

## SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY IN BRAZILIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY<sup>1</sup>

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The preoccupation in “inventing Brazil”, that is, in discovering the supposed historical roots of the country, held in the line of continuity of historical events, joining the present to the past, connecting the social, political and cultural processes, constituted the horizon of many Brazilian intellectuals in the twenties and thirties.<sup>2</sup> Immersed in the task of determining possible futures and of finding ways of overcoming obstacles to social and economic development, they questioned themselves about what traits had marked the national culture, about what were the essential features of the 'Brazilian people', and for the past that had made it what it was. “*What country is this?*” was the question they sought to answer in terms of the interpretations of the historical origins of Brazil, from colony to the present time. “*What country do we want it to be?*” has been the question asked since then, and asked anew in successive occasions and also now, in the time of globalization, in which the old national references come undone.

The concepts of nation, nation-state and national consciousness have now grown old and are insufficient to account for the political realities, but at that moment they seemed extremely fertile to represent the “imagined community” desired by the intellectual elites.<sup>3</sup> As Eric Hobsbawm reminds us, if for most people today national identification does not exclude other forms of identification constituting the social being, such as the religious, the sexual and the ethnic, at that moment it meant the possibility of finding a strong common bond, a starting point from which the problems could be stated and possible solutions proposed.<sup>4</sup>

The reflections of Pierre Nora on the relationships of memory and history suggest that the

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first published in Portuguese as “Sexualidade e Identidade na Historiografia Brasileira”. In Maria Andrea Loyola (org.). *A SEXUALIDADE NAS CIÊNCIAS HUMANAS*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora da UERJ, 1998, pp.175-200.

<sup>2</sup> There is a large bibliography on this theme: Carlos Guilherme Mota. *IDEOLOGIA DA CULTURA BRASILEIRA (1933-1974)*. São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1977; Thomas E. Skidmore. *PRETO NO BRANCO. RAÇA E NACIONALIDADE NO PENSAMENTO BRASILEIRO*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1<sup>a</sup> ed.1976; 2<sup>a</sup> ed.1989; Michael M. Herschmann e Carlos Alberto Messeder Pereira (orgs.) *A INVENÇÃO DO BRASIL MODERNO. Medicina, Educação e Engenharia nos anos 20-30*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1994; Sergio Miceli(org.) *HISTÓRIA DAS CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS NO BRASIL/vol.1*, São Paulo: Vértice, Idesp, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> See Benedict Anderson. *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES*. Chapel Hill, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm. *NAÇÕES E NACIONALISMO desde 1870*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1990.

constant losses of territory to which we are daily exposed have so deeply shaken the feeling of belonging to a fixed group, such as the nation, that we are in need of other operational concepts for our understanding of the present, to place ourselves in the world, but also for us to reorganize our internal space, marking the limits to new fleeting and changeable subjectivities, heretofore unthinkable.<sup>5</sup> There are few who still think there is one Brazil only, and faced with so many multiplicities and territorial expansion, the wishful one included, we more and more try to locate ourselves based on references that are particular, flexible and provisory.

However, the questions were put differently for that generation. It was, fundamentally, a matter of defining our supposed cultural identity, of finding the fixed points, or the so wished for 'essence', hidden in the depths of the earth or of the psyche. It was a matter of understanding the past to transform the present and so rid ourselves of a burden, to break with the heavy traditions that prevented progress and so enter the pace of history. This reading had the objective of providing a new interpretation of the history of the country, a reading that would legitimate its political and ideological positions, and this range of questions broached by these nationalistic intellectuals aimed at detecting the roots of the evils that damaged Brazil and to understand the glaring and violent social and economic problems of that society and mainly to analyze what they considered the lack of capacity of the people to build a modern, rich and powerful nation on the model of the United States of America.

These intellectuals gave, almost all of them, an emphasis to the settled, peaceful, lazy and imitative nature of the Brazilian people, described at the time by another well-known writer, Monteiro Lobato as "Jeca Tatu", one of the most powerful figures in the Brazilian social imagination. Sergio Buarque de Hollanda, for instance, in searching to historicize this historical heritage, wondered why modernity had not in Brasil been concluded and what the impediments were to the formation of a modern public sphere. He aimed in this way at perceiving the trend lines of a possible transforming modernization that could make the country the equal of more developed peoples or at least bring it nearer to their stages of development.

The intellectuals of that time acclaimed some of the works produced, such as *Retrato do Brasil. Um Ensaio sobre a Tristeza Brasileira*, by Paulo Prado, published in 1928, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, by Gilberto Freire and *Evolução Política do Brasil*, by Caio Prado Jr. both of 1933 and *Raízes do Brasil*, by Sergio Buarque de Hollanda in 1936.<sup>6</sup>

These historical readings of the past, widely praised and republished in the generations

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Nora (org.). LES LIEUX DE LA MÉMOIRE. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Paulo Prado. RETRATO DO BRASIL. Ensaio sobre a Tristeza Brasileira. S.Paulo,s/ed., 1929, 3a.ed.; Gilberto Freyre. CASA GRANDE E SENZALA. Rio de Janeiro: Schmidt Editor, 1936, 2a.ed.; Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda. RAÍZES DO BRASIL. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1994,2a.ed.; Caio Prado Jr. EVOLUÇÃO POLÍTICA DO BRASIL. São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, 1933.

following and widespread until the end of the sixties, formed a number of generations and molded the “national consciousness”, becoming one of the principal references of the national identity, the lenses through which Brazilians began to look at themselves and to recognize their own image. Brought into the canon of Brazilian culture they were defined as the matrices of social thought in Brazil, surely less for their obvious scientific qualities than for the truth discourse regime produced and reinforced by them, and that spoke of the privileged place of science.

This being so, these works established themselves as those that spoke “the truth” of the Brazilian people and so remained for several decades beyond questioning, while other interpretations written at that time fell into complete oblivion. It should be remembered that only from the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies that a more acute criticism of the writings of Gilberto Freyre and Sergio Buarque de Hollanda, and even of the marxist Caio Prado were formulated, this last being already in his turn a fierce critic of the theses of the intellectuals that were his contemporaries in the Communist Party, such as Leoncio Basbaum or Nelson Werneck Sodré. At the same time, other writers of the period, started being discovered and reassessed, as were Euclides da Cunha, Monteiro Lobato and Manoel Bonfim, not to mention the socialists and anarchists of that moment in our history, or woman writers as the libertarian Maria Lacerda de Moura and the modernist Pagu (Patrícia Galvão), whose books are still hard to come by.<sup>7</sup>

When today we analyze those books in the canon of the Brazilian Academy one aspect is highlighted that went completely unnoticed both by the traditional eulogistic interpretations and by the criticism of the left, that however took a most strict attitude when the works were reassessed three decades later. We mean the dimension occupied by sexuality in the construction of those interpretations of Brazilian reality and thus the idea of national identity. Around this idea were produced most of the characteristics that have explained the “Brazilian people”, its nature and vocation, as first observed by the American Anthropologist Richard Parker in the nineties.<sup>8</sup> The historical development to be observed along our history appears then in embryo in traits that were formed in the origins of our colonization, in the primary relationships established in Brazil's “infancy”, when the first *conquistadores* arrived and was begun the process of racial miscegenation, being from then on endlessly repositioned.

The relationships between erotic culture and science seem to have been always tense and complicated and not only in Brazil. They may even be easier in this country when compared to countries with a puritan tradition. Eroticism pervades the daily life of Brazilians from north to

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<sup>7</sup> On Brazilian women writers from the 19th century to the 1930s, see Norma Telles. ENCANTAÇÕES LITERÁRIAS, (to be published); Margareth Rago. "A subjetividade feminina entre o desejo e a norma: moral sexual e cultura literária feminina no Brasil, 1900-1932", REVISTA BRASILEIRA DE HISTÓRIA, ANPUH, Marco Zero, no.28, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Parker. CORPOS, PRAZERES E PAIXÕES. Cultura Sexual no Brasil Contemporâneo. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Bestseller, 1993.

south, from jokes to games of seduction, from clothing to behavior, in offices, in bars, in squares. Science alone is serious, that has been called gray. Here a life is lived that is extremely sexualized in all senses, violence among them, while the image of the “south-of-equator-tropical-sexuality” is not without the over stimulation of the tourist industry, of the export of sensual black women, samba, carnival, the “tchan” (a dance) and of all that is well known in the imagination of tropical Brazil.

It has been said, by Sergio Buarque, that we were colonized more by “adventurers” than by workers, by the Portuguese “sowers” that started the colonization responding to the immediacy of the situations, differently from the Spanish “tilers”, worried about the forms of their enterprise, in ordering the urban space. The Portuguese colonizers, bearers of a spacious concept of the world, saw no limits to their deterritorializing expansion and, faced with the administrative capacity and rationality of their rivals, recited along their Padre Vieira: “*Hasn't God made the Heavens like a checkerboard of stars...*”<sup>9</sup> And the historian ends by coming to this conclusion: “*We are still today exiles in our own land*” and proposes to find then the “roots of Brazil”.<sup>10</sup>

On account of all this it is to be remarked that Brazilians have only recently started to perceive the central place given to sexuality in the discourse of those intellectuals interested in the scientific interpretation of reality and the definition of the national identity, or, in different terms, to the question of the shutting away of desire in the Big House and the slave quarters. *A Portrait of Brazil*, republished recently in a beautiful edition, was several times reviewed in newspapers and magazines without any mention to the dimension that bursts forth from the text itself: tropical sexuality, a constituent of the national identity.

More recently still some historians, such as Ronaldo Vainfas, have questioned the unruly image of the colony that was produced by the observers of the first centuries of Colonization and by the intellectuals of the twenties and the thirties, finding many rules, norms and forms of blame where others had seen only chaos and a lack of commitment.

“There was no lack then of very rigid rules to tropical fornication (...) sexually intoxicated though it may have been the Colony, as seen by Gilberto Freyre, the values of the family, a mix of popular culture and official discourse made themselves felt”.<sup>11</sup>

It is not here, within the limits of this text, a question of deciding precisely on the morality or immorality that constituted the country historically, but a matter of deconstructing the historical

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<sup>9</sup> Holanda, op.cit. p.82

<sup>10</sup> idem, p.3.

<sup>11</sup> Ronaldo Vainfas – TRÓPICO DO PECADO. Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 1989, p.65. Also see Angela Mendes de Almeida. O GOSTO DO PECADO. Casamento e Sexualidade nos manuais de confessores dos séculos VI e XVII. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1992.

narratives that are ceaselessly produced and reproduced, stressing the importance that the discourse of sexuality takes in the reading Brazilians make of their origins. As Richard Parker has observed, the notion of sexuality in Brazil is present not only in the perception that each individual has of his own existence, but in his self-interpretation of society as a whole. “*It is a view that has gained in emphasis in recent years in the histories that Brazilians choose to tell about themselves, as a people*”.<sup>12</sup>

### **Brazilian Melancholy**

Paulo Prado, in his inaugural essay in 1928, *A Portrait of Brazil. An Essay on the Melancholy of Brazil*, tries to explain Brazil building a faithful portrait, as proposed in the title.<sup>13</sup> He begins by defining the main characteristic of the “Brazilian people” as compared to the *jaburu* bird in the epigraph of Capistrano de Abreu. The writer asserts in the first page: “*In a bright land dwells a sad people*”. In the pages that follow he makes clear the meaning of this sadness that he calls more and more, based on medical vocabulary, “*melancholy*”. We are then informed that melancholy is the physical and psychological condition derived from “*sexual hyperaesthesia*”. Brazilians, from so many sexual excesses and vices of the multiplication of the “*unions of a sheer animal nature*”, from the beginning of the colonization of the country, had become a sad, tired and prostrate people. The virgin land, the lush forests, the torrential streams and the abundant nature, the climate, “*man, free in his solitude*”, the charm of the full nakedness of the Indian women and the later presence of the sensual blacks, everything in the historical formation of the country contributed to make the Brazilians a soft, instinctive, sensual and dionisiac people, contrasting with the Apollonian north-Americans.

“The history of Brazil is the disordered development of these obsessions that subjugate both the body and spirit of its victims. The factors, as if accomplices, that contributed to this exaggerated eroticism were – we said it already – three factors: the climate, the land and the woman, the Indian or African slave. Everything in the virgin land incited to the cult of the sexual vice... Ineradicable marks of these excesses of the sensual life were left in the Brazilian character. The phenomena of exhaustion are not limited to the sensory and vegetative functions; they extend to the domains of intelligence and the feelings. They produce in the organism somatic and psychological perturbations,

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<sup>12</sup> Parker, op.cit., p.22.

<sup>13</sup> See Carlos Eduardo Ornelas Beriel. TIETÊ, TEJO, SENA: A obra de Paulo Prado. Campinas: Papirus, 2000.

accompanied of a profound fatigue that can easily turn pathological, from disgust to hate.”(p.120)

The author affirms, in a different part:

“In Brazil sadness followed the intense sexual life of the people of the colony, diverted to erotic perversions and basically atavistic.”(p. 121)

“The sexual hyperaesthesia that we have seen in this essay to be the trait peculiar to the ethnic development of our land has avoided the segregation of the African element as happened in the United States, overcome by the antipathies of racial prejudice. Here lust and social sloppiness have brought the races nearer and joined them.”(p.188)

This original trait, that has marked Brazilian culture definitively from the beginnings of the colonization shall be responsible for the atavistic incapacity for evolution, for the non-happening of Brazilian Modernity. Differently from peoples with a Puritan origin, such as the Americans, in which the rational and administrative side is stronger than the instinctive, Brazil cannot break with an archaic, heavy, conservative and authoritarian past that block its march towards Progress.

It is interesting to remember that it is also in 1928 that the famous work of the modernist Mario de Andrade is published, *Macunaíma. The Hero with no Character*, dedicated, by the way, to his friend Paulo Prado.<sup>14</sup> The hero, or anti-hero, is a nature man like our old inhabitants, that has fun the whole time, “playing with the *cunhãs*”, or whores, that in turn rave and enjoy the whole time. Not for nothing it is that even his entrance into civilization, his coming into the modern and noisy city of São Paulo and the sudden contact with the machines is done through three white and beautiful *cunhãs* with whom he spends the night and to whom he pays four hundred *bangarotes*.

“The mind of the hero continued to spin with all these novel experiences. The women, laughing, taught him that the long armed monkey wasn’t a monkey at all but was called an elevator, a kind of machine contraption. From early in the morning they taught him that all those whistles, shrieks, sighs, roarings and gruntings were not at all what he thought, but were called bells, klaxons, hooters, buzzers and sirens; they were all machine contraptions.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mário de Andrade. MACUNAÍMA. O herói sem nenhum caráter. São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, 1981, 18a.ed; also translated as MACUNAÍMA, by E.A. Goodland, New York: Random House, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Mário de Andrade. MACUNAÍMA. Translated by E.A. Goodland, New York: Random House, 1984, p.34.

It is thus that the marginal figures of prostitutes mediate between opposite universes, making the hero pass from the kingdom of nature to that of Civilization, from the green land to the world of Technique and the sale of sex, the first capitalistic relation lived by the hero. From history and literature therefore comes up a lazy and weak people, very sexual, a trait indicative of its degree of cultural backwardness, the predominance of the instinctive over the rational, making him therefore unfit for the construction of modernity and becoming a citizen of the First World.

The question is worth asking of why the sexual culture described by Prado should be the origin of Brazilian melancholy and not of joy, as appears in Mario de Andrade? It is true that Prado, from São Paulo, is known as a member of a decadent oligarchic elite, a representative of its pessimism in the assessment of the country on the eve of the social transformations of 1930. A fear of degeneration of the race, of a darkening of the population instead of the so wished for whitening, a fear of instinct mastering reason, a fear of a “racial psyche” that would doom Brazilians to failure.

This pessimistic view of the Brazilian people seems to be based on a highly negative concept of the author about sexuality, beyond all influence of social Darwinism on his work. The excess of sexual energy, after all, the opening to the other, the ease of physical contact, could not in principle be perceived as negative factors in the constitution of a people. It is still to be explained why sexual desire should be the principal trait in the “national psyche”, a question that obviously did not bother the thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Michel Foucault, making visible this problematic, affirms the need to understand why sexuality has become, in the Christian cultures, “*the seismograph of our subjectivity*”. He finishes:

“It is a fact, and a mysterious fact, that within this undefined spiral of truth and reality, sexuality itself has become of prime importance from the first centuries of our era. It gets more and more important. Why is there such a close connection among sexuality, subjectivity and the obligation to truth?”<sup>16</sup>

As Richard Sennett, a student of the French Philosopher, would explain:

“This full psychological value that is given to sexuality is a legacy of Victorian wisdom, despite our pride in not sharing in its repressive prejudices. The idea of having an

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, M.; Sennett, R. “Sexualidade e Solidão” (1981), DITOS E ESCRITOS, vol. 5, Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 2004, p.93-103; Thomas Abraham. FOUCAULT Y LA ÉTICA. Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1988, p.175.

identity based on our own sexuality brings such an enormous burden to our erotic feelings, a burden that would be very hard to understand to someone of the eighteenth century.”(idem)

It is certain that the intellectuals in focus here had the basis of important documentary sources to build their historical interpretations of the national past and certain it is too that the travelers, inquisitors, colonizers that produced influential imaginary representations of the country, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, brought, besides the male viewpoint, the whole burden of cultural prejudices of Renaissance Europe through which they codified the social and sexual practices, as was shown by Vainfas. Thus they saw in the sexual practices of the Indians all the vices that Christianity had taught them to see. The naked Indian women were made into “nymphomaniacs” and “dissolute women”, according to the classifications of “sexual perversions” created by the Viennese doctor Von-Krafft-Ebing in the middle of the nineteenth century. The representations were established as facts and only in the last decades have these misogynist and racist images, conveyed in the documents, been deconstructed.<sup>17</sup>

It is moreover possible to affirm that it is the non quoted medical discourse, the one that is just referred to, that is the matrix of the scientific interpretations of Paulo Prado about race and people. It has been known since Foucault, however, how strict, moralist and sexist is this discourse that establishes the modern references on sexuality.<sup>18</sup> The physicians of the past century (19<sup>th</sup>) saw sexual desire as a force that was threatening, volcanic and destructive, that should be resisted and well administered by the intellect. For instance, according to Dr Heredia de Sá:

“The man anxious for venereal pleasure feels tormented by an imperious, irresistible need, a frightening excitement vivifies his organism, a hot fire burns his organs, his arteries throb with an excess of force, his eyes light up with a supernatural fire, his face gains color, his breathing becomes yearning, his genital parts swell, become congested and he feels in them a burning and titillation. Thought loses strength, his will is no longer master and all his faculties concentrate on a fixed idea;”(...) (1845)

However neither the Indian nor “the Portuguese adventurer” that came here had this inner capacity for self control. Those men of science obsessed with sexuality, voyeurs in disguises, didn't stop talking about sexuality since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly to condemn it. They dissected the body of

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<sup>17</sup> See Ronald Raminelli. *IMAGENS DA COLONIZAÇÃO. A representação do índio de Caminha a Vieira.* Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1996; Ronaldo Vainfas, op.cit.; Ligia Bellini. *A COISA OBSCURA. Mulher, sodomia e Inquisição no Brasil Colonial.* São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1987.

<sup>18</sup> M. Foucault. *HISTÓRIA DA SEXUALIDADE. vol.1 A Vontade de Saber.* Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 1979.



the prostitute, of the pimp and homosexual, they “perverted sex”. All sexual practices were brought under the sign of scientific discourse, explained, analyzed, classified, contained and condemned. But they became, all of them, widely visible. It could be said that, in the fear of being dominated, science had tamed sex.<sup>19</sup>

As to prostitution, the physician Francisco Ferraz de Macedo classified the prostitutes that he found in the city of Rio de Janeiro, around the year of 1872, in the wake of what the father of criminal anthropology, Cesare Lombroso, said, as “born degenerates”, gluttons, lazy, excentric, of no use for the nation, signs of the degeneration of the species: a sub race. His peers insisted on the absence of the sexual instinct in “chaste women”, except for reproductive ends. Jurists like Viveiros de Castro, siding with the physicians, saw onanists, pedophiles, homosexuals, tribades and sexual perverts all over the city, especially in the streets, bars, restaurants and theaters and musical coffeehouses of the underworld. Especially important was the condemnation of masturbation, both masculine and feminine, seen as a sure path to insanity. According to the medical discourse of the nineteenth century:

“Onanism is master among the youth in the schools and houses of learning (...) Seclusion, daily incitement and the excitement many times almost continuous little by little dull the intellectual faculties and its organic development does not go on; there is even an interruption in the general development of the organism, while that of the organs called on happens with frightening precocity”.<sup>20</sup>

How then does Paulo Prado proceed to define the national identity of Brazilians? He begins by feeding on the Victorian medical discourse to organize his perception of society and construct a representation of the sexuality of the inhabitants of the country, thus embodying his own prejudices. All the “truths” of medical thought on sexuality are reproduced by the historian. The second step: on this interpretative basis he elaborates his reading of the national identity, generalizing for all Brazilians, women and men, a strong dose of sensuality, a latent, overflowing sexuality that radiates to the other psychical and physical dimensions. The third step goes beyond his control: the reproduction and appropriation of this theses by his peers.

Thus is the medical discourse on the body and sexuality appropriated as scientific truth, meaning it is accepted non-critically by historians and serves as a foundation for the building of an interpretation of the national psyche, that, be it joyful or sad, is seen through the prism of

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<sup>19</sup> See Margareth Rago. *OS PRAZERES DA NOITE. Prostituição e Códigos da Sexualidade Feminina em S.Paulo (1890-1930)*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1991, 2 ed. 2009.

<sup>20</sup> C.R. Vasconcellos. *Higiene Escolar, suas aplicações à cidade do Rio de Janeiro*, tese de doutoramento, 1888. In: Jurandir Freire Costa. *ORDEM MÉDICA E NORMA FAMILIAR*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Graal, p. 191.

perversion, of the predominance of instinct over reason and therefore of all that makes impossible the formation of the rational individual, of the citizen able to participate in the public sphere and to administrate the public good. From the observations of travelers and inquisitors to historiography, these misogynous and lying representations of “Brazilian reality” were reproduced and repeated indefinitely, teaching what was a Brazilian and what it meant to be one.<sup>21</sup>

This results in the construction of a field of discourse, that being biological, reinforces the stigmatization of the other, perceived as a deviant, as a monster, as different. This ethnocentric and xenophobic discourse understands the other as an inferior race, biologically; being phallogocentric, it institutes the masculine as the place of truth and perfection. In this imagination, the naked Indian women – sheer animality – wish to give themselves to the white men, for they live in a state of nature, not in society. In the kingdom of exuberant nature only wild sexuality could have a place. Would Brazil then have no chances?

### **Brazilian Joy**

Another famous author, Gilberto Freyre, will be necessary in order to return some joy to Brazilians, and to note that sexual life in Brazil is positive and responsible for the “racial democracy”, despite the spread of venereal diseases. In this point of view the Brazilian people has its origin in the miscegenation of the three races that in Brazil specially, had no problem in merging for sexual attraction was stronger than the legal and rational demands of the unions between different people. This originates a particular culture marked by cordiality, instinct, lightness, by the body and by tolerance. The primary relationships, would, according to Freyre, be characterized by intense sexual activity:

“The ambient in which Brazilian life began was one of almost sexual intoxication.

The European came down to land stepping on naked Indian women; the priest themselves of the Company of Jesus had to come ashore carefully or they would sink into flesh. Many of the other clergy allowed themselves to be contaminated by dissipation. The women were the first to give themselves to the whites, the hottest among them going to rub against the legs of those they considered gods. They gave themselves to the white for a comb or for a shard of mirror”. (p.60)

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<sup>21</sup> See Tania Navarro Swain. “Feminino/Masculino no Brasil do Século XVI: Um Estudo Historiográfico”, 1996, mimeo.

According to him the approximation among the several races comes from a strong sexual impulse, specially on the part of the European, not very vain of his cultural traditions and not capable of showing a resistance to the ethnic difference and nymphomania of the Indian women:

“The sexualities of the two peoples first to meet in this part of the Americas were excited sexualities: that of the Portuguese and that of the Indian women. Contrary to the popular belief that most of his lewdness came to the Brazilian from the Africans, it seems to us that it was precisely this one the weakest of the three elements that came together to form Brazil, and the Portuguese the most lewd.

And it is so that, inspired by Paulo Prado, Freyre builds his argument about the origin of the Brazilian people:

“Paulo Prado emphasizes that the “unruliness of the European conqueror” came to meet in our shores the “sensuality of the Indians. More precisely of the Indian women, I would say. That of those priapic 'caboclas', mad for white men”. (p.68)

“To the advantage of miscegenation corresponded in Brazil the disadvantages of syphilization. They began together, one to form the Brazilian – the ideal type of modern man for the tropics, an European with Black or Indian blood heightening his energies; the other to deform him (...) Syphilis has been maybe, of all social influences after bad nutrition, the one most deforming of the plastic and the most enfeebling of the economic energy of the Brazilian half-breed (...) It is said that civilization and syphilization go together. Brazil, however, seems to have become syphilized before becoming civilized”.(p.50)

“The scarcity of white women created zones of fraternization between victors and vanquished, between masters and slaves. These relationships – the relationships of white men and colored women - continued to be those of 'superiors' with 'inferiors' and, in most cases, those of unrestrained and sadistic masters with passive slave women, those relationships grew sweeter however with the need felt by many of the settlers of constituting a family under those circumstances and on that basis. The miscegenation that was largely practiced here corrected the social distance that would otherwise continued to be huge between the Big House and the tropical jungle, between the Big House and the slave quarters”.

It is interesting to notice that a competent intellectual such as Freyre has worked so literally

with the documentation, finding there the truth about the 'nature of the Brazilian people' and built from a whole tradition of licentiousness, with its roots in turn coming from the 'priapic' Indian women and 'caboclas' and the 'Portuguese adventurers', *'unruly studs'*. It should be noted that the adjective *'priapic'* used generally to refer to an erection of the penis, it is here put to use in reference to women, in quite a misogynous use, we may say in passing. Thus, if in the beginning the writer refers to Indians without making differences of gender, his discourse shifts progressively to focus specifically on the women who, revealing a wild sexuality, offer themselves shamelessly to the white conqueror.

As to him, the absence of a 'race consciousness' in the 'cosmopolitan and plastic Portuguese' marks radically the Brazilian social formation. The Portuguese that arrive here shows a *'predisposition to a hybrid and slave colonization'* by the African influence in his somewhat Moorish blood and by the marks of the hot and oily air of Africa, that softens the institutions. The *'enchanted Moorish woman'*, wrapped in a sexual mysticism, an image remaining with the Portuguese from their contacts with the Saracens, would have been then projected on the Indian women bathing on the rivers, 'as fat as the Moorish' and less skittish: *"They would give themselves for any trinket, any shard of looking glass, with open legs, to the 'caraíbas, hungry for women"*.

Going back to Paulo Prado, he affirms:

"They were attracted by the possibility of a free life, utterly without boundaries, in the midst of many naked women and so they settled here by taste or will, many Europeans of the type realistically portrayed by Paulo Prado. Unruly studs". (p.21)

Edward Said exposed, in his analysis of the imaginary construction of the East by the discourses produced ethnocentrically in the West, the dangers of transference in the representation of other cultures and the relations of power implicit in that.<sup>22</sup> Here too the erotic fantasies of the Europeans were projected on the orientals, seen as their dark and irrational other. The sensual figure of the oriental woman, hot and voluptuous, associated to exotic dances, that was built on the imagination of Westerners comes alive again in the metaphor of the 'enchanted Moorish woman' used by Freyre and identified with the Indian woman in the new land.

Sexuality acquires, besides that, a very powerful dimension in the historical interpretation of Freyre, as she is a fundamental factor in determining the relationships established in the public sphere. This sphere is molded by models borrowed from the private sphere, where the primary

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Said. *ORIENTALISMO*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990.

relationships are marked by sado-masochism above all. In this way the model of the sado-masochist sexual relationship between master and slave, of both sexes, is transferred to the public sphere and characterizes the social relationship.

“But this sadism of the master and corresponding masochism on the part of the slave, in exceeding the sexual domestic sphere, has made itself felt throughout our formation in a wider field: the social and the political. We believe to come upon them in our political life, where bossiness has always found a victim on which to exert its force, sometimes in refined sadism; leaving behind sometimes a nostalgia that becomes a civic cult, as in the case of the so-called 'Iron Marshall'.

Even so, and according to its reasoning, the Patriarchy permitted social stability and granted a form of social cohesion that would otherwise have been lost:

“Contrasting with the adventuring nomadism of the ‘bandeirantes’, most of them half-breeds of Indians and Whites, the masters of the Big Houses represented, in the formation of Brazil, the tendency that was most characteristically Portuguese, that is, hard working, in the sense of Patriarchal stability. A stability supported by sugar (the sugar mill) and the black ( the slave quarters)”. P XX

### **The big house and slave quarters X urban modernity**

Sergio Buarque, in his *Raízes do Brasil*, though he does not refer to sexuality as the place of origin and constitution of the Brazilian, is partially committed only with this sexual imagination when he draws the figure of the essential cordiality of the Brazilian.<sup>23</sup> Despite the depth and perceptiveness of his historical analysis of the political difficulties in the construction of the modern public sphere in Brazil, it is still curious the weight given to sexuality in the explanation of the emotional nature that characterizes the 'cordial man'. Though this man has become known for a

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<sup>23</sup> Also see Sergio Buarque de Holanda. *VISÃO DO PARAÍSO*, first published in 1958 (São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1994, 6<sup>a</sup> ed.). The author analyses the construction of the national identity connected to the imagined strong and primitive sexuality of the inhabitants. He believes that the Portuguese conquerors coming to Brazil were looking for a “copy of the Eden”, the lost Paradise, on the contrary of the calvinists who were in search of a refugee to build their own church in New England. In the tropical Paradise, where men were free of rules and norms, and lived surrounded by abundant vegetation, a gift from Nature, sin was not known. He also shows the images of nude female Indians seducing the European conquerors, of Indians indifferent to work, as well as the practices of incest and unrestrainable licentiousness experienced in the Atlantic Hell.

supposed passivity and benevolence, it is surely in a different manner he appears in original construction of this profoundly modern historian.

“Cordial man”, an heir of the “personalist” Portuguese that came here, is the product of a heavy tradition marked by personalism, ruralism, patriarchalism and, above all, by a form of random colonization in which following personal whims was more important than rational planning. Says the historian:

“It is thus understandable that the modern religion of work and the esteem of useful activities have never become naturalized among the Spanish peoples. A dignified idleness has always seem more excellent, and even more ennobling, to a good Portuguese, to a good Spaniard, than the insane struggle for the daily bread”.(p.10)

The 'adventurer', the 'sower', have always predominated over the 'worker' and the 'tiler' responsible for the Spanish colonization, producing a character that was more emotional and instinctive than rational and so anti-modern. The mind set of the Big House invaded the cities and conquered the professions he says, even the most humble; the cult of personality predominated over the strengthening of the bonds of solidarity, the ethics of adventure over the ethics of work; the cities grew under the sway of the momentary, given the spirit of the colonizers, free and averse to commitments. In the end everything contributed to the formation of an ethics that was anti modern, a sexuality that was permissive and at the same time corrosive. The Portuguese did not even have a pride of race, having no problem in merging with the Blacks and Indians, without the imposition of any sexual or ethnic barrier. The moral values never gained a firm foundation among us. The citizens were only the great land owners of the colonial period.

The power of the *pater*, undeniable and limitless, the predomination of the family and of the Big House over the state and the public life, the dictatorship of countryside over the cities, the extent of the power of the private sphere prevented the formation of the concept of citizenship in the country.

“The family scene becomes thus so powerful and demanding that its shadow pursues the individual even out of the domestic fold. The private entity has, always, in them a precedence over the public entity. The nostalgia of this unique, compact and non-transferable organization where the preferences founded on affective bonds necessarily prevail would necessarily mark our society, our public life and all our activities”. (p.50)

Sergio Buarque emphasizes the difficulties in changing the mind set created in a

patriarchal environment 'so opposed to the demands of free men and of a more and more egalitarian inclination' and to the problems originating in the enormous importance that the patriarchal family structure got in relation to the public world: 'the relations that originate in the domestic life always provided the obligatory model of any social composition among us'. (p.104) And so the establishment of the 'Brazilian cordiality', an emotional psyche, a feeling that everything is familiar to us, the wish to establish an intimacy in all domains of relationship, the greatest obstacle to the modernization of the country.

Richard Sennett can be useful in our discussion of the problematic of the structural incapacity of the formation of the public sphere in Brazil.<sup>24</sup> He says that in the First World the wish for intimacy came in addition to the public consciousness, or rather to the belief in the public sphere, in a long process began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fear of the appearance of unruly crowds in the great cities and of the numberless forms of urban violence led to the seeking for a refuge in the interior of each individual, dissolving all possibility of the constitution of networks of solidarity. What was private was represented in this context as a nest, a space for the coziness and warmth among people, as opposed to the public, perceived as the venue of war and of cold competition.

The predominance of the private in Brazil occurred differently, but it also made difficult the formation of the public. The power of the farmers in their great properties, the mixing up of the family with the state, the non-recognition of the public interests, the repression of social movements that pressured for the recognition of specific rights, led to the crystallization of the logic of the Big House and the slave quarters, reproduced in the microcosm of the public or private institutions.<sup>25</sup> Rulers, bosses, governors established the public space as 'their own backyard', characterized by cliental relationships that permeate even forms of relationship in the *favelas* and popular environments. What is more, the intimate life of the Brazilian, that is liberal and permissive, as the author affirms, does not become "*cohesive enough to envelop and dominate all his personality, integrating it into the social group as a conscious part. He is then free to give himself over to a whole repertory of gestures, ideas and forms that he may find in his way, frequently assimilating them without difficulties*".(p.112)

If Sergio Buarque does found his construction of the character of the Brazilian in the field of sexuality, like Paulo Prado and Gilberto Freyre, whom he quotes and admires, he participates to some extent in this imagination in the search for the national identity, in the thirties, when he stresses the predominance of the emotional and of the instinctive over the rational as the main trait of the Brazilian character. The 'cordial man' is after all the man of the heart, of the affections and

<sup>24</sup> Richard Sennett. O DECLÍNIO DO HOMEM PÚBLICO. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Gay. POPULAR ORGANIZATION AND DEMOCRACY IN RIO DE JANEIRO: A TALE OF TWO FAVELAS. Philadelphia. Temple University Press, 1994

the feelings, according to the widespread image of the Brazilian in the United States.

“It would be a mistake to suppose that such virtues (affability in the treatment, hospitality, the generosity) could mean 'good manners', civility. They are, before anything else, the legitimate expression of an extremely rich and overflowing emotional depth”.(p.107)

Brazilians are here too associated to images of the body, to the immediacy in the organization of their lives, more to a style of the Big House and the slave quarters than to modern characters. This rural heritage carries a heavy weight and prevents the emergence of new cultural values. They cannot, for this very reason, accomplish the public sphere in Brazil, develop effective bonds of solidarity and build a just and democratic society. The picture of the ‘cordial man’, this essence of the Brazilian character, is a giant hurdle to the development of the nation. In the words of the historian:

“Democracy in Brazil was always a regrettable misunderstanding. It was imported by a rural and semi-feudal aristocracy that attempted to fit it, where possible, to its rights and privileges, the same ones that had been, in the old world, the targets of the fight of the bourgeoisie against the aristocrats”. (p.119)

It would also be worthwhile to examine how the 'cordial man' was appropriated by our culture and ask why he has come down into history as a nice figure, complying and 'good', different from what the writer himself wanted, when he argued against Cassiano Ricardo. It would also be worth our time to observe the type of appropriation undergone, that has stripped him of everything that is the strong part of the critical analysis of Sergio Buarque. The figure of the cordial man was, in this sense, emptied of the deeply challenging content it had, being made a prisoner of the logic of the very Big House and slave quarters it denounced. Gilberto Freyre, for instance, found him in the smiling mulatto that goes up socially and ethnically: the ‘abundant laughter’ that characterizes him does not come from his race, but from a development, or from a social specialization, on account of the conditions of social climbing that he can only enjoy in the free life, and not in the 'slave quarters and harems of the sugar mills'(...) According to the sociologist, the mulatto tried to defeat the white by pleasing the 'people', the clients, smiling.<sup>26</sup> His laughter was a tool of social ascent – in the passage from one to another race – if not from one class to another, that would be explained by the

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<sup>26</sup> Gilberto Freyre. SOBRADOS E MUCAMBOS. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio, t.2, 3ª ed., p.644



action of the cultural environment on the individual. He is finally identified to the 'cordial man' for being the creator of intimacy, which would reveal his firm intent of shortening the distance in relation to the whites." *In the Brazilian use of the diminutive, somewhat coy, no one can exceed the mulatto.*"

### **The sexual meaning of colonization**

Caio Prado Jr in his books *The Political Evolution of Brazil* (1933) and *The Formation of Contemporary Brazil* (1942) inaugurates the Marxist trend of historical interpretation, pointing to the economic infra-structure as the privileged venue for the understanding of history. The historian begins the second book mentioned with a chapter on 'The Settlement', that focuses on the sexual constitution of the population, seeing that the sexual relations permit the miscegenation of the races and the appearance of the population. It is, then, the condition of the possibility of all the other dimensions of life in society, that is, the productive relations tackled in the chapters called 'The Material Life' and 'The Social Life'. Sexuality is, in this sense, at the basis of economy and society, as it is from the sexual fusion produced by the mixture of the races that is the Brazilian people is born.

Caio Prado reproduces here the moralistic and conservative theses of Paulo Prado, his uncle, and of Gilberto Freyre, taking up an evolutionist reading of the historical formation of Brazil, considered today controversial and naïve. According to him:

“The licence of conduct, that was always the rule in colonial Brazil, had at least this positive contribution to the formation of the Brazilian nationality: it was thanks to that that it was possible to blend and join such profoundly different races, both in their ethnical character and in the relative position they occupied in the social organization of the colony”.(p.93)

It is not then by chance that the historian reproduces literally the theses of the sociologist from Pernambuco, in the chapter called ‘Races’. Marxism yields here to another kind of analysis, strongly positivist and Darwinist, and in which, differently from the author quoted, he speaks of the superstructures, that he considers as secondary in so far as they are determined. I stress this chapter, in which Caio explains that the ‘breeding of the races’ was the greatest contribution for the absorption of the Indian, which happened not through official measures but by “*the physiological impulse of individuals of a race of such keen sexual instinct as the Portuguese*”. (p.98) Incidentally, the cross-breeding of the races, “*the sign under which is formed the Brazilian nation and that is its*

*most notable and deepest characteristic trait, was the true solution found by the Portuguese colonization for the problem of the Indian”.*

It is worth it, in this sense, to follow more closely his own words:

“Brazilian cross-breeding is above all a result of the sexual problem of the dominant race, having at its center the white settler. In this scenario in which three races, a dominant one and two dominated ones, are in contact, everything is naturally disposed according to the first in the economic and social domains and consequently also in the one of the sexual relations”.(p.110) The white man “thus directs natural selection towards whitening”.

The cross-breeding then results from an exceptional quality of the Portuguese, his ease in breeding with other races. Paraphrasing Freyre once more, the historian explains that this is largely due to the form of emigration, of settlers of the male sex that came here alone. *‘The lack of white women was always a problem of the European colonization in the overseas territories,(...)’*(p.103) The settler was then forced to look for the satisfaction of his sexual needs here, something that did not present great difficulties.

“Rather, and in the case of the Indian woman particularly, the ease with which she gave herself is notorious, as are the indifference and passivity which she brought to the sex act. The impetuosity which characterized the Portuguese and his complete absence of moral checks make the picture complete. Mixed unions became the rule”. (p.104)

It is interesting to observe that despite all the conception of history founded on dialectical and historical materialism, used in the building of the 'national reality', the author takes for himself the prejudices and analyzes spread by documents he bases himself on, be that the one of travelers and settlers, be that the one divulged by the historians and social scientists of this time. And it is maybe still more interesting to note how the very structure of the book itself ends up by placing sexuality, taken in its wider meaning, as the very foundation of the constitution of life in society, an aspect commented by the writer himself when he says:

“All organized society is founded mainly on regulation of the two primary instincts of man, the sexual and the economical, no matter the complexity that may afterward result”. (p.345)

Sexuality is again mentioned as a central explanation of the social organization and as a privileged place of the reading of the past and Brazilian culture.

### **In conclusion**

It is clear that Brazilians, women and men, perceive themselves through their sexuality, but it is also clear the difficulty faced by the social sciences in dealing with this question, recognizing at least how central it is in the scientific discourse. The privilege of rational discourse over other forms of knowledge, the dichotomy between theory and practice, the exclusive focus on matters that are strictly economical and political and less on cultural matters led to the dimming of the question.

Closer to our times the pressures of feminism, of the homosexual and black movements forced the incorporation of new considerations and new subjects. It is as if an invasion of the feminine in culture is brought about: the Dionysian, the instinctive, the sacred, the sexual, the body become the subjects of discussion, are accepted as important constitutive dimensions of social practices and of the forms of knowledge. We take up again the problematic and teachings of the historians of the 'Annales' School, worried about the 'mentalités', with different temporalities and new conceptual tools. We have changed the subjects and the procedures of analyzes, we have challenged the traditional epistemological fields and the instruments given.

This is the sense in which to state the question of the central place of sexuality in the construction of the national identity and the interpretation of Brazilian history, and to force a rereading of the historiography. It was produced in a moment of profound modernization, of growth of the cities and the industries and of the strengthening of the state and had quite a strong impact on the construction of the past, made into official memory and transmitted from generation to generation. It is undeniable that the forms of production of this History molded the social imagination and defined a very negative national identity, a heavy heritage Brazilians end up shouldering. For this very reason it matters that they be deconstructed, re-made or abandoned.

One more question still seems to me inevitable in confronting the Brazilian historiographical tradition. It is the question of asking to whom were the acclaimed authors of the twenties and the thirties looking, of what 'people' were they speaking about? If we look at the culture of the workers of the time, the strikes and manifestations that sprung up in these twenties and thirties in the centers in the country that were becoming industrialized lead us to question radically the negative images constructed about the foreign immigrants and the national workers, former slaves many of them, that we now know were the targets of unlimited exploitation in

numberless factories and places of production. It should be asked where did the laziness they referred to come from? Who were they talking about, they who did not read either Maria Lacerda de Moura<sup>27</sup> or Pagu<sup>28</sup>? And more, what to say yet of the exploitation of child labor, so much denounced in the anarchist and socialist press of the period and so absolutely absent from their discourses?

To end, I believe that if it is at all meaningful to render homage to the ‘inventors of Brazil’, it is certainly fundamental to consider that the alternative voices, that at that same period refused to accept the negative images projected on misogynistic mirrors, are still silenced. And more, the question should be asked of why do Brazilians continue to reaffirm the stigmatizing traits that do not lead them to a more healthy and positive personal and social self-construction?

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<sup>27</sup> Maria Lacerda de Moura (1887-1944), born in Minas Gerais, was a respected Brazilian anarchist-feminist teacher, journalist, writer, lecturer and poet. She published *Han Hyner e o Amor Plural*, *Amai e não vos multipliqueis*, *A mulher é uma degenerada?*, among many other books.

<sup>28</sup> Pagu (1910-1962) is the nickname of Patricia Galvão, an iconic Brazilian feminist and modernist writer. She published a novel on the working class daily life in São Paulo called *Parque Industrial*, among other books.

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