

Historical Roots of the “Whitening” of Brazil

by

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It has been estimated that, over a 300-year period from the second half of the sixteenth century until the first half of the nineteenth, some 3.5-3.6 million black slaves were brought to Brazil from Africa (Goulart, 1950: 272; Mattoso, 1981: 53). This enormous number of black Africans transformed the racial makeup of Brazil. We do not know exactly when it happened, but by the end of the eighteenth century these blacks and their descendants already formed the majority of the Brazilian population (Malheiro, 1976: 30). This demographic circumstance persisted into the following century. In 1872, the year of Brazil's first national census, whites constituted 38.1 percent of the population, while blacks, mulattoes, and Indians accounted for the remaining 61.9 percent. In the second census, carried out in 1890, the white population, although it had proportionately increased by 5.9 percent to 44 percent, was still in the minority, as the other racial categories together still accounted for 56 percent of the total (Santos, 1997).

The available statistics show that, in the final years of Brazilian slavery, the slave population was concentrated in the southeast, excluding the province of Espírito Santo and the city of Rio de Janeiro. Although the statistics show that between 1884 and 1887 slave numbers fell sharply, by some 41.69 percent, in every province, the concentration of the slave population in this region—the provinces of Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo—actually increased during the last decade of slavery (Santos, 1997).

After the abolition of the slave trade in 1850 and well before there was any obvious decline in the supply of slaves, their owners and the rulers of Brazil “discovered” that the offer of blacks from Africa was not unlimited. This realization gave rise to the first concern with the labor supply question, based on a probable future shortage of hands for agricultural work.

Realizing that slave labor was inevitably doomed, the Brazilian ruling elites began to stress the need to develop free labor as a substitute, although they meanwhile did their utmost to delay the abolition of slavery. Since slave

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labor was still the principal source of agricultural production, the planters sought to gain time to develop this new type of labor. This explains the slow and gradual process of abolition, which required three basic laws: the Free Womb Law of 1871, the Sexagenarian Law of 1885, and the so-called Golden Law of 1888.

In the 1870s, the concern to formulate a manpower policy to “supply agriculture’s need for field hands” became a definite item on the political agenda of the government of the empire and those of several provinces, notably that of São Paulo, where the planter class was represented among holders of the highest public offices, imperial as well as provincial. Thus it was that the coffee growers and the central and provincial governments decided that the institution of free labor would be introduced by means of immigration from Europe (Kowarick, 1987: 100).

Even before 1870 there had been some attempts to attract immigrants, especially Germans and Swiss, with the explicit intention of countering the disproportion between blacks and whites (Balán, 1974: 117-119). But it was only from 1867 on that the Brazilian government began to invest more markedly in its chosen immigration policy, almost doubling its expenditure on it. Although government expenditure on immigration fell appreciably between 1870 and 1872, it more than doubled after 1872 (Santos, 1997). The European immigrants’ transportation costs, paid for by the Brazilian national government from 1851 to 1909 and by the government of São Paulo province (later, state) from 1881 to 1927 (Santos, 1997), was one obstacle that was overcome by administrative action to make this policy of importing farm labor practicable. Thus the makeup of the free labor market depended, even before the formal abolition of slavery, on a flow of immigrants from abroad (Kowarick, 1987: 88-89) subsidized by decisive intervention of the imperial and provincial governments.

The discussion of immigration policy was not, however, confined to the government and the legislature. When the imperial government sought to regularize the institution of free labor, it decided on a direct consultation of the planters of the southeastern region through a farming conference, held in Rio de Janeiro in July 1878 and presided over by the Ministry of Agriculture. This Congresso Agrícola served as an opportunity for reflection on the way opinion was developing among a significant part of the Brazilian ruling class, the planters of the southeast, on the composition of the rural working class in Brazil after the expected abolition of slave labor.

Opinions varied not only as to future management-worker relationships but also as to what racial type should form Brazil’s working class, for the question of race was fundamental to any definition. Some of the conference participants advocated the use of “national labor” after abolition, arguing that

former slaves could be used to the extent that their labor could be made obligatory to overcome their supposedly inherent laziness. Another, no less representative cohort of conference participants rejected the use of former slaves because of this oft-repeated stigma of indolence and insisted that the new type of worker and future citizen of Brazil had to be a foreigner. And not even those who argued for immigration to supply the new free labor market did it without regard to such aspects as the origin, race, and nature of the immigrants (among their other characteristics). Although the conference had been convoked to present solutions to the "manpower shortage crisis" so much discussed by the planters of the southeastern region, especially those from São Paulo, it was this question of race that turned out to be the central point of discussion.

On July 8, 1878, the Congresso Agrícola was opened by João Vieira Lins Cansação de Sinimbu, then minister of agriculture, trade, and public works [and also prime minister January 1878–March 1879], in order (according to his inaugural address) to "safeguard the fate of large-scale agriculture" (Congresso Agrícola, 1988: 126). Every province that was invited sent delegates, who included not only landowners but also important politicians (such as Campos Salles, later to be president of Brazil 1898-1902) both from the established Conservative and Liberal parties and also from the recently formed Republican party. There were 399 of these delegates, of whom 50 percent came from Rio de Janeiro, 25 percent from São Paulo, 17 percent from Minas Gerais, 3 percent from the city of Rio de Janeiro (the then neutral municipality and future federal district), 1.5 percent from Espírito Santo, and 1 percent from places unknown (Congresso Agrícola, 1988).

Minister Sinimbu, stating the consensus among the planters in attendance, asserted that a crisis existed in the supply of rural manpower and that joint action by the imperial government and the farmers was needed to solve it. "To face the problem head on, without thinking one instant about turning back, to seek the most effective and suitable means to solve it, rebuilding the rural economy on the basis of free labor: this, gentlemen, is our principal mission, and yours" (Congresso Agrícola, 1988: 128).

In this way (Congresso Agrícola, 1988: 2),

the objective of the conference's discussions should be to debate everything directly concerned with the future of farming, and especially to advise the government on the following points:

1. What are the most urgent and immediate needs of large-scale farming?
2. Does the labor shortage constitute a very important factor in maintaining, improving, or developing large-scale farming?
3. What is the most effective and appropriate way to overcome this shortage?

4. Can we expect home-grown labor, the descendants of slaves, to provide a permanent free labor force on large plantations? If not, how may farm labor be reorganized?

5. Does large-scale farming suffer from a capital shortage? If so, is this due to an absolute lack of investment capital in Brazil, or is it due to a depression in agricultural credit?

6. How may the supply of agricultural credit be improved? Should special institutions be created? How should they be funded?

7. Have improvements been introduced into Brazilian farming? Which? Is there an urgent need for others? How may they be implemented?

Sinimbu considered the home-grown farm worker as unreliable, “lacking the stimulus of having to maintain a civilized standard of living,” and unwilling to “work hard and continuously” and suggested the importation of workers from Asia as a means of transition toward free labor. This proposal led to lengthy debate on the racial type of worker best suited for Brazil, with a considerable number of delegates wishing to import only Europeans. Sinimbu was not opposed to European immigration but warned the delegates that the intelligence and expertise of the European worker would be expensive. Besides, the European would give up paid work at the earliest opportunity to set up on his own, independence being his real objective (*Congresso Agrícola*, 1988: 126-129).

On one hand, it is obvious that the minister’s approach was that of someone calculatingly and systematically looking for the cheapest solution to the lack of farming manpower they so much complained about. All indications are that this was also the attitude of most of those present, since the principal committees established by the conference approved the minister’s proposal to import Asians and rejected the use of home-grown labor because of its reputed laziness. On the other hand, it is also clear that there was a belief in the European as “superior” not only to the native Brazilian but also to any other non-European worker. In other words, even planters whose objective was rationally to maximize their profits did not reject the idea that Brazil should be concerned with the racial composition of its population.

Even the majority of those in the *Comissão Nomeada pelos Lavradores do Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais e Espírito Santo* (Committee Nominated by the Farmers of the Provinces of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and Espírito Santo), who approved the import of Asians, accepted them reluctantly, as a stopgap solution—a mere “trial” and “means of transition”—and not as permanent settlers (*Congresso Agrícola*, 1988: 78):

Slave labor will be abolished by emancipation or death. The native Brazilian, although some may consider him as a permanent auxiliary, does not satisfy all labor needs. It is therefore essential to import free labor, and, as an experiment

and as a means of transition toward settlement by better-quality races, the Chinese hired worker is a convenient makeshift.

The Comissão Nomeada pelos Lavradores de São Paulo (Committee Nominated by the Farmers of São Paulo Province), although approving the proposal to use the labor of "Indiatic" [i.e., South Asian] peoples, was concerned about the race and origin of future immigrants, and again, by all indications, the use was considered only a stopgap, being "a step backward for our civilization." According to the committee (Congresso Agrícola, 1988: 76),

The simple result of a large-scale immigration is not enough. If our country needs a foreign population to develop all its industry, and especially that of agriculture, which is our chief economic activity, then it is beyond question that we carefully consider the race, origin, character and customs of the peoples that shall live in the bosom of the Brazilian nation, because, above all, we must reinvigorate our energy and stimulate work through morality and freedom.

Since Asians had a subservient and immoral character that would contaminate the Brazilian population and scare off European immigration, as the São Paulo Committee had asserted, and so were a race that could degrade the Brazilian nation, the Representantes de Lavradores de Juiz de Fora e Paraíba do Sul (Representatives of the Farmers of Juiz de Fora and Paraíba do Sul) and those of the Companhia União dos Lavradores (Farmers' Union Company) took a position against the immigration of Asiatics, Africans, and even some Europeans (Congresso Agrícola, 1988: 69):

Immigration, as a simple source of more manpower to fill up the deficit left by the eventual death of our present workers, is doubtless of great importance; but in the choice of immigrants we must, above all, consider improving our farming methods and our processing of farm products. Considering the problem from this viewpoint, the origin and nature of settlers must weigh upon the choice, and so it is not a matter of indifference whether they be Asians, Africans, or Europeans, and even among Europeans selection is called for.

Concerned with the future of Brazil, seeking to distance themselves from "African barbarism" and from Asian "coolies" as "a threat to order and to the well-being of the farming community," these delegates were more preoccupied with the constitution of the nation than with the easy and immediate profit that would accompany Asian immigration. That is, they preferred a "civilized" future with a "vigorous and conquering race" to easy profits and the possibility of weakening a Brazilian civilization still under construction through the supposed backwardness of the black and yellow races. Although

there were differences among the delegates as to which racial type of workers Brazil should import, one can nevertheless perceive two positions or opinions held unanimously: (1) the black and yellow races were inferior to the whites and (2) the ideal immigrants were European whites (Congresso Agrícola, 1988).

These debates transcended the Congresso Agrícola and reached the imperial parliament, where federal deputy Joaquim Nabuco, the most respected leader of the abolitionist movement, made explicit in his speeches during 1879 what in his books is only implicit: the distinction between the superior, white races and the inferior, black and yellow ones (Nabuco, 1983: 180-183, 188-191) and his fear that Brazil would remain a country with a black majority. He also made clear his rejection of the desire of some of Brazil's ruling elites to import Asians, who could Mongolize the nation, degrading the races already there, and introduce vices that would contaminate the population with "the subservient and immoral character" of the Asian, discouraging the immigration of Europeans with their inherent civilization (1983: 165-166). Like the participants in the Congresso Agrícola, Nabuco was concerned with the origin, race, and character of the peoples that Brazil wished to import, and therefore he did not want Asian immigrants either as a stopgap or temporarily as proposed by the conference delegates and the members of the Sociedade Auxiliadora da Indústria Nacional (Society for Assisting Brazilian Industry).¹

Nabuco's Aryanism was not just anti-Asian. Even though this "intellectual politician" had proposed, in his speech of March 10, 1879, the abolition of slavery in Brazil and the transformation of the bondsman into a peasant tied to the soil as the solution to the probable lack of manpower in agriculture (Nabuco, 1983: 184), he revealed his prejudice against African blacks when he prohibited their possible spontaneous migration to Brazil at the same time as he lamented the [seventeenth-century] expulsion from Pernambuco of the Dutch, an "adventurous race" and one "of advanced civilization." The latter, he said, had "perhaps deprived us of our chance to become a greater nation than we are, but neither African nor Mongolian immigration inspires in me the same sympathy" (1983: 184-185).

At the same time, despite his pessimism about the contemporary situation and his distaste for the past importation of Africans, Nabuco was explicit in his desire for Brazil to become white someday, arguing for the tendency of the blacks to vanish through miscegenation because of their inferiority and savagery. "As the black man and the white live together in the same society for hundreds of years, the former's blood will tend to be absorbed into that of the latter, or it will disappear altogether as the one race gives up the field to the other, better prepared for the struggle of life" (Nabuco, 1983: 182).

Farther on the abolitionist leader, despite always insisting that slavery was to blame for all the country's ills, revealed one of the real objectives of his plan to abolish Brazilian slavery by making possible the entry of European immigrants into Brazil. "Free labor and slave labor cannot coexist, and neither can slavery and immigration" (Nabuco, 1983: 183). He believed that slavery devalued the worker and inhibited the movement of European immigrants to Brazil, which in turn slowed up the process of whitening the country so desired by its ruling elites. Thus, slavery was an evil not just for having Africanized Brazil but also for having slowed Brazil's progress by hindering the arrival of civilization and modernity through immigration from Europe and the resulting whitening of the population.

Nabuco's scientific reasoning and political actions were based on such biological criteria as the races of mankind. The speeches, theses, and proposals of this "social reformer" regarding the integration of the black into a free-labor society after abolition, as well as the emphasis he gave to nonbiological factors in the process of degrading the black in *O Abolicionismo* (1938), give the impression that, to the extent that he employed "physiological reasons" to show that one race dominated another through a process of selection, however gradual, his claim to be an "intellectual politician" was mere rhetoric. Furthermore, his concern for the future of Brazilian whites confronting the "Africanization" of the country and the supposedly dangerous possibility of its "Mongolization" recommended the immigration of Germans, Russians, and Britons (1983: 191).

Beside the pessimism that came out when he thought about the black and yellow races and the hope he expressed when he thought about European immigration, Nabuco also showed a xenophobia with regard to Asians and Africans that seems paradoxical in someone who declared, "I am more a spectator of my times than of my country: what is in play for me is civilization" (Nabuco, 1963: 33). The paradox is only apparent, for the center or essence of his universalism is Europe, from which could flow an immigration bearing human and universal values (1963: 39):

We Brazilians (and the same could be said of the other nations of the Americas) belong to the New World as a new, buoyant settlement, and we belong to Europe, at least in our upper strata. For any of us who has the least culture, the European influence predominates over the American. Our imagination cannot but be European, that is, human. It did not cease when Brazil held its first mass but went on, reforming the traditions of the savages who filled our shores at the time of the Discovery. It continued influenced by all the civilizations of humanity, like that of the Europeans, with whom we share the same basis of language,

religion, art, law, and poetry, the same centuries of accumulated civilization, and, thus, as long as there is a ray of culture, the same historical imagination.

This “social reformer” expressed not just his vision of the world, based on the desire of omnipresence and in the whites’ certainty of omnipotence, hope for Brazil’s future, but also its reverse, the fear that Brazil will be thought of as a nonwhite country forever—a situation about to be made worse by the arrival of yellow men. He pointed out that the province of São Paulo “had been, in the past few years, concentrating on its soil a foreign population, imported hurriedly and indiscriminately, and thereby risking the unhappy consequences of a black immigration out of all proportion to the white population of the farming centers” (Nabuco, 1983: 248).

The discussion of the need to import Europeans to avoid the consolidation of the Africanization of Brazil or its virtual Mongolization by the imminently threatened migration from Asia was neither new nor sudden. The question was raised in the Brazilian House of Deputies not only as a reply to the proposal of the minister of agriculture, trade, and public works but also as a consequence of the debate that had been going on in the provincial legislature of São Paulo for the past ten years.²

Consequently, there was, at the end of the nineteenth century, before the formal abolition of slavery, a recurrent discussion on the genotypical and phenotypical characteristics of the type of worker that the country would need after the end of slavery. In this period, the race or races of a country, according to the belief of Brazil’s ruling elites, explained its past and present besides also foretelling its future as a civilized (or uncivilized) country. Civilization, progress, order, and the guarantee of security and peace were also dependent on race, as was the fundamental step forward toward creating an earthly paradise. Based on the need to improve the Brazilian race, the case for European immigration was overwhelming. This racist discourse not only was supported by arguments in favor of a policy to whiten the Brazilian population but also determined that free labor would be imported according to racial criteria.

The hostility of the Brazilian elites toward nonwhites specifically prevented the importing of Asians for Brazilian farm work, while at the same time it excluded blacks and mulattoes from the market for paid labor that was beginning to flourish even before the formal ending of slavery in Brazil (Santos, 1997). It was considered necessary to root out the “social cancer” and the workforce on which slavery itself depended, for, as the Brazilian elites saw it, the population of African origin would never create a fully civilized Brazil because of its inability to overcome such supposed deficiencies as vagrancy, lack of energy, passivity, and immorality. The solution would be

to shut the black out—to prevent the growth of the black population and encourage the entry of European immigrants.³ By the end of the nineteenth century the impact on the Brazilian ruling elites of the race factor in the debate was so strong that, despite having approved the immigration of Asian workers at the Congresso Agrícola, they came round to a concern for the whitening of the population and began to favor the importation of a white European workforce.

Thus the province of São Paulo admitted 11,870 immigrants in the 1870s. In the 1880s this number grew tenfold, to 183,505, corresponding to a growth rate of 1,445.95 percent—an extraordinary number compared with the national immigration growth rate for the period of 150.83 percent. It is certainly true that in the 1870s this province had already experienced an immigration growth rate of 606.12 percent, well above the national growth rate of 84.08 percent. In the 1890s what is now the state of São Paulo continued to have a very high immigration growth rate: 300.52 percent, well above the national rate of 171.76 percent. In this decade the country imported 1,211,076 immigrants, of whom over half, 734,985, went to São Paulo (Santos, 1997). The majority of immigrants who went to São Paulo to work on the coffee plantations as free labor were Italian in origin. Italy was the country that exported most farm workers to Brazil in the years 1884 to 1939: 1,412,263. In second place was Portugal, which supplied 1,204,394 in the same period, most of whom went to the province (later state) of Rio de Janeiro (Santos, 1997). The majority of these Portuguese immigrants were illiterate, unmarried men, all of whom came to Brazil “at their own expense, or that of their kinfolk,” receiving no financial help from the Brazilian government (Hahner, 1993: 61-63). There was also immigration of Britons, Frenchmen, Belgians, Danes, Dutchmen, Americans, Poles, Russians, Spaniards, and Japanese, among others. Spaniards were in third place, contributing more than 500,000 (Santos, 1997).

With this European immigration, the ethnic makeup of the city of São Paulo changed rapidly. Between 1872 and 1920, the percentage of foreigners in the city rose from 7.8 to 35.4. In the same period, its population rose from 31,385 to 579,093. But when we look into the data on the color of the state's population, we see how fundamental was the immigration policy adopted at the state and federal level in its rapid whitening (Santos, 1997), although at no time in the nineteenth century had blacks made up the largest component (Lowrie, 1938). In 1797, whites made up 56 percent of the population of the province of São Paulo (Lowrie, 1938: 11-13), falling to 51.8 percent by 1872. From then on, thanks to the implacably aggressive policy of seeking European immigrants, their numbers increased continuously, reaching 63.1 percent in 1890, 88 percent in 1940, and 88.8 percent in 1950 (Santos, 1997).

Already by 1890 we can see an inexorable process of whitening at work both in this province and in the Federal District (the city of Rio de Janeiro). This process was directly proportionate to São Paulo state's immigration rate: 606.12 percent in the 1870s, 1,445.95 percent in the 1880s, and 300.52 percent in the 1890s—truly phenomenal figures. In just these three decades, more than 930,000 immigrants came to São Paulo. In the five decades 1880-1929, some 2,220,159 immigrants arrived in São Paulo, a total that was doubtless fundamental in ensuring so profound a change in the racial makeup of its population (Santos, 1997).

The effects of this policy are also evident at the national level. Brazil underwent a radical change in its racial composition. In contrast to that of São Paulo, the majority of the population of Brazil as a whole was, as we have seen, made up of Africans and their descendants from the end of the eighteenth century on. Whereas in 1872 whites accounted for 38.1 percent of Brazil's total population and blacks, mestizos, and Indians 61.9 percent, by 1950 this situation had been reversed; whites were now 62.5 percent and others only 37.5 percent. Thus there had been an increasing whitening of the Brazilian nation, a tendency that was already noticeable in 1890 even though the halfway point in "de-Africanization" was reached only in 1940 (Santos, 1997).

To resolve any doubt that the immigration policies adopted by the federal and São Paulo state governments were intended to whiten the national and state populations, it seems to me relevant to compare the number of Africans brought in as slaves from the second half of the sixteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth with the number of mostly European immigrants introduced between 1851 and 1937. Although in those first three centuries some 3.5 to 3.6 million black Africans were imported, in the second period of less than a century 4,793,981 immigrants came in, of whom 2,417,386 or 50.42 per cent came to São Paulo (Santos, 1997). In other words, in under a century of immigration policy subsidized by the Brazilian government, Brazil imported more manpower (of free whites) than that (of black slaves) imported in three centuries of the slave trade.

This importation of Europeans at so high a level was possible only because of the passages paid for by the governments of Brazil and the state of São Paulo—that is, it was achieved only through decisive government intervention, which resulted from some 20 years of discussions, debates, and proposals on the part of the provincial legislative assembly of São Paulo, the Brazilian national parliament, and the 1878 Congresso Agrícola as to what type of worker should be employed after the abolition of slavery.

Government intervention in Brazilian immigration policy was not limited to the economic aspect of financing the immigrants' passages. An analysis

restricted to the economic sphere could create the false impression that the immigration policy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had the sole objective of supplying manpower for an expanding agriculture. It would not reveal the restrictive and segregationist aspect of the immigration legislation, which impeded the entry into Brazil of Africans and Asians exactly when immigration was at its height, in the 1890s.

This was when the Brazilian government published Decree No. 528 of June 28, 1890, which sought to "regularize" the entry of immigrants. This expressed, in law and in practice, the desire to import Europeans, for it provided subsidized passages only for them (article 7) and prohibited the entry of those of the black and yellow races (articles 1, 2, and 3):

Article I. Entry in the ports of the Republic of individuals capable and suitable for work is wholly free, unless they have been indicted for criminal offenses in their native land, except for natives of Asia and Africa, who can only be admitted with, and subject to the provisions of, the authorization of the National Congress.

Article II. The diplomatic and consular representatives of the United States of Brazil shall impede, by all means at their disposal, the entry of immigrants from those continents, and shall inform the Federal Government immediately by telegraph of any case they are unable to stop.

Article III. The police of Brazilian ports shall prevent the landing of such individuals, and also that of beggars and the indigent.

The spirit of this selective, racist policy endured until the end of the 1920s, manifesting itself, for example, in Brazil's prohibition of a projected immigration of African-Americans who wanted to form a settlement in the state of Mato Grosso (Lesser, 1994: 84). But the ban on the entry of U.S. blacks into Brazil in the 1920s was not limited to would-be settlers. It also applied to U.S. tourists of African descent (Lesser, 1994: 90-91), which confirmed the Brazilian government's determination to forbid the entry into Brazil of anyone of African origin. In the 1920s Brazil imported 964,087 immigrants, of whom 487,253 went to the state of São Paulo (Santos, 1997). However, the aversion to blacks and their descendants was so great that the Brazilian government breached the Peace, Friendship, Trade, and Navigation Agreement between Brazil and the United States⁴ to stop the entry into Brazil of a small number of African-Americans.

The Brazilian immigration policy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cannot be regarded as concerned merely with forming a free labor market, since it was capable of banning not only someone ready to work but, as is evident in the case of the African-Americans, even a businessman with the capital for an agricultural settlement. The action of Brazil's ruling

elites was aimed not just at supplying plenty of hands for an expanding agriculture but at creating a new and different nation.⁵

In the 1870-1930 period, racial diversity was seen as an evil in itself, especially if it meant the presence of blacks (so defined by race or color). The feeling, thought, and action of congressmen, administrators, and planters, among others, expressed an objective that went beyond the need to form a free labor market—that of whitening the Brazilian population. This implied not just achieving a white majority—which in fact occurred in 1940 (Santos, 1997)—but also saying no to blacks.

It was not the political and economic elites alone for whom these were leading objectives. The intellectual elite shared the same ethos.⁶ Their interpretation, understanding, and explanation of the country's problems and proposals for solving them were similarly based on a racist analysis in which the black race was held responsible for "the country's backwardness," as João Batista de Lacerda asserted in the paper he contributed to the 1911 First Universal Racial Conference (Lacerda, 1911: 29-30):

The importation, on a vast scale, of the black race to Brazil has exercised a harmful influence on this country's progress. For a long while it has been a brake on its material development and has made it difficult to exploit its immense natural wealth. The character of the population has suffered from the failings and vices of this imported, inferior race.

Balancing this, the white race was seen as the guarantee of a sparkling future for Brazil, the solution to the country's present and future problems, since it would help at one and the same time to wipe out the black and indigenous populations and reinvigorate the Brazilian race by whitening it (Lacerda, 1911: 30-31):

In less than a century, in all probability, the population of Brazil will be represented, in its greater part, by individuals of the white, Latin race, and within the same period, the black and the indigenous will have vanished from this part of the Americas. . . . A brilliant future is reserved for Brazil, which will become the principal place in South America where the Latin race will be retempered and rejuvenated, just as the United States has done, in North America, the same for the Saxon race.

The Brazilian intellectuals were the products of an era in which racial differences were treated as natural inequalities even by science, which had established a hierarchy among the races. Science gave legitimacy to the discriminatory policies of the country's political and economic leaders besides demonstrating that no viable Brazilian nation could be built with blacks, the

supposedly inferior race. Brazilian sociologists, basing their ideas on determinist theories⁷ that explained why some societies were more developed culturally, politically, and economically than others, agreed on whitening as the way to make their country viable. Thus, they "scientifically" legitimized the ideas of the Brazilian political and economic elites.

At the same time as racist theories were reaching Brazil, Joseph Arthur Gobineau, one of the theoreticians of "scientific racism" and an advocate of the superiority of the Aryan race, also arrived there. He resided in Rio de Janeiro from April 1869 to May 1870 as head of the French diplomatic mission. He found the country intolerable, and the only friend he had while he was there was the Emperor Pedro II (Raeders, 1988). Gobineau's view of the Brazilian population was decidedly pessimistic. He considered Brazilians "lazy," "idle," "ugly," "degraded," "deformed," and, consequently, lacking any future because unrestricted miscegenation was leading them to a decline without hope of recovery (quoted in Raeders, 1988: 90):

A wholly half-caste population, with vitiated descent, vitiated intelligence, and fearfully ugly. . . . No Brazilian is pure-blooded. Mixed marriages between whites, Indians, and blacks have so increased that one has every mixture of color, and all this produces, from the lowest classes to the highest, a degeneration of the most wretched kind. . . . The result is deformed physiognomies which, if they are not always repugnant, are always unpleasant to look upon.

As to the blacks who lived in Brazil, Gobineau considered them as bad as those of mixed blood or worse: they were "primitively depraved" (Gobineau, quoted by Raeders, 1988: 75, 89-90, 121-124, 163). So great was the disenchantment with the Brazilian population of this French racial theorist that he forecast that "in less than 200 years" its "degeneration" would "lead to the end of the descendants of the companions of Costa Cabral and the immigrants who followed him," for the mixed blood would (he maintained) produce offspring unable to survive (quoted in Raeders, 1988: 241).

Despite condemning racial mixtures (Gobineau, cited in Poliakov, 1974: 217-221; Ventura, 1991: 56-57), the French theorist considered some mixtures "strategic." While the natural "degeneracy" and tendency to self-destruct of half-breeds could end in their disappearance from Brazil, Gobineau also offered a glimpse of a possible future whitening of Brazil through their absorption by the Portuguese whites. The miscegenation of the European white with the Brazilian half-caste could lead to the disappearance of the latter (Gobineau, cited in Raeders, 1988: 123-124):

The Brazilian population, properly so called, when considered globally, is in reality half-caste, or at least as closely related to Blacks as to whites, and is

therefore equally fated to disappear, whether by extinction or by being absorbed by Portuguese families who settle here. Within a definite time it will yield to the absolute supremacy of a type of new nation, whose basis will be formed by Portuguese from the Azores and the south of Portugal, more or less mixed with Germans, French, and Italians.

Suggesting the possibility of Brazil's becoming a white nation, Gobineau proposed an alliance of the Brazilians with the European races (quoted in Raeders, 1988: 242):

But if, instead of going on inbreeding [as mulattoes], the Brazilian people were able to dilute even further the harmful elements of its present ethnic composition, strengthening itself through more worthy alliances with European races, the destructive movement observable in its procreation would come to an end, giving way to a contrary action. The race would reestablish itself, public health would improve, its moral quality would be reformed and the happiest changes would be introduced into the social situation of this admirable country.

However, despite the influence of European determinist theories on Brazilian scientific thought and the presence of an important racial theory in the Brazil of the end of the nineteenth century, the Brazilian social theorists of roughly 1870 to 1930 were not mere "cultural hangers-on and imitative thinkers," nor were they "ill prepared to discuss the latest racial doctrines from Europe" as Thomas E. Skidmore would have it (1976: 13). On the contrary, intellectuals/academics redefined those determinist theories, using them "critically and selectively" (Ventura, 1991: 60), to create their "whitening theory"⁸ (Schwarcz and Queiroz, 1996: 178), the emergence of which was made possible, among other factors, by the very contradictions found in the theses of the principal theoreticians of racial determinism (Seyferth, 1985: 88), such as those of Count Gobineau, just mentioned.

To believe, as does Skidmore (1976), in the general "cultural dependence" of Brazilian social theorists is to underestimate the capacity of the Brazilian ruling elites to think about nation building with clear (if relative) autonomy based on their own redefinition of race. At the same time, it is to overlook the original contribution of the local intelligentsia to the solution of Brazilian problems in that they took as the principal problem not miscegenation in itself but the predominance of the characteristics of the black race in the Brazilian population. If they had adopted European determinist theories directly, they would probably have given up the possibility of building a nation in the tropics. They could not be ignorant of the historical presence of blacks in their country, even if they sought to regard only the whites as of any value, nor could they deny the high degree of miscegenation that had occurred over the

years. As the European theories condemned all the characteristics of the Brazilian people, accepting such theories in their pure form or uncritically would have been the same as accepting self-destruction.

The original theoretical model of the Brazilian intellectuals presented itself in their pursuit of racial unity for their country. Brazil's half-caste condition they saw as a transitory one that, after some miscegenation with the white elements, would be "cleansed" and finally become white, that is to say, among the superior races. Thus the singularity of the Brazilian social thinkers was in their argument for racial purification to secure liberation from the "black stain," with the white phenotype as the ideal to be attained, synonymous with a guaranteed future or, rather, civilization, progress, modernity, wealth, peace, and security for their country.

This whitening ideal of the Brazilian ruling classes was not new, nor, contra Skidmore (1976: 12-13),⁹ did it come from the influence of European theories. According to Nilo Odália, Francisco Adolpho de Varnhagen, in his *História geral do Brasil*, had already sketched the idea of the whitening of the Brazilian population and the consequent disappearance of the population of African origin as the solution to Brazil's problems. The arrival in Brazil of determinist theories from 1870 on only reinforced what was already the common opinion among Brazil's ruling elites: the supposed racial superiority of the white race (Odália, 1970: 128-131). The scientific status that Lacerda had bestowed on whitening (Seyferth, 1985: 87; Skidmore, 1976: 87) ratified and legitimized as anthropological "fact" what was the social belief of the Brazilian elites in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries—that the black and the mestizo would disappear because of their inferiority to the white. This racial extinction was also forecast by Euclides da Cunha. For him, the "subraces," "weaker races," or "incompetent races" (blacks and mestizos) would be wiped out as a "natural phenomenon" by the strong or superior races (the whites). This belief is based on the thesis of Gumplowicz¹⁰ that the race struggle is "the motive force of history" (Cunha, 1967: 89, 93, 143, 170-171; 1963: 3, 83, 90-91). Cunha himself reported having been influenced also by other authors of racial and geographical determinism, such as Taine, Spencer, Renan, Littré, Buckle, Ratzel, and Darwin (Cunha, 1967; 1966; 1963), taking all the "prickly bits" of their theories "critically" and "selectively."

Cunha endorsed the theses of his teachers, such as the supposed inferiority of the black, not only in terms of race but also in terms of civilization and white superiority (Cunha, 1967; 1966; 1963). Often he seems ambivalent. While sometimes he appreciated racial mixing, affirming the Brazilian backwoodsman to be the "living rock" of the nation, not a degenerate (1963: 92, 469), at other times he depreciated and/or condemned him because of the

inevitability of biological laws, which brand the mixed-blood as presenting the stigma of an inferior race (1963: 90).

A very diverse racial mixture is, in most cases, prejudicial. The conclusions of the theory of evolution lead to a clear stigma of inferiority, even when a superior race is involved in the mixture. Extreme miscegenation is a step backward. The Indo-European, the black, and the Tupi-Guarani (or Tapuia) express different stages in evolution confronting one another. Racial crossing not only obliterates the outstanding qualities of the first but is a stimulus to reawakening the primitive attributes of the others. The mestizo, the interracial hyphen, whose brief individual existence compresses centuries of effort, is almost always unbalanced. And, whether an amalgam of the white with blacks or Indians or of both the latter, the mixed-blood is not just an intermediary but a decadent, lacking both the physical energy of his savage forebears and the intellectual height of his superior ancestry. In contrast to the fecundity that he may well possess, he reveals extraordinary instances of moral hybridization: his intelligence may be flashy, but it is fragile, restless, inconstant, one moment dazzling and the next dying out, the victim of the inevitability of biological laws, molded on the lower plane of the less favored race.

Cunha's "ambivalence" is a false impression, for it is possible to perceive a certain logical coherence between this quotation and other of his statements (1963: 92, 469). For Cunha what is "prejudicial" and therefore to be condemned is "divergent mixtures"—crossbreeding in which the black element has been predominant, as has happened along Brazil's Atlantic coast, in contrast to the mixtures typical of the backlands of the interior. In the coastal region, race mixture was a "disturbing case" in which the mixed-bloods had no a definite physiognomy but show every variety of skin color because of the massive presence of black African blood.

Given his belief in the inequality of the races of mankind—the genetic inferiority of the black and his incapacity to become civilized—Cunha saw in their black descent the principal influence characterizing the "depressed half-castes" of the coastal zone, where the "primitive attributes" of the black persist in the mulatto, destroying the "outstanding qualities" of the white (1963: 90-91). In the arid uplands of the Brazilian interior, the *sertão*, there was hardly any penetration of black Africans. Interbreeding was most frequent between the European settler and the Indian, producing "a race of pure *caribocas*" with "almost no black admixture" (1963: 76, 83), and this made up the "vigorous heartwood of our nationhood," precisely because it had no Negroid characteristics but was instead more "defined" and "unchangeable," that is, closer to the white. The isolation of the backwoodsman had resulted in a "well-defined mestizo" different from and superior to the "variform

mestizo of the coast," whose principal ancestry was white European and black African (1963: 87-89).

By criticizing miscegenation while praising the man of the sertão (also the product of miscegenation) as a strong being, free of the exhausted deformity of the "neurasthenic half-breed" of the coast (1963: 90-94), the author of *Rebellion in the Backlands* was inconsistent or confused. In fact, Cunha was trying to show that the agent of civilization in Brazil was the white European, even when his blood was mixed with that of the Indians, the country's first inhabitants. Blacks, in contrast, were the agents of barbarism.

Cunha believed in the genetic and civilizing superiority of the white man, but the recovery of a white population in Brazil, that is, its whitening as the way to solve the country's problem, could be achieved only by way of miscegenation, even though the white would be the common and superior denominator of this mixing and the mulatto, the mix of white with black, was a "neurasthenic." Pessimistic about mulattoes but with no other alternative for whitening Brazil, Cunha proposed the immigration of Europeans as the solution to the country's "racial problem." Brazil lacked an "ethnic integrity" that would guarantee its progress, securing to it "the dominant energies of civilized life" (1967: 168-171). Immigration could change the qualities of the natives, transforming them into "a new and higher type," as the English, the Germans, and the French had done for the United States and Australia (1967: 168-169):

We cannot yet dispense with the more active and suitable European energy to unlock our own. The settler in this country is the first, if not the sole, economic factor, and by the only too clear distinction between his indefatigable dexterity and our fumbling activity he comes into view, transforming the industrial biology into a most interesting chapter of social psychology. . . . This immigration that we desire, not now by the mechanical competition of the working arm but also because we lack the artistic collaboration and the advancement of other nations, appears at the head of our political structure and of our incomplete historical formation as a problem that we cannot ignore, that we do not want to ignore and must not ignore but must resolve with infinite care.

The explanation for Brazil's underdevelopment or its slowness in reaching the stage of civilization and progress lay in the ethnic makeup of its population, which needed for its improvement the "advancement of other nations" that were more "energetic" or supposedly superior—such as the Europeans. These, by migrating to Brazil, could change its racial makeup, turning it into a country with a white majority and neutralizing the supposedly negative influence of the black.

The idea of the immigration of Europeans to Brazil as a means to diminish the “Africanization of the country” fired the imagination of Brazilian social theorists at the turn of the century. Joaquim Nabuco, affected by all the criticism he had made of slavery, which he saw as Brazil’s “principal problem” (Nabuco, 1938: 238), stated at the beginning of *O Abolicionismo*, “In the future only an operation can save us—at the cost of our national identity—that is, the transfusion of the pure and oxygenated blood of a free race” (1938: 6). For Nabuco Brazil had problems just as serious as slavery. Perhaps the most important was the “Africanization of the country,” which had “saturated it with black blood” and with its “vices” and which he characterized as the “first revenge of the Black race” on the country. A second was a virtual problem: the possible coming to Brazil of Asians (1938: 133-134, 196, 244).

As salvation for the country, to deliver it from the “disgrace” of black blood and of the probable arrival of yellow blood, Nabuco argued for European immigration to Brazil, since this would bring into the country a blood without vice, that is, “energetic and wholesome,” that could be absorbed without risk, making it possible for Brazil to return to whiteness and, consequently, to its progress as a nation (1938: 244):¹¹

Compare our present-day Brazil of slavery with the ideal fatherland which we Abolitionists uphold: a country where everyone is free, where, attracted by the free nature of our institutions and the liberty of our government system, European immigration could bring, continuously, into the tropics a stream of lively, energetic, and wholesome Caucasian blood, which we could absorb without risk, instead of this Chinese wave with which large landowners want to vitiate and corrupt our race even more; a land that will work originally and in every way to do the work of mankind and for the advancement of South America.

For Nabuco, the Brazilian race question was as important as slavery—perhaps even more important, given that he tried to argue that slave-owning Brazil was a racial democracy in that it “never developed color prejudice . . . there was a system of absolute equality between masters and slaves in Brazil, in spite of slavery” (1938: 19-22, 170-171). The apparent contradiction in his simultaneously deploring the “retarded mental development,” “the barbarous instincts,” and the “gross superstitions” of the black race, carrier of a blood full of vices (1938: 133-134, 140, 244), has a coherence that one may not see at first glance. This coherence becomes apparent with the knowledge that Nabuco tried to exclude slaves from taking part in the struggle against slavery. “Abolitionist propaganda, in effect, was directed not toward the slaves . . . but against an institution and not against people” (1938: 24-25, 30). He was afraid that the participation of blacks in the process of abolition would lead Brazil into an uncontrollable civil war in which the society of the

(white) masters would suffer the most. The struggle against slavery was to remain limited to Parliament, far from the streets and squares of the cities (1938: 26).

The exclusion of slaves from the process of abolition and the pursuit of European immigration were combined in Nabuco's program. That whites were a minority in Brazil was considered one of the causes of the country's backwardness, and "the only way out would be the 'refinement of the race' in the direction of greater whiteness (according to Lacerda) or of Aryanization (according to Oliveira Viana)" (Seyferth, 1985: 96). The dominant concern of Brazil's ruling elites in the nineteenth century was to "build a white nation" (Odália, 1977: 134), a concern that persisted for the first three decades of the present century in a selective immigration policy that discriminated against blacks and Asians. European immigration was for both Brazil's political and economic and its intellectual elites one of the most important instruments for whitening the country. In the short term, this immigration would increase the number of white persons. In the long term, racial mixing between blacks, half-breeds, and whites would, according to the "law of attraction"—that is the law of inevitable interbreeding among the races, according to Gobineau himself (Poliakov, 1974: 218)—"purify" those of African descent by means of "natural selection," providing a racial cleansing, whitening the Brazilian people, and, as a result, eliminating the "defects" and the "vices" of the blacks and mestizos in accordance with the wishes of the Brazilian ruling classes.

NOTES

1. In Sociedade Auxiliadora da Indústria Nacional (Society for Assisting Brazilian Industry) also there were, in the 1870s, heated debates on the need to import Chinese labor. One of its members, I. C. Galvão, taking part in a commission set up by the society, defended the importation of Asians but argued that "the Chinese were the only people who, in the present circumstances, could supply the need for manpower on the plantations and other establishments where slave labor is currently employed. . . . Their introduction for this purpose is not just useful but an urgent necessity. But this commission understands this importation solely and simply as a temporary measure to supply field labor, and not as real settlers who would become fixed on the land as a permanent part of our society and compete, by fusion with our indigenous population and with immigrants from elsewhere, come to form our nation" (Galvão, quoted by Carneiro, 1948).

2. From the end of 1870s on, the political representatives of the province of São Paulo, when discussing the type of worker the province should have once slavery was ended, desired to "improve our race" by way of "a transfusion of better blood" through immigration. During the 1870s and 1880s, such debates recurred in the Assembléia Legislativa Provincial de São Paulo (Legislative Assembly of the Province of São Paulo—ALPSP), and therefore I have used this

province as an “ideal type” for our analysis. See Azevedo (1987) and the Assembly’s *Anais*, 1869-1888.

3. At the national level, this position can be seen farther on in the Brazilian government’s Decree No. 528 of June 28, 1890. At the provincial or state level, taking São Paulo province as the “ideal type,” we can see this through the speech of provincial assemblyman Paula Souza, in the ALPSP session of February 15, 1884: “So, it is to the African that we owe our present relative prosperity. We do not have to be ashamed of this. We obeyed a historical necessity, which the circumstances explained and to some degree justified. If we owe our relative civilization to the black, it is to him that we also owe our present difficulties. . . . When we talk about the lack of manpower, we in São Paulo understand that the black was a mistake and can no longer be tolerated in this province if we claim to be a civilized people, if we hope for moral and Christian progress. We have closed the door and said, ‘No more blacks to come in.’ When it has been proposed to let a few in by way of chinks in this prohibition, the Assembly has arisen and declared, ‘No, the law is absolute: no more blacks may be let in!’” (ALPSP, *Anais*, 1884: 215-220).

4. This treaty was signed December 12, 1828, and confirmed on several subsequent occasions, including once in 1873 (Lesser, 1994: 86). According to article 2 of the treaty, “the citizens and subjects of both countries may travel throughout the other, with right to reside and do business. . . . There will be a perfect, fixed, and inviolable peace and friendship between [the U.S.A. and Brazil] in all their possessions and territories . . . without distinction of people or places” (TPACN, quoted by Lesser, 1994: 86).

5. The yellow races or, more precisely, the Chinese and the Japanese were authorized on October 5, 1892, to enter Brazil legally, by Law 97/1892, but the Japanese began to migrate to Brazil only after 1908 (Hahner, 1993: 9).

6. When I refer to the intellectual elites I use, as “ideal types,” three Brazilian intellectuals of the end of the nineteenth century: João Batista de Lacerda, Euclides da Cunha, and Joaquim Nabuco. I could also have analyzed, among other important writers with similar ideas, Sylvio Romero, Oliveira Viana, and Nina Rodrigues. However, my purpose has been not to conduct an in-depth analysis of Brazilian social thought at that period but only to register that an analysis based on racial difference advanced by a significant segment of Brazilian thinkers was fundamental in explaining national problems. My choice of these intellectuals is not arbitrary. Euclides da Cunha and Joaquim Nabuco are “sanctified names” (i.e., well-established authorities) who have helped to create “the history of socio-political thought in Brazil” (Santos, 1967). The choice of João Batista de Lacerda is justified not just because he was the Brazilian delegate to the Universal Racial Conference held in London in 1911 but also because he was the director of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro and an intellectual with ties to the international academic community.

7. On these theories and their influence on the Brazilian intelligentsia, see Skidmore (1976) and Schwarcz (1993).

8. According to Giralda Seyferth, “The theory of racial whitening, inspired by the ideas developed in Europe about racial determinism, was developed in Brazil in the period between the end of the Empire (1889) and the First World War (1914). The chief characteristic of this theory is its ambiguity: it thought of miscegenation at one and the same time as both an evil to be extirpated and a solution for the racial question in Brazil. The preoccupation with various types and degrees of color mixing and their consequences for the formation of the Brazilian nation was a constant in the work of various writers (historians, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.), all in some degree influenced by theories that today we would label racist but which, at the time, had the status of authentic science. The concept of whitening implies a series of presuppositions and some even contradictory opinions on the meanings of the concept of race: the authors believed in the inequality of human races, in the incapacity of the black to become civilized, in the genetic

inferiority of the nonwhite races, including in this the majority of mestizos, and, principally, in a natural and social selection that would lead to a whiter Brazilian people in the not very distant future. Using the then popular term *eugenics*, the Brazilian authors who developed this theory suggested the possibility of cleansing the mixed-blood population of its African characteristics after a few generations" (1985: 81).

9. Nilo Odália was the first writer to make this criticism of Skidmore. "If we call attention to the role played by Varnhagen in the development of the theme of miscegenation and of the idea of whitening the Brazilian population, it is only to demonstrate that it does not seem to us correct to claim that a clear whitening idea had arisen only out of the racial theories. We believe the contrary: that the racial theories arose only to provide a better theoretical framework for a feeling and a reality that had long existed in Brazilian society. They were introduced only to reinforce the myth of white superiority" (1970: 131).

10. In a February 27, 1903, letter to Araripe Júnior, Cunha declared, "I am a disciple of Gumplowicz, warding off all the hard angles of that fierce Anglo-Saxon temperament. And, as I admit, with him, the irresistible expansion of the syngenetic circle of peoples, the idea is quite consoling that the final absorption will take place less through the belligerent brutality of the Centaur whose horsehooves dug out the medieval earth and more through the accumulated energy and excess of life of the people destined to the democratic conquest of the planet" (Cunha, 1966: 624). Ludwig von Gumplowicz (1838-1900) was a Polish sociologist and historian who attributed social evolution to the struggle or collaboration between groups. His writings include *The Race Struggle and Principles of Sociology* (1963: 76-84).

11. Nabuco, like Lacerda (1911), believed that crossing blacks with whites would not bastardize the latter but instead elevate the former (1938: 141)

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