different languages living in highly dispersed communities that occupy approximately 11% of the national territory. Their formal education is extremely deficient and very few complete higher education. For all these reasons, the indigenous peoples in Brazil, once upon a time the majority population in the colony, at the present have no demographic, intellectual, or political impact on the nation's affairs. Whereas in countries like Ecuador the strength of indigenous protests can depose presidents, and in Bolivia the majority Indian population cannot be ignored by the State, in Brazil the effect of indigenous political pressures is practically limited to its symbolic power. It is a power that affects more strongly the

country's image than than its *realpolitik*.

But, small as this minority may be, its symbolic presence has populated the minds and, as the 1998 sample reveals, the imagined veins of the majority society with rare potency. In this respect, Brazil is not alone. Consider, for instance, the following statement: "In a country like Colombia where all the people classified by government censuses as Indian would fit into a few city blocks, the enormity of the magic attributed to those Indians is striking" (Taussig 1987: 171). One might even be tempted to risk a sweeping generalization and say that the smaller the indigenous population the more attention it is paid by the country at large. There are, however, powerful counter-examples, such as Argentina and the United States, to mention just two countries where the Indians are either socially invisible (in Argentina) or folklorized to irrelevance, as wittily reported by Stedman for the US (Stedman 1982).

The undeniable ambivalence of the Brazilian State and society toward its indigenous people tells us that the space the Indians occupy in the national imagination is not negligible. From colonial times to the present there have always been two major views regarding the role of Indians in national affairs. On the one hand, there is the view that the Indians represent everything the country should be proud of: lush nature, absence of malice, vivacity, goodnaturedness. On the other hand, there is the position according to which the nation has not reached full social, economic, and political development precisely because there are Indians in our backyard. To give an example of this pervading ambivalence, let me refer to one author. Afonso Arinos de Melo Franco, a prominent intellectual who in 1937 wrote a charming book praising the virtues of Brazilian Indians and their strong influence on the ideologues of the French Revolution, just one year earlier lamented the immaturity of the country's political life and attributed the national disregard for legality to the "impulses of Afro-Indian cultural residues," passed on to Brazilians from "the 'embryonic stage' of both Indians and Blacks who based their world on force rather than on reason" (Ramos 1998: 288). This oscillation between praise and condemnation is the typical recipe for what Gregory Bateson (1972) called a double bind. The love-hate duplicity that has been built into the country's imaginings regarding the Indians is bound to carry over to the Indians themselves. It is, therefore, not surprising to see, not many years ago, a mixed-blood Indian from a southern state philosophically musing: "My white side will die without understanding my Indian side" (Ramos 1998: 284).

The Brazilian State has made various attempts to dispose of the country's ethnic ambivalence by changing the special status of the indigenous peoples. Since colonial times, once the Indians were outnumbered by colonists, they have been treated, both in legislation and in practice, as children who needed paternal guidance to reach their maturity, that is, to become simply Brazilians. The 1916 Civil Code that to this day has not been updated classifies the Indians together with minors and other legally limited citizens as "relatively incapable" for certain acts of civil life. A draft of the new Civil Code that has been in Congress since 1985 awaits presidential approval. In this new version a paragraph states that "the capacity of the forest dwellers (*silvícolas*) will be regulated by special legislation."

Apart from the anachronistic description of the Indians as "forest dwellers," this means that they are being expelled from the Civil Code, once again segregated into a corner of the State's concerns. As usual, the Indians were never consulted about these decisions that directly affect their lives.

In practical terms what the special status as relatively incapable means is that the

Indians have been submitted to a guardian, the Brazilian State itself, which has often been dubbed as an unfaithful guardian, thanks to the constant abuses of power, in some cases with serious breaches of human rights.

How has this unfaithful guardian tried to terminate guardianship? Simply by "emancipating" the Indians. State officials counted on the appeal of this semantic subterfuge: who could be against emancipation, a concept traditionally used as liberation from an oppressed condition? Perhaps they expected a positive reaction from the Indians and their allies. But when, in 1978, the minister of the Interior, to whom the national Indian agency was subordinated, announced his emancipation decree, he was met with a tremendous protest from Indians, anthropologists, lawyers, journalists, clergymen, and everyone else directly engaged or just sympathetic to the indigenous cause. Why did the Indians reject emancipation? Because being emancipated meant to stop being Indian and become Brazilian living on lands transformed into private property and, as such, open for sale. First of all, it didn't cross the Indians' minds to relinquish their ethnic identity. In fact, some indigenous leaders were simply terrified with that prospect. Second, as common citizens, they would have lost territorial protection. As wards of the State indigenous peoples have the right of permanent occupation of their lands which are the inalienable property of the State.

Both these points were exhaustively discussed all over the country for months on end until the minister's decree was shelved. Concerned citizens who had been gagged by State censorship found in the Indian plight a suitable political arena to vent their own longing for freedom and justice. It was a unique conjuncture when Brazilians and Indians were together in a common cause. For the time being, the usual ambivalence that pervades the relationships of non-Indians and Indians was put in brackets. The result of the nationwide mobilization against the minister's misconceived bill was that indigeneity gained a remarkably high profile on the national scene. Thus the contemporary era of organized indigenous movements and of indigenist non-governmental organizations began as a reaction to the emancipation decree during Brazil's military dictatorship. Other timid attempts to withdraw State responsibility regarding indigenous peoples had the same fate: under heavy protests, they were shelved.

The humiliating "special status" of the Indians as wards of the State began to change with the 1988 Constitution. For the first time since 1500, Brazil had a non-assimilationist policy for its indigenous peoples. According to the new Constitution, the Indians have the right to maintain their cultures and traditions, the permanent possession of their lands, and the capacity to start law suits with the assistance of independent prosecutors (*Ministério Público*) and without the interference of the national Indian agency. In other words, the Constitution has brought about the death sentence of the wardship system. Indigenous civil life can now be divided into B.C. and A.C. -- Before the Constitution and After the Constitution. Whereas before 1988 indigenous organizations were regarded by State authorities as illegal because the Indians were "relatively incapable," after 1988 there has been a proliferation of indigenous organizations, especially in the Amazon. Some spectacular victories have been won in court, such as the case of the Panará who will receive a large amount of money as compensation for the deaths they suffered at first contact in the 1970. There is also the positive outcome of the 23 year long battle for the demarcation of the Yanomami land. After a dozen proposals presented to the government and rejected, the Yanomami Indigenous Area was finally demarcated in 1991

as the result of a huge campaign and the intense work of independent prosecutors.

The improvements gained in the 1988 Constitution were the fruits of much political labor in the preceding decade. Pro-Indian groups, including the Catholic Church, were instrumental to launch the Brazilian indigenous cause into the international circuit of human rights. At a time when supra-national organizations (UN, OAS, the Russell Tribunal) became regular forums for the demands of indigenous peoples the world over -- the so-called Fourth World -- Brazilian Indians, still newcomers to the political games of the West, were amazingly successful in pressuring the Brazilian State to improve its indigenous policies. During the 1987-88 Constitutional Assembly, the National Congress in the capital city of Brasilia witnessed the efforts of the indigenist lobby, perhaps the strongest lobby at that time. As the indigenous cause gathered international momentum to the point of having some countries censured for breach of human rights, Brazilian Indians benefitted from that favorable climate. They were sufficiently empowered to influence congress members to approve legislation that recognized the legitimacy of indigenous societies with legitimate cultures and traditions, thus ending the long era of official assimilationism.

One factor that has been particularly advantageous to indigenous peoples in Brazil is the extreme sensitivity of the State with regard to its image abroad. Threats to denounce the country's_ abuses to international agencies have been converted into bargaining power for the Indians. In the 1980s the World Bank specially, in its attempt to show a human face to its capitalist endeavors, opened its doors to indigenous demands and passed on to the borrowing states a series of conditions that included protective measures toward indigenous peoples affected by development projects. Although these gestures were often no more than façade, they had some consequences. Fearing cuts in funding from multilateral banks due to inadequate protection of indigenous peoples, Brazil was forced to demarcate a number of indigenous lands and provide a minimum of health assistance. At other times funding was simply cut, as in the case of a chain of hydroelectric dams on the Xingu River, successfully blocked by a gigantic rally organized by the Kayapó in the late 80s, profusely covered by the national and international press.

In fact, the mass media have been more instrumental in the defense of indigenous rights than conventional weapons. Perhaps the novelty of the 20th century is, not in a qualitative difference in the treatment of indigenous peoples by nation-states, but in the new means with which the Indians can now defend themselves. With some notable exceptions (Chiapas, for instance), interethnic battlefields have been relocated to news media, court rooms, and parliaments. Ironically it was the violence of the Second World War that brought about these peaceful weapons now available to indigenous peoples.

In the contemporary arena of confrontation between ethnicity and the State one cannot overemphasize the role of a new actor which are the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The first NGOs to take on the defense of indigenous rights were created in the mid-1960s and the effect of their actions was immediately felt in Europe in the form of public denunciations, motions, declarations, and other strategies. NGOs have been instrumental in opening channels for indigenous peoples to vent their grievances at the national level, but most importantly at the international level. Their usefulness is precisely in their role as political switches between the local and the global. They empower the Indians to bypass State resistance and launch their cause into international arenas. Supra-national forums like the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and

the International Labor Organization have upheld numerous complaints concerning State abuses against Indian peoples and censured many a transgressing country thanks to the joint effort of Indians and pro-Indian NGOs. History has told a long story of the State against the Indians, but now we witness a more balanced contest where the Indians strike back and put themselves against the State. Universal human rights, this double-edged sword, has in actual practice done more service than harm to the Indians.

The Brazilian case indicates that the internationalization of the indigenous cause and, as a consequence, the relative success with which indigenous demands are made visible, if not always met, does not depend on a large indigenous population. The cases I have mentioned contribute to tone down Darcy Ribeiro's appraisal of the insignificant weight of indigenous peoples on the life of the country. Small as the indigenous population in Brazil may be, the strength of their cause emanates from sources that are not related to demographic or to any other kind of material strength. It is the combination of local factors and international conjunctures that creates the conditions for the emergence of a specifically Brazilian structure of interethnicity. While sharing a number of characteristics with other national interethnicities, it displays other traits that could only manifest themselves in the particular historical and social milieu of the Brazilian national formation. In other words, Brazilian Indians may share indigeneity with all other indigenous peoples in the Americas, but part of their specific way of being Indian is to have been colonized by the Portuguese and then by the Brazilians. Much in the sense described by Ashis Nandy in his book *Intimate Enemy*, Brazilian Indians can no longer extricate themselves from the mark left on them by their conquerors, particularly Brazilians, their intimate enemy par excellence. The corollary seems to be equally true. Brazil would be virtually unintelligible without its Indians. What would the nation do without the ancestral Indian who gave legitimacy to the 19th-century Indianist literary movement in search of authenticity and freedom from European hegemony? What would the country be like without the Indian who provides it with shopwindow ornaments for its display of "racial tolerance"? What would the new market ideology of sustainable development do without the Indian and his much proclaimed but little understood wisdom in dealing with nature? Remove the Indian from the Brazilian landscape and imagination and you will have a gaping hole that would threaten to transform Brazilianness into something utterly different from what it is.

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