Brazilian Perceptions of Brazil, Past and Present
Transcript

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“No people passing through this as the routine of their life over the centuries would come out of it without being indelibly marked. All of us Brazilians are the flesh of this flesh of those tortured blacks and Indians. All of us Brazilians are, likewise, the mad hand that tortured them. The tenderest softness and the most atrocious cruelty come together here to make us the sensitive and long-suffering people that we are and the insensitive and brutal people that we also are. Descendants of slaves and slave owners, we will always be slaves to the distilled malignancy installed in us, both because of the feeling of the pain intentionally produced in order to give more pain and because of the exercise of brutality over men, women, and children that has been the nourishment of our fury…. The most terrible aspect of our heritages is that we will always carry with us the mark of the torturer impressed on our soul…..”

Darcy Ribeiro, The Brazilian People

How do Brazilians view themselves and their country? Brazilians are fascinated by the questions of ‘who they are’ and of what their culture is like.

To approach this topic, however, it is absolutely necessary to remember the country’s immense diversity, which makes it impossible for anyone to give a full account of Brazilians’ multiple perceptions of Brazil.

With this warning, I’d like to start by talking about one of the most powerful Brazilian senses of collective identity, in other words cultural hybridity, racial mixture and lack of discrimination on the grounds of colour. Until the 1930s, however, this positive view of miscegenation and hybridity was not the norm. So, how did people reach the view of Brazil as a quasi-paradise of human relations?

There is a virtual consensus, at least among scholars, that a dramatic change in the self-perception of Brazilians took place in the early 1930s, and that the "arch-ideologist" of this new perception was Gilberto Freyre, a leading social thinker and historian. Freyre’s importance to Brazil is so great that one can say that he has become part of the biography of the country. His role in national culture has been compared to an "earthquake" that “shook a whole generation”, and continues to cause waves.

Until Freyre’s time, the mixture of races and cultures that created Brazil was generally viewed negatively by most Brazilians and foreigners alike. Originating in miscegenation, the country was thought to lack an identity of its own. As a result of its hybridity, Brazil was supposed to suffer from lack of spirit, an inferiority complex and a certain sadness, which a well-known writer, Paulo Prado, considered part of the Brazilian character. His famous book of 1928, Retrato do Brasil (Portrait of Brazil) starts like this: “In a radiant country lives a sad people”.

In this context, one possible solution envisaged was the whitening of the population, defended, among others, by the Brazilian sociologist Oliveira Vianna, who put forward his ideas at a time when mass immigration from Europe was transforming the south of Brazil. He welcomed this move as a much-needed ‘aryanisation’ of the country, the only way to put it on the right road to development. So when Freyre put forward his ideas about the value of miscegenation, turning the conventional wisdom upside down, his views were either shocking or fascinatingly subversive.

Miscegenation, in Freyre’s view, ceased to be a problem and purity ceased to be a condition for civilisation, because there was no scientific basis for praising one and opposing the other, while the main problems of the country were not racial but social and environmental. To talk about race inferiority or superiority was as absurd as it would be to deny that the cultural wealth of the Indians and the Blacks enriched Brazil through the interpenetration of cultures. He actually uses the expression "civilizing mission" when referring to the role played by the African slaves in the national culture.
In his interpretation, perhaps the biggest enrichment brought by miscegenation came from its “softening” influence on Brazilian society. The racial mixing which permeated the patriarchal system was the oil that lubricated the economy, and the source of the relative social harmony that had become part of the country’s character.

As a critic once put it very well, Freyre “revels in impurity throughout the essay, in order to defend his thesis that all Brazilians share a mestizo cultural heritage”. The success of his new interpretation was not confined to the literati. Over the years, CGS enjoyed a popular success that few history books can match, appealing to both an academic and to a wider public. Besides more than 40 editions and translations into 9 languages, it has been translated into a comic book and a television mini-series and used as a theme for Carnival floats and parades. Many of Jorge Amado’s novels may be seen as a translation into fiction of themes that are central in CGS. Tent of Miracles (1969), for instance, fictionalizes the debate over mestiçagem.

This interpretation of Brazil circulated beyond its borders, revealing the importance of the transnational flow of ideas in the building of national self-perceptions. In the case of miscegenation, Brazilians and North-Americans have, at different moments, defined themselves in contrast to each other. Among leading members of the North-American black community, the “Brazilian solution” for the so-called “race problem” had been praised since the 1840s. Schemes for the emigration of African Americans to Brazil were put forward even before slavery had been abolished there in 1888.

Freyre’s work developed and formalised the myth of harmonious racial relations in Brazil, giving it the “legitimacy of a social scientist’s stamp”. As the Second World War approached, Freyre’s book acquired greater importance in a much wider circle in the United States. The North American historian Lewis Hanke welcomed, in 1939, a book that defended a doctrine “loaded with political dynamite”; a dynamite that could, if exploded, counteract “the Fascist and Nazi ideologies”.

The impact of this view is even more impressive when we note that the US Congress used Freyre’s ideas, in 1942, to raise awareness of the importance of Brazilian cooperation “for the destruction of Nazism in the Old World” and for the combat against race prejudice on their own American soil. This was the context for the first English translation of Casa Grande (1946).

Another important reinforcement of this view of Brazil as a model for other nations came from a book by the internationally famous Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig. This book, entitled Brazil, Land of the Future (1941) was the result of his experience and observations at a time when the Old World from which he fled was falling to pieces. Zweig’s book soon became a best seller in six languages.

In Brazil, Zweig was surprised and humbled to find “a new kind of civilization” that demanded “the admiration of the whole world” for having found the answer to the “simple and most important question”: “What can we do to make it possible for human beings to live peacefully together, despite all the differences of race, colour, religion and creed?”

Zweig’s list of Brazilian qualities – friendliness, peaceful way of thinking, spirit of conciliation, humanitarian behaviour, tolerance, courtesy, cordiality towards foreigners – was presented as the result of a nation built upon “the principle of a free and unsuppressed miscegenation”, in total contrast with the countries ruled by the insane attempt to breed people “racially pure, like race-horses and dogs”.

It has been well said that one of the reasons for the success of this positive view of Brazil over the long term was that it was flattering for a substantial proportion of Brazilians and told them “something that they wanted to hear”. Nevertheless, the veracity of this quasi-paradise of race relations has been increasingly challenged more recently, together with other so-called virtues of the country, like its friendliness, its tolerance and its spirit of conciliation, etc.
As far as racial harmony is concerned, Brazilians seem to be divided into two main opposed points of view:

A. one side, there is the Freyrean position, in both an extreme form, which sees race relations there as a paradise, and a moderate form, which sees Brazil as relatively harmonious, with zones of fraternization in sports and carnival, for example, coexisting with zones of discrimination, such as employment. Both these forms can be illustrated from the impressions of foreigners. The African-American pop singer Dionne Warwick, explaining why she had decided to make the city of Salvador her home, declared that “Brazil is paradise”, because no one “can stigmatise me because of the colour of my skin.” Visitors often comment that they cannot think of anywhere in the world where everyday social relations with people that one does not know are so warm and friendly.

B - on the other side, a movement of counter-hybridity is growing, on the grounds that the praise of hybridity denies the separate identities of both indigenous people and African-Americans. It is in this context that the Brazilian black consciousness movement denounces Freyre’s view as a way “to get rid of the blacks” and is associated with identification with Africa.

Supporters of B criticize A for viewing Brazilian society through rose-colored spectacles, for denying discrimination on the basis of color and even for what they call “ethnic lynching”. Supporters of A criticize B for encouraging division and conflict in a society in which social relations are relatively cordial.

If racial issues, still in debate in Brazil, are a legacy of slavery, other characteristics of Brazil being discussed today are also viewed as part of that legacy, especially hierarchy, violence and the inferiority complex. Three main puzzles are particularly relevant in today’s discussions: how can a country combine opposites like equality and hierarchy, gentleness and violence, self-confidence and an inferiority complex?

1. Equality and Hierarchy: Brazil operates on a system with more than a single set of rules. Impersonal rules and equality before the law have their place in society, but so does a heritage in which hierarchical, authoritarian and personalistic relations prevail together with favor, patronage and nepotism. Laws that should apply to all the members of society exist, but are side stepped when they interfere with personal relations, family relations, friendship relations.

   It is this tendency to reject the impersonality of the public systems, which is thought to explain the rarity of public figures who put the interest of the state or of the public good above those of friendship. The reaction of Brazilians to this state of affairs is twofold: on one side, it is to believe that the rule of law and, therefore, the modernity of the country, is only a veneer. The other reaction is to say that Brazilian society is neither traditional or modern, but both. The formal and the informal sides of the system are complementary.

Conflicts remain, nevertheless. Part of what is behind the social unrest of the last few years seems to be connected with the disappointment of the public with the politicians who are elected thanks to a rhetoric of democratic principles but actually follow practices of patronage, even though these are socially acceptable at the everyday level.

2. Gentleness and Violence. This combination is also a puzzle that Brazilians frequently debate, especially now, as the country prepares to host the biggest sporting event in the world. How can a country renowned for its tolerance and peacefulness – the last war was with Paraguay in the 1860s – also be a seat of high rates of homicide (including lynchings), not to mention a rise in vigilante groups? In Brazil as a whole, the annual homicide rate is 25.2 for 100 thousand inhabitants, while in the UK is 1 homicide per 100 thousand people. This violence reveals, according to many Brazilians, the other side of national ‘cordiality”. This aggressive side is also revealed in the verbal violence that the social media disseminate.

   In such a state of affairs, there are those who think that only the laws, the legal system and a bigger police force could put things right. For others, the prevailing violence is the result of inequality, drug trafficking, injustice in society, etc, and only when social solutions are found, will there be a hope for change. According to a third group, one way in which violence could be tackled is by doing what consecutive governments have completely failed to do: educate the public in citizenship, democracy and human rights.

3. Self-confidence versus inferiority complex. The third contrast that is much discussed today is that between the self-confidence of a nation proud of its historical role and the inferiority complex that comes to the surface intermittently, bringing back the disbelief, which still haunts Brazilians, in the future of a mixed and peripheral country.

The prestige of foreigners among Brazilians may be illustrated by the very common habit of asking them what they think about Brazil. Brazilians, so goes the argument, seems to be always ready to tell stories against themselves, a “whip for our exercises in self-flagellation”, as one commentator put it, like the joke about Brazil being forever waiting for a future that never arrives.
The demonstrations against the World Cup in 2013 were interpreted by some Brazilian and foreign observers, not as a protest against lack of good public services, but as a revival of Brazilians’ deep-seated insecurity and lack of self-esteem. It was as if the demonstrators were pre-empting the possibility of failure by trying to stop the World Cup from happening. It was the playwright Nelson Rodrigues, a great fan of football, who coined the phrase, “mongrel complex”, to refer to what Brazilians suffer. “The problem is faith in oneself”, as he put it. With this phrase he also wanted to refer to Brazilian deference towards foreigners.

I’d like to end this talk on a note of optimism. Domenico De Masi, a sociologist from Italy who has been visiting and studying Brazil for the last 30 years has been accused of being a “new Stefan Zweig”. De Masi recently published a book entitled The Future arrived: models for a disoriented society. In this book, Brazil, among other places, is chosen as a model because it has many positive things with which to inspire the world, in spite of its problems of violence, corruption, inequality, etc. Cultural miscegenation, religious syncretism and the pacific way with which Brazilians have been solving their problems are some of the bases of the Brazilian model.

Denouncing Brazilian Intellectuals as suffering from the “mongrel complex”, which prevents them from seeing the country’s positive points, De Masi talks about the need for them to raise their self-esteem and contribute to the positive discussion that the country so much needs.

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