

Mayorga, Claudia. Some reflections on race and racism in Brazil

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Algumas reflexões sobre raça e racismo no Brasil

Algunas reflexiones sobre la raza y el racismo en Brasil

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Abstract

In this paper we propose a course of analysis aimed at the clarification of how racism and racial inequality have been shaped, naturalized and institutionalized in Brazil based on specificities strongly linked to the dynamics of Brazilian society from, among others, the viewpoint of the interests of the elite, the colonial rationale, and the process of modernization of the Brazilian State. We first analyze the process of *invention* of races in the West and the scientific racism in Brazil until the development of the myth of racial democracy. Then, we highlight the contributions of the black movement that have been fundamental to the acknowledgement of racial equality as a public issue in Brazil.

Keywords: racism; racial democracy; Brazil; black movement.

Resumo

Neste artigo, propomos um percurso de análise que visa a elucidar como o racismo e a desigualdade racial foram moldados, naturalizados e institucionalizados no Brasil com base em especificidades fortemente ligadas à dinâmica da sociedade brasileira, dentre outras o ponto de vista dos interesses da elite local, a lógica colonial e o processo de modernização do Estado brasileiro. Analisamos, primeiro, o processo de invenção das raças no Ocidente e o racismo científico no Brasil até o desenvolvimento do mito da democracia racial. Em seguida, destacamos as contribuições do movimento negro, que têm sido fundamentais para o reconhecimento da igualdade racial como uma questão pública no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: racismo; democracia racial; Brasil; movimento negro.

Resumen

En este artículo proponemos un curso de análisis orientado a aclarar cómo el racismo y la desigualdad racial han sido plasmados, naturalizados e institucionalizados en Brasil a partir de especificidades fuertemente vinculadas a la dinámica de la sociedad brasileña desde, entre otros, el punto de vista de los intereses de la élite, la racionalidad colonial y el proceso de modernización del Estado brasileño. Primero analizamos el proceso de invención de las razas

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en Occidente y el racismo científico en Brasil hasta el desarrollo del mito de la democracia racial. Luego, destacamos las contribuciones del movimiento negro que han sido fundamentales para el reconocimiento de la igualdad racial como un tema público en Brasil.

Palabras clave: racismo; democracia racial; Brasil; movimiento negro.

Introduction

In the most recent history of Brazil, that is, from the late 1990s on, that the racial inequality theme acquired progressive relevance and recognition in the field of public policy. Since far-off times, this has been an issue of interest in social movements' struggle against slavery and racism (black movement) and for equal rights. However, only at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century did the debate become institutionalized at a national level, to such an extent that, in 2003, a department for the promotion of racial equality (Secretaria Especial de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial, Seppir) was established, under the Presidency of the Republic, with Ministry *status*. Its objective was "the promotion of the formulation, coordination and joint action of the fight against racial inequality and of affirmative action policies in an integrated manner with all other federal government agencies" (IPEA, 2008).

It is worth remembering that the law that criminalizes racism in Brazil dates from 1988. We emphasize that the pressure from and expectation of international agencies for a stronger position by the Brazilian government in the fight against racism has also contributed to establishing a favorable moment for progress in the field of race issues. The actions and important achievements in the fight for racial equality in Brazil have met difficulties and challenges. It is increasingly acknowledged that racism operates effectively in Brazil, producing and accentuating the unequal access to rights and public policies, narrowing the access to public services, which indicates how much still has to be done. Among these actions and achievements, we emphasize public services in the area of education, an old claim of the black movement. Since 1930, black movement groups have warned about the necessity of

implementing public policies that ensured the access to education for the black population. This fight lasted through much of the 20th century, and from the 1970s on, the black movement's demands included the need for providing a clearly non-racist education. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the struggles, achievements and actions for racial equality were marked by commotion and were especially challenging for the effective promotion of racial equality in Brazil.

A major achievement was Act No. 10,639, passed on January 2003, which amended the Act of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (1996) and required the teaching of Afro-Brazilian Culture History in public and private elementary and secondary schools. The study of the history of Africa and of Africans, the fight and resistance of blacks in Brazil, the Brazilian black culture and the social, economic, and political contributions of blacks in the formation of the Brazilian society affords a broader view of the Afro-Brazilian culture, divergent from the traditional versions and curricula that almost exclusively focused black culture in Brazil during slavery, many times considering enslavement and black inferiority as something natural and necessary.

Another movement of importance is the fight for affirmative actions in higher education and to the institution of programs for greater access to and permanence of black, native Brazilian and public school students in higher education. Initiatives such as PROUNI - Programa Universidade para Todos (University for All), which had a significant impact on the access of black youth to private higher education schools, indigenous education programs and a growing incorporation of social and racial quota policies for democratic access to federal and state higher education in the whole of Brazil show the progress in the promotion of

racial equality.

Most of all, we identified elements of acknowledgement of black men and women as equal partakers in politics and in the building of the society – the collective action of the black movement together with other actors in Brazil questioned the legal and institutional patterns of exclusion. Today we can identify how these actors have been able to propose other institutional and legal patterns of inclusion in an intense dialogue with other sectors of the civil society and the State, which is an important step in order to promote social justice.

However, the challenges are numerous: the fight against institutional racism in public policies; the regularization and filing of land deeds to *quilombolas* (descendants of run-away slaves and from the slave resistance); equal access to jobs; fight against sexual and domestic abuse, which bears mainly on black women and children; and finally, the violence and extermination which strike black youths who live in the suburbs. By all means, a great challenge is achieving the necessary deconstruction of strongly naturalized discourses and practices which consider the black as inferior and unequal individuals, without historicizing and analyzing the power relations underlying the promotion of this inferiority, and disguise this inequality with the notion of Brazil as being a locus of racial harmony. Besides understanding the social and economic injustice that afflicts blacks in Brazil, one must consider the symbolic and cultural dimensions, which are no less important for understanding racial inequality and the promotion of equality (Fraser, 1995; 1998). All these issues have raised quite controversial reactions and positions concerning the race issue in Brazil, giving place to the debate which has been recurrently avoided or neglected throughout the history of Brazil.

The concern with the race issue has (re)introduced the discussion on which the society we want and has brought up quite

different perspectives and heated controversies or made them explicit. If on the one hand, the racial theme occupies a significant public place through the acknowledgement of racial inequality as a problem that must be approached in a specific way, other positions can be identified that do not share such acknowledgement. There are those that resume the debate of miscegenation as a constituting feature of Brazilian identity, which would prevent, according to this position, the practice of racism, since its "target" cannot be identified. Other positions identify poverty as the main issue to be dealt with in public policies, seeing racial equality as a consequence of socio-economic equality. Others delegitimize the debate started by the black movement by proposing that the black movement would be creating a nonexistent conflict through the discussion of the problem of racial inequality and racism in Brazil by considering the Brazilian society as racist and threatening the unity of Brazil as a country and Brazilian identity.

To understand the complex contemporary debate on race in Brazil a little better and how the discourses and interpretations of the race issue have been shaped over time, it is essential to resort to History to (re)construct the knowledge on racism and racial inequality in Brazil. For this purpose, it is necessary to resort to different fields of knowledge, such as sociology, anthropology, political science, social psychology and psychology of social movements, which is important in the deconstruction of the monoculture of knowledge about the race issue that predominates in Brazil. The purpose of this multidisciplinary approach is to elaborate an interpretation on the issue of blacks in Brazil by questioning the official way in which this history is told and the psychosocial aspects that legitimize and perpetuate the places of subalternity of black men and women. In addition, understanding the justifications for public policies toward race issues requires

knowing and clearly outlining exactly how the race issue problem took shape in Brazil. Only in this way, will we succeed in making explicit the whys of public policies on race issues and the fact that it is not a claim for privileges but for equality and social justice. It is clear that this enterprise requires the deconstruction of deeply rooted beliefs and practices that constantly permeate our daily lives and that contribute to the institutionalization and naturalization of racism – after all, much of what we propose to deconstruct here refers to the ways in which we have learned to understand and interpret Brazilian society. This paper presents the challenge for our active participation in the proposal of knowledge and practices that contribute to the (re)construction of Brazil less marked by the bias of domination and oppression (Haraway, 1988).

To this end, we propose a course of analysis aimed at the clarification of how racism and racial inequality have been shaped, naturalized and institutionalized in Brazil based on specificities strongly linked to the dynamics of Brazilian society from, among others, the viewpoint of the interests of the elite, the colonial rationale, and the process of modernization of the Brazilian State. We will first analyze the process of invention of races in the West and the scientific racism in Brazil until the development of the myth of racial democracy. Then, we will highlight the contributions of the black movement that have been fundamental to the acknowledgement of racial equality as a public issue in Brazil.

From scientific racism to the myth of racial democracy: some considerations

There are differing interpretations about the timing and circumstances of the constitution of the category of *race* in Western societies; however, we shall highlight some elements here that we consider relevant in order to build an understanding less worrying about the

"when it started" and more focused on the social, economic, cultural and political *functions* that the notion of race has acquired in contemporaneous societies.

In the analysis of Latin American societies from the perspective of globalization, Quijano (2000, 2005, 2009) identifies that the pattern of power which marks this historical turning point would be the culmination of a process that began with the foundation of America and the colonial/modern capitalism. According to the author, this global pattern of power consists of the articulation between four fundamental axes, two of which we will discuss here: *the coloniality of power and Eurocentrism*. The first proposes the analysis of one of the founding elements of the current pattern of power, namely, the social classification of the population based on the notion of *race* that began to be employed more than 500 years ago, simultaneously in America and Europe, along with capitalism. *Race* would express the most profound and enduring basic experience of colonial domination that was imposed on various populations during the expansion of European colonialism. Its consequence for the formation of social relations would be the production of historically new social identities: native people, blacks, mestizos, and the redefinition of others. Thus, as Quijano (2000; 2005) shows, terms such as *Portuguese* and *Spanish*, and later *European*, which until that time expressed exclusively geographical origin or country of origin, acquired a racial connotation in relation to new identities. And since these social relations that were taking shape were of domination, these identities were immediately associated with hierarchies, places and social roles that corresponded to this new prevailing pattern of domination.

Over time, the colonizers outlined the phenotypic traits of the colonized as *skin colour*, which was taken as an emblematic characteristic of racial

category. In America, the notion of race was a way of legitimizing the relationships of domination imposed by colonization; that is, of sustaining the position of dominance, which was necessary to build the notion of colonized and everything that concerned it, based on the concept of race: primitive, backward, lazy, little intelligent, promiscuous, sassy and others, which was used to justify the presence of the colonizer, representative of rationality, civilization and progress (Mayorga, Costa & Cardoso, 2010). Europe was constituted only after America, and the expansion of European colonialism to the rest of the world enabled the development of a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge and, with it, the theoretical systematization of the notion of race as a consequence of the naturalization of these colonial relations of domination between Europeans and non-Europeans. It was not by chance that later the field of natural science was taken as a paradigm of the theorizing about races, since such a perspective allows analyses and explanations that exclude social relations of its scope, thus making the relationships of domination or exploitation "invisible" from that perspective. Historically, this meant a new way of legitimizing the old ideas and practices of superiority/inferiority relationships between the dominant and the dominated (Quijano, 2005). Since then, this has been proven to be one of the most effective and lasting instruments of universal social domination; the conquered and dominated peoples were understood from a "natural" condition of inferiority, and therefore so were their phenotypic traits and their mental and cultural discoveries. In this way, the new places of power that were thus outlined and constituted using the notion of race to legitimize distinct ranks, places and functions: the subjects in charge, who thought, who obeyed, who submitted themselves, etc. were defined using racial elements, therefore setting up the

structure and the pattern of power in this new emerging society.

This brings us to the second characteristic axis of the pattern of power in analysis, namely, Eurocentrism as a hegemonic form of control of subjectivity/intersubjectivity, especially in the production of knowledge. The coloniality of power, based on the classification and ranking of people, produced and was produced by a specific rationale, Eurocentrism, a thought that took Europe conceived as a paragon of society, therefore, to be perpetuated and divulged for the sake of ideals such as progress, civilization, evolution, etc.; the prevailing idea-image is that of the human civilization history as a path that starts from a state of nature and culminates in Europe (Quijano, 2000; 2005). To do this, it assigned the differences between what was Europe and non-Europe as differences in nature (colored skin and races), and not to the history of power. This perspective was supported by evolutionism and dualism, two of the main elements of Eurocentrism. One of the consequences of the divisions between the mind and the body, reason and emotion, subject and object, which are characteristics of this modern rationale, was the division between the individual and society, and a quest for human nature that ignored historical and power elements in order to understand the different social groups: while the ideal of civilization, modernity and progress was in Europe, left to the "new" just "discovered" peoples were the adjectives primitive, uncivilized, and irrational, who, therefore, should be civilized and domesticated from the Eurocentric perspective. What stands out is that the Eurocentric ideal becomes synonymous with *humanity* throughout history and later on with the ethnocentrism that marks this position, it will be denounced and formulated (Mayorga, 2009).

As a result of coloniality of power and its specific rationale, among other

things, that which was termed *scientific racism* gained space and legitimacy from the 19th century on with Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) among the most distinguished along with his elaborations on social evolutionism. He proposed the shift of the typological model and of the classificatory systems from the biological to the cultural world, updating from other parameters, the notion of differences between peoples and societies. To him, society would be a body subjected to the same laws that living organisms were. Concerning Spencer's characterization of peoples, he ranked them as upper and lower, and the top mostly were white Europeans. He also ranked societies from their organizational and job division schemes, and considered industrial societies as civilized and more advanced, which distinguished them from other so-called primitive societies. Another important statement of social evolutionism is that in the fight for supremacy between peoples, similarly to what occurs in nature, superiority would prevail in a natural way, and the survival of the fittest and subordination of the weakest would be a constitutive element of the evolutionary process of societies.

This notion was "applied" in some fields of knowledge, as, for instance, in Anthropology, which used the concept of cultural superiority and focused on the study of the so-called primitive societies, identifying in them less advanced stages in the process of development of the human species, considered to be a series of steps that conformed to a rigid sequence formed by stages of development (Schwarcz, 2000).

This thought had quite a significant reach from the 19th century on and was the basis of what was termed scientific racism. What we cannot fail to point out is that this knowledge, which was gaining strength in Europe and which influenced Brazilian scientists and intellectuals, did not encompass but rather ignored the process of exploitation, oppression and the socio-psychological implications of colonialism.

The ideological mark of the division of humanity into races and stages of development was ignored, since it masked, from the explanatory framework of social phenomena based on biology, the socio-historical conditions as responsible for the differences between cultures, individuals and forms, and levels of insertion and involvement in social life (Chaves, 2003).

These ideas reached Brazil in a crucial moment, since at the end of the 19th century, most Brazilian intellectuals discussed and understood national issues from racial and individual points of view (Schwarcz, 2000). This time which became known as "racial stalemate" at the turn of the 19th century and in the early 20th century was marked by strong abolitionist clashes (we point out that there was a strong political action in favor of enfranchisement and close attention was paid to its consequences for blacks and mestizos), the proclamation of the Republic (1889) and the legislation on aspects of construction of citizenship (Menezes, 1997). A country that had just abolished slavery and proclaimed a Republic wondered about what the country wanted to be; who should be a citizen in a State that drew a new profile, which modernization was possible for Brazil to progress and what its obstacles were. With the fall of the Monarchy, the powers were reconfigured in this new scenario with the race issue at the center of this reconfiguration.

At this restless time, among Brazilian intellectuals and scientists emerged studies and positions that sought to present solutions to social and political dilemmas. The different versions of miscegenation in Brazil and its consequences on society were the concern that much reflected what was at stake or dispute at that time: if on the one hand some advocated a worthy integration of blacks into society after enfranchisement, others were concerned with the consequences of this integration. The mix of races through miscegenation became,

therefore, the object of studies, largely synthesizing the concern of the elite with the consequences of enfranchisement in Brazil.

An emblematic thinker at that moment was Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906), medical doctor at the School of Medicine of Rio de Janeiro and later professor and researcher at the College of Medicine in Salvador. The extent of themes to which he devoted himself in his studies and research included issues such as diseases that affected residents of Bahia state (beriberi); the psychopathology of some segments of the population and their propensities to diseases; the strict characterization of races that make up the Brazilian population; his study on Canudos³, the investigations about Africans in Brazil; the religion of Africans, its influence on the white population and religious syncretism (Corrêa, 2001), which runs through Rodrigues' work and refers to the psycho sociology of races in Brazil. Strongly influenced by Spencer's social evolutionism and Le Bon's psychology of the masses, he identifies in the mulatto and the *mameluco*, born from the miscegenation between whites and blacks and whites and natives, respectively, the source of degeneration of the white race. His position can be identified in the following excerpt:

For science, this inferiority [of blacks and mestizos] is no more than a phenomenon of perfectly natural order, produced by the unequal pace of the phylogenetic development of mankind in its various divisions or sections (...) The Black Race in Brazil, however unquestionable their services to our civilization, however justified the sympathies toward it arising from the sickening abuse of slavery that surrounded it, however big the generous

exaggerations of its flatterers, will always be one of the factors of our inferiority as a people (...). [Author's translation] (Nina Rodrigues, 1977)

According to Nina Rodrigues, the mestizos did not constitute races and were considered inferior due to the deleterious influence of their wild and primitive ancestors: the blacks and natives. According to the thinker, this inferiority was expressed in the blacks' religious practices, which infected the whites, since European monotheism was considered more sophisticated and advanced and impossible to be understood by the backward minds of mestizos. This inferiority was considered to be due to the neuropathic predisposition that some mestizos might have inherited, lack of intelligence and backward cultures, among many other factors. His work contains very detailed classifications and characterizations of the social groups that he studied, such as the difference between rural and seaside mestizos.

In Nina Rodrigues' way of thinking, the expression of scientific racism in Brazil is characterized by the elements that we have sought to point out so far on this topic: first of all, it is possible to recognize that the objective of the use of biological reductionism to interpret cultures and social relations - which masked the ideological dimension of scientific racism and came to legitimize positions of the white elite in a time of great "turmoil" and pressures that disqualified the intelligence, culture, religion and "quality" of health of blacks and mestizos - was to disqualify the demonstrations which rose within those same groups or in favor of them, and ensure the supremacy of white ideals. Why should the State stress the integration of freed blacks and mestizos, if these were scientifically considered the cause of degeneration of Brazilian society? Why invest in this social group if its culture, religion and customs can contribute to the

³ TN: Canudos, a town in Bahia state, was founded in 1893 by Antônio Vicente Mendes Maciel, a wandering preacher from Ceará state whom local authorities saw as a Monarchist and as a threat to their legitimacy -

deterioration of the white race, the one which is responsible for qualities and values related to civilization, progress and modernization? This position, here represented by Nina Rodrigues, was not the most popular among views of the race issue in Brazil at that time; the arguments put forward practically made Brazil itself unviable, since, according to this version, through the relation between "species" of different quality, miscegenation inexorably led to biological, but, above all cultural sterility, undermining the efforts of civilization among us (Skidmore, 1976).

We saw that in the late 19th century and early 20th century, with the overall commotion that marked the pre- and post-enfranchisement periods, the debate on the construction of Brazilian nationality and a modernized Brazil was an object of divergences and convergences between some Brazilian thinkers, since racial diversity was seen as a hindrance for the realization of this project. Nina Rodrigues, along with Oliveira Viana (1883-1951), Arthur Ramos (1903-1949), Sílvio Romero (1851-1914), Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909), Alberto Torres (1865-1917), Manuel Bonfim (1868-1932), Edgar Roquette Pinto (1884-1954) and later Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) and others dwelt on the reflection and construction of a singular ethnic identity for Brazil. This effort was justified due to the fact that racial plurality established by the colonization process posed a threat and hindered the construction of a society based on the association of the modernization of Brazil with white ideals (Munanga, 2006). As proposed, the above mentioned authors disagreed in relation to the race issue, its explanation, characterization and valuation and their effects on the conceptions of Brazilian identity: while Nina Rodrigues attributed to miscegenation the backwardness of Brazilian society, authors such as the social psychologist and anthropologist Arthur Ramos saw miscegenation as a possibility of improvement of the black

race, which would take place through the "successful" process of acculturation, as is clear in the excerpt below:

[...] In addition, there are other factors related to the very Brazilian mental life in its general sense. The existence of affective, emotional substrates in the Brazilian collective life. The influence of magical thinking, which I have already reviewed in 'Negro Brasileiro'. No particular ethnic group that has contributed to our formation as Brazilians is to be blamed for this. These faults are a consequence of either cultural backwardness or socio-cultural misfitting arising from the still incomplete work of acculturation. (Ramos, 1942).

The idea of race as a category based on the primarily biological characterization (with moral, intellectual and cognitive consequences) for the qualification of human groups began to give rise to a notion based on cultural and social aspects, although an analysis that considers the relations of power is still ignored or remains implicit. Thus, miscegenation stopped being the great reason for the ruin of Brazil as a nation, race and culture to become a mechanism that can ensure the redemption of Brazil – one that could finally solve the race issue and ultimately usher in progress (Araújo, 1994). For some intellectuals of that time, such a position was possible only because miscegenation was regarded as a process of whitening (acting white) that, according to Skidmore (1976), constituted a typical Brazilian solution, one "which would ensure a gradual predominance of white over black characters in the body and spirit of each mulatto. Thus, within a given period, at a point calculated to be about three generations or more or less 100 years, (...) it was believed that the black inheritance would be definitively eradicated from Brazil" (Araújo, 1994, p. 27). Thus, while the first perspective indicated the constraints engendered by miscegenation, which would indicate, as stated above, the almost non viability of Brazil, the second apparently pointed to

the future elimination of black inheritance. Both viewpoints restate the white supremacy that gives meaning to the argument (Araújo, 1994). Thus, the concept of *whitening* (*acting white*) gained distinct connotations: If, on the one hand, whitening may refer to a view of a population phenomenon related to an empirical reality, in the other this term is also used with ideological meaning, as an idea that helps us to understand how racism is built up in Brazil: the ideology of whitening refers to the diffusion and incorporation of white ideals among whites and blacks, who, in assimilating the values of the former will behave, act, think, project the past, present and future and feel in tune with the ideals of white culture (Domingues, 2002).

Nevertheless, there is a third discourse on miscegenation and the race issue in Brazil. We have seen that the studies about races and the interest in the consequences of miscegenation presented various interpretations of the race issue, one of them is emblematic to the understanding of the discourse on Brazil as a racial democracy: the theory proposed by Gilberto Freyre (1982) about relations between masters and male and female slaves in the slavery period in *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933). By distinguishing race from culture and seeking to equalize the contributions of Portuguese, black people and indigenous on a smaller scale, *Casa Grande e Senzala* gained strength as an attempt to overcome racism and that polarized the intellectual production in Brazil until then, and also as an attempt to build another version of the Brazilian identity, "one in which the obsession with progress and reason, with the integration of the country in the march of civilization, to a certain extent, was replaced by an interpretation that paid some attention to the hybrid and unique articulation of traditions that occurred here" (Araújo, 1994). Therefore, the value of the influence of blacks and natives were acknowledged by outlining the foundations

of a collective identity that might stimulate an unprecedented sense of community by making explicit, characterizing and valuing ties, until then disregarded or made invisible, between the different groups that make up Brazil.

Nevertheless, according to Araújo (1994), the way that Gilberto Freyre introduces and analyses these relationships between Portuguese, blacks and natives has a second meaning, which is responsible for the harsh criticism of his work by various intellectuals concerned about the race issue and the debate about Brazilian identity. Criticism shows that, while trying to move away from racism and acknowledge the importance of other cultures for understanding Brazil, Gilberto Freyre built a quite idyllic image of Brazilian colonial society regardless of the violence, conflicts, exploitation and discrimination that marks slavery and colonial societies, idealizing the image of a racial democracy in an atmosphere of cooperation and intimacy between masters and slaves in which they established fraternal relationships.

Chauí called this idealized perspective the *founding myth* of Brazilian identity: Brazilians would be the result of miscegenation of "three valiant races - the brave native peoples, the stoic blacks and the intrepid and sentimental Lusitans" (Chauí, 2000). This would have made Brazil the prototype of the racial democracy, where the miscegenation of races and colors would have made the great cultural wealth of the country possible, an egalitarian daily living of these different groups and, therefore, the absence of prejudices and any kind of racism, since who founded the Brazilian identity could not be classified in terms of pure racial categories: the peculiar hybridism of miscegenation would be the metaphor to portray the glorious encounter between races in Brazil. According to Chauí (2000), the idea of myth must be seen not only in the etymological sense of the term, derived from *mythos*, the public

narration of legendary deeds of a community, but, above all, in its anthropological sense: myth as a narrative used to explain or even justify a specific reality, an imaginary solution to tensions, conflicts and contradictions that in most cases remain unsolved in reality. Hence comes the ideological character of myth, as it masks the true situation of a certain reality, in this, case race relations in Brazil. The founding myth is, therefore, seen as what explains the origin or foundation of a certain people that is immortalized by its continuous resignification throughout the history of a people. The diffusion of this myth, with its ideological connotations, also masks the whitening ideology, which consists of the assimilation of white and Eurocentric ideals by whites and blacks and mestizos alike.

It is important to highlight that it was not Gilberto Freyre's work that created this myth; his work expresses the debate and ideas of an age, which found such great acceptance that the idealized concept of racial democracy gradually gained expression and also usefulness to certain groups that it became the official version of Brazilianness. The founding myth that idealizes the encounter between the various cultures and races throughout Brazilian history hides what it is unpleasant to see and admit: the interaction between white colonizers, blacks and native peoples was full of extermination, violence, torture and diffusion of Eurocentric views on Brazil itself. The myth makes us forget this "sad story", but the consequences of the forgetfulness of this are serious, since they prevent us from knowing, recognizing and healing our wounds as a nation, from making the projection of a present and future built with an explicit concern with the repetition of this kind of violence and authoritarianism.

Discourses about race and miscegenation in Brazil

It was the perspective on Brazil as a racial paradise that justified conducting a series of studies in Brazil that became known as "the cycle of UNESCO studies" (1953-1956). After the Second World War and all the horrors of the genocide in the concentration camps (against Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, etc.) the urgency to find solutions to such great conflicts arose in the world - racism, xenophobia and prejudice seemed unacceptable. The divulging of ideas about the supposed Brazilian racial democracy in the United States and Europe and Arthur Ramos' appointment to director of the UNESCO Department of Social Sciences in 1949 made the world look at Brazil with hope that the "successful" encounter between cultures and races in Brazil might set an example to other nations, since the idea that circulated was that Brazil, in contrast to countries like the United States, solved differences between races and cultures in a cordial and peaceful way. These studies were of high relevance because, contrary to expectations, what the studies made evident was the racist dimension of Brazilian society. In addition, it allowed the characterization of Brazilian racism – the "cordial racism" marked by a superficial kindness, the non-identification of its agents and by the inability of Brazilians to acknowledge having prejudice. It even allowed the acknowledgement of racial democracy as an ideological construct with the function of masking and neutralizing the reality of domination and exploitation of blacks by whites (Fernandes, 1965). These studies were widely used by the black movement to further support its struggles, since the racism revealed in the studies had already been denounced by the movement long ago.

Thus, according to Guimarães (2002), the idea of racial democracy gained distinct connotations derived from the different historical connotations and new meanings over time. What needs to be highlighted once again is that, in the way

that Brazilian history took place, racial democracy, from an ideal to be achieved, took the dimensions of a myth that masks, as previously said, the relationships of domination and power between whites and blacks in Brazil. In this way, the ideological dimension of myth set in.

We try to show here how the notion of race earns specific connotations when we approach its economic, social and political function both in the process of the constitution of America and as a consequence of the European expansion and colonization, as in the process of the Proclamation of the Republic in Brazil, where the race issue and its consequences became central in the following years. Reviewing this path gains relevance in the debate on public policies on race, since it enables (re)discovering the place of race in Brazilian history and social thought. This analysis leads us to the conclusion that *race* is a social construction with social, political and economic effects that were taken as natural, which justified the belittlement and oppression of blacks and mestizos, a position which spread with conflicts and strong opposition.

Black men and women in movements

The concept of race gains other meanings when we focus our analysis on the history and formation of the black movement in Brazil. For a long period of time the idea that African blacks who came to Brazil suffered from all the effects of slavery and violence passively was perpetuated among Brazilians. Such a belief or, we might say, ideology, is a harmful historical error and is associated with the effort of characterization of blacks and mestizos in Brazil, the fruit of scientific racism as said before, based on disqualifying attributes, and that strengthened the notion of natural inferiority of blacks.

The period after the enfranchisement and the Proclamation of the Republic was marked by the absence of

symbolic and material gains for the black population. This marginalization of the enfranchised and their descendants led to the mobilization of blacks in Brazil, initially through the creation of dozens of unions, associations and clubs in the different States of Brazil aiming to assemble the so-called "men of color" around welfare, recreational or cultural activities (Domingues, 2007). However, it is important to point out that prior to this period the black resistance to slavery was exerted through movements, rebellions and revolts in various regions of Brazil and the organization of quilombos, resistance communities of runaway slaves.

Similarly, throughout the whole 20th and early 21st century, the Brazilian black movement exerted significant anti-racist action in favor of the rights of the black population, the most important of its achievements in its history being the introduction of anti-racist ideas into the political thinking of Brazilian society and the increasing consolidation of a new racial and cultural identity for the black population in Brazil (Cardoso, 1987).

Still, throughout these years, the Brazilian black movement has become a quite heterogeneous political agent. Four different stages (Domingues, 2007) are identified: first stage (1889-1937), second stage (1945-1964), third stage (1978-2000) and fourth stage (2000-to present). We agree with Prado (2002) that the construction of a political identity is a complex psychosocial process that requires some elements, among them: the construction of a collective identity (common causes and assembly based at least on the strengthening of the ties of solidarity and mutual acknowledgement), interpretation of the relationships of subordination as conditions of oppression (in order that a movement can be identified as political, social relations must no longer be seen as natural elements to keep society "in order", but must be seen as the result of unequal relations, driven by interests of power, and as a consequence of historical

dynamics) and the delimitation of political borderlines between "us" and "them" (a process of definition of the object of struggle, the objectives and the direction of changes wanted, who the agents are, what the dynamics and structures identified as causes of oppression and violence are).

In order to understand the course followed by the Brazilian black movement, we try and analyze the shaping of this political actor in these different stages, beginning from three elements highlighted before and giving a special attention to the ways of incursion into and interference in the public field. Although we are not going to present this analysis here, this turns out to be fundamental to determine the new meanings that the idea of race gained in the interpretation of the Brazilian society and the political struggle without influences from biologizing perspectives and considering cultural aspects and the positive reconstruction of black identity. Recovering the history and memory of blacks (religiousness, art, relationship with the body, etc.) before and after they arrived in Brazil was a relevant strategy for this positive reconstruction of identity.

The criticism of the myth of racial democracy predominated and has been gradually systematized throughout the history of the black movement. The strategies used by the movement are varied: while in the first stage of the movement, the creation of a black press was considered fundamental to inform and raise awareness in black men and women on "color prejudice" as it was called at the time, the Experimental Black Theatre (Teatro Experimental do Negro) made use of other languages in order to mobilize blacks for the race issue. Another point worth highlighting is the politico-ideological alliances of the movement: if in the first two stages alliances were made with more "center" and "right" political groups, then from the third stage on, under strong influence of Marxism, the black movement adopted an anti-capitalistic position too.

It is clear that a large part of the effort of black movement has focused on the denaturalization of racial inequality and racism in Brazilian society, identifying experiences previously regarded as natural and "normal" for blacks as experiences of oppression and violence. As a result, during the last years the "them" in the black movement has been the myth of racial democracy and the whitening (acting white) ideology. Resisting the patriarchal, colonial and racial system called for efforts to reconstruct the identity of blacks, refusing pre-established positions, meanings and stories ascribed by others and trying to reconstruct their history of resistance.

The black movement has warned Brazilian society and the government about the negative effects of racism on living conditions of blacks in Brazil. This same movement and various groups which fight against racial prejudice also lay claim to democratic access to education which approaches ethnic-racial diversity in a positive way, giving this area of education the due priority for the construction of racial equality.

The introduction of other types of knowledge in school curricula, especially of African Brazilian contents, is urgent for the construction of a fairer and more democratic society. The history of the black population and its contribution for the construction of Brazil can only be divulged and retransmitted to present and future generations to the extent that they are known, acknowledged and transmitted in the present.

Another relevant form proposed by the black movement to fight back at racial inequality is the affirmative action policy (AA). Affirmative actions "can be seen as a group of policies, actions and public or private guidelines, either compulsory or optional or voluntary in nature, with the goal of correcting historically demonstrated discrimination and exclusion resulting in inequalities imposed on certain social and/or ethnic-racial groups. (...)

They can be adopted in education, health, the job market, political office jobs, and other (...) sectors where discrimination to be overcome is more evident and situations of inequality and exclusion can be found” (Munanga & Gomes, 2006.) [Author's translation] Unfortunately, there is a great lack of information on AA policies in Brazil – the debate is based on very general images broadcast by the media which is often full of prejudice, in addition to positions that do not actually acknowledge the existence of racial inequality in Brazil. Once more, it is clear that a great contribution by the black movement to Brazilian society has been the inclusion of racial equality on the political horizon of social justice. The need to approach this issue in the field of public policies and its debate has been expressed.

Conclusions

Throughout the text we have tried to show different facets of the race issue, from the perspective of the foundation of America and the need to racially discriminate peoples who were "discovered" and dominated for reasons of power, we analyzed the discourses on the race issue in Brazil before and after enfranchisement, highlighting how miscegenation became a symbol of the race issue in Brazil, that is, how miscegenation either degenerates or shows the way for the neutralization of the black race is valued in the form of an ideology of whitening. We have also analyzed how the myth of racial democracy neutralizes and makes the subjugation of and violence against blacks invisible, and tried to point out the leading role of the black movement and of the black women's movement in turning the race issue into a public issue to be approached through the adoption of public policies. Continued analytical work may include the identification of the current discourses on race, miscegenation and the race issue. It is necessary to try and identify the reproductions of the past in the

present in search of elements which may help to make the political positions on this issue explicit.

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