

## Ethnic question in Brazil (1910-1920)

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The question of the amplification and accomplishment of the citizenship rights is still occupying a prominent place in the calendar of Brazilian problems. Marshall's classic formulation, which saw the civil element in them, related to the individual freedom, the political element capable of sustaining the participation in the public life, and the social one, responsible for assuring a minimum economic welfare, still today comes as a program to be accomplished.

After the Abolition of the Slavery (May 13, 1888), the ruling elite had to face the clamor of a varied range of social and political agents that invaded the public scene. The demands for social rights and for representation in elections, parties or unions were invariably understood, during the so called Old Republic (1889-1930), as a threat that should be extirpated or at least detained. In a society marked by centuries of slavery, it is no surprise that the citizenship notion had been born wrapped up in a negative way, seen as an evil to be avoided.

In this paper we intend to analyze in what measure, in the early decades of this century, the intellectuality of the period, always following scientific principles judged as capable of giving them a distance from the political arena, ended up supplying a frame of conceptions that denied to large portions of the Brazilian population a capacity to exercise its civil and political rights.

We chose as a source for this research the 113 issues of the *Revista do Brasil*, a monthly journal that was issued uninterruptedly between January 1916 and March 1925. This journal was recognized to be the principal source of the cultural contents of the country at the time. In this publication, a resource little researched by Brazilian historians, the most significant intellectuals and men of letters of the period contributed. The *Revista do Brasil* was published in the city of São Paulo, the capital of the State which bears the same name. Its first phase ended in 1925, with the failure of its owner's editorial business.

The publication became an important forum in which the national subjects were debated under different angles. After an extensive reexamination of this production we can conclude that there was a persistent desire of promoting a reinterpretation of the country. Diagnoses were oftentimes tinged with disillusionment. Several thinkers were skeptical of the idea that this tropical land, barely out of slavery, would be amenable to the notion of

civilization. Brazil that had already envisioned Europeans dreams of wealth and affluence, entered the Twentieth century being often cited as a counter example. According to the average opinion, we were not still a true nation, conclusion that put an urgency sense to the task of discovering because it seemed to fail the chemistry capable of guaranteeing, under the sky of the tropics, the existence of a collective identity able to tread the path of modernity, considered the only element capable of giving us a prominent place in the international scenery. The careful study of the different aspects of 'national reality ' was never dissociated from the desire of proposing new roads and advancing progressive policies. The construction of explanations and propositions for the future crossroaded with projects of administration that one hoped to turn effective.

In the decades of 1910 and 1920 to think the nation still meant, above all, to face the tortuous question of the inhabitants ethnic statute, subject that had already been a constant item in the Brazilian intellectuality's agenda. The relation between 'the quality of the inhabitants' and the destinies of a nation was settled in a long tradition regarding the diversity of mankind. We must not underestimate the practice of dividing humanity in groups to which different biological, psychological, moral and cultural values were conferred according to a scale going from barbarism to civilization, and that was still assumed as a scientific truth that few dared to contest. Questions of miscegenation, corollary of this premise, also remained involved in skepticism. In Brazil, a country that had a multicolored population as a result of a large variety of cross breeding, the problematic of hybridization was not a matter of theoretical speculation, but a reality experienced in everyday life.

In the *Revista do Brasil* the subject was debated intensely. Some authors continued endorsing the not very flattering opinions that Agassiz, Couty or Gobineau had about the inhabitants of the country:

*“It is necessary to admit that most of the people that we call Brazilians is made up of mestiços, mulattos, caboclos of different degrees... in short who says a Brazilian, says, with rare exceptions, a colored man. Without entering into the appreciation of*

*the physical or moral qualities of these varieties, it is impossible not to verify that they are not hard workers, industrious or productive."*<sup>1</sup>

This pessimism was still underwritten, in the decades of 1910 and 1920, by those who insisted on linking the progress of the country to the whitening of the inhabitants, a way of not just reaffirming the inferiority of the Indians and Africans, but also of expressing doubts about the effective chances of this ethnicity to abandon an inferior mental standard and consequently participate in the effort of national construction. To prove the correctness of the analysis, it was enough to remember the absence of significant contributions of the country for mankind<sup>2</sup>.

The scientific progress in different areas of knowledge seemed to confirm the existence of larger and previous factors of the individual, whose will power anything or very little could make against forces of physical and or psychological order. Habits, tastes and behaviors migrated from the private to the collective background, being understood as manifestations of pulses that allowed very narrow degree of mobility for the individual action:

*"... side by side with the individual psychology, by itself so obscure and difficult, the ethnic psychology was born and formed, which studies residues that are common to the thought of any race. This wider conception of psychology explains many individual phenomena that do not pass from the limits of the pulses of the species, from the soul of the people, previous to the ideas of any individual. The race does not only possess forms and external types, it also possesses a common soul formed of slow acquisitions as well, the soul of the species and of the family that precedes every moment of the personality. It is this old soul the responsible agent for the*

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<sup>1</sup>Apud: RAEDERS, Georges. *Conde de Gobineau no Brasil*. SP: Secretaria de Estado da Cultura, Ciência e Tecnologia, 1976, p. 113. See also: AGASSIZ, Louis e Elizabeth Cary. *Viagem ao Brasil* (1865-1866). RJ: Cia Editoras Nacional, 1938; COUTY, Louis. *A Escravidão no Brasil*. RJ: Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>BELLO, José Maria. Inteligência e Cultura. *Revista do Brasil*, 19 (74): 180-181, fev. 1922.

*myths, for the religion, for the language, for the right and finally for all the primitive and elementary creations.*"<sup>3</sup>

That more orthodox reading, although it was not totally absent in the journal, it was surpassed by another reading that considered the crossbreeding a privileged way in the direction to progress. The same logic of Darwinistic inspiration that threw curses on the human blending could be activated in an opposite direction to affirm the predominance of the features originated from superior types. If, in a first moment, the interbreeding between whites and Indians or white and blacks generated an offspring that did not reach the developed progenitor's level, it would be enough some more crossing in a correct direction to arrive to a degree of excellence. In fact Brazil arose as a witness of the potential of the mulatto's improvement, as our representative in the First International Congress of the Races, pointed out in London in 1911, when he said:

*"To Brazil the **mestiços** supplied, until today, poets of great inspiration, painters, sculptors, different musicians, magistrates, lawyers, eloquent speakers, notable writers, doctors and engineers that stood out thanks to their technical aptitudes and to their professional capacity... The **mestiço** collaboration to the progress and to the development of Brazil is notorious, and of great value."*<sup>4</sup>

Even admitting the compatibility between the hybrid and civilization, the analysts delighted in marking that, thanks to the natural predominance of the white, Brazilians tended to become more and more white. In a very optimistic prevision, some considered that in just about fifty years our population would be whiter than that of the Iberian Peninsula. The north of the country would need some more time to get rid of the hesitant colored *mestiço* "to walk in the direction of a progressive Aryan coloring of good origins."<sup>5</sup> The whitening

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<sup>3</sup>RIBEIRO, João. A Primeira Religião do Brasil. *Revista do Brasil*. 22 (86): 180, fev. 1923.

<sup>4</sup>LACERDA, João Batista de. Sobre os Mestiços no Brasil. Apud: MORAES, Evaristo de. A Ascensão dos Mulatos. *Revista do Brasil*. 25 (94):197, out. 1923.

<sup>5</sup>RIBEIRO, João. Brancos de toda cor. *Revista do Brasil*. 24 (96): 378, nov. 1923. See also SKIDMORE, Thomas. Preto no Branco. Raça e Nacionalidade no Pensamento Político Brasileiro. RJ: Paz e Terra, 1976, pp. 81-94.

appeared as a kind of magic solution for the contradictions of a multiracial, heterogeneous society, marked by a strict hierarchy.

Although considerable part of the intellectuality of the time was in favor of the race and environment categories, such stand point was far away from resulting in a sole representation regarding the possibilities of overcoming the difficulties that impaired the definitive establishment of the nation. The mentioned examples stand up the analyses that some times insist in an absolute pessimism, and some times in an exaggerated belief in relation to the future. It seems more appropriate to discern the existence of an oscillation between those two points of view.

However the *Revista do Brasil* makes possible to distinguish another point of view, articulated since the middle of the 1910s that found in the publication a privileged place of construction and diffusion: the sanitary approach, which brought significant transformations for the understanding of the ethnic subject.

The microbial and bacteriological paradigm offered another understanding of the cause of diseases, their transmission forms and cure. In fact the identification of the etiologic agent responsible for infectious diseases favored the development of several immunization methods and how to fight the vectors and their natural reservoirs. Specific methods of prophylaxis appeared, usually quite effective, which led people to fondle the dream that all and any disease could be remedied by the new science.

The epidemics in the cities of São Paulo, Santos and Rio de Janeiro, nervous centers of the national economy, hindered the full operation of the exportation of agro-products and moved away the foreign workers. The constituted powers created, in the turning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a legal apparatus to regulate the sanitary services as well as a group of institutions that began to dictate the course of the public health.

The victories obtained against malaria, yellow fever, small pox and the bubonic plague put an end to the resistance imposed by the detractors of the new practices. Hygiene, anointed by the prestige that only science could confer, penetrated the daily life of the individuals, inspecting, watching and controlling it through norms, cares, prescriptions and recommendations. However, the rural population, living far from the agro-exportation culture, was not taken into consideration.

The terrible sanitary conditions of the vast interior of the country motivated Miguel Pereira's famous maxim uttered in 1916 – *Brazil is a vast hospital*. This was not a novelty. However his statement found favorable conditions to fructify. At the same time other hygienists as Belisário Penna, Artur Neiva and Afranio Peixoto also began to denounce the awful picture of the distant countryside.

The possibility of apprehending the ethnic subject from an hygienistic logical point of view was taken by the intellectuality of the time as a true revelation. To express their surprise in front of a truth turned obvious, but never suspected before, they would use the metaphor of the curtain that opens up, breaking down the veil of naturalness and forcing to see what before was occult.<sup>6</sup> In fact it was another order of arguments that invited the rethinking of the strict determinism so far dominant

Inside the new science tropical areas were no longer believed to have a climate which was not very favorable to human beings. Also the idea that the hot zones possessed their own diseases, i.e. a pathology of its own, exotic in relation to the European pathology began to be strongly contested.<sup>7</sup>

An essential distinction was introduced between the climatic situation, taken as a natural fact, and the degree of salubrity, the latter capable of being manipulated by the human action. It was evident the trust in the technical knowledge, which thanks to its intervention power, submits, transforms and molds the environment, an attitude that is similar to the work of the gods.

An important aspect that deserves to be pointed out is the trust in the possibilities opened by the control of the endemic and infect-contagious diseases, as if the efficiency of hygiene were independent from place, conditions or circumstances. If the diagnosis of the problems that afflicted the population was painted with strong colors, the solution seemed to depend only on the good will of the constituted authorities, which needed to take conscience of the seriousness of the problem.

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<sup>6</sup>This metaphor can be find in: LOBATO, José Bento Monteiro. O Saneamento do Brasil. *Revista do Brasil*. 7 (28): 305, mar. 1918 and SOUZA, Brenno Muniz de. Imigração e Indesejáveis. *Revista do Brasil*. 9 (34): 113, out. 1918.

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, PEIXOTO, Afrânio. A Velha e a Nova Medicina: a Higiene. *Revista do Brasil*. 8 (32): 354-361, ago. 1918.

The knowledge accumulated by science, available to be used, was considered of easy application. It is symptomatic that the article written by Belisário Penna especially for the *Revista do Brasil* was entitled *Small Hygienic Cares*.<sup>8</sup> It was believed that the diseases that afflicted the Brazilians could be overcome with little effort. Penna brought to mind that malaria could be eliminated with the quinine. In his opinion, the State should make it possible to reach all the corners of the country at very small price or free of charges. According to his figures 70% of the population had ancilostomiasis (hookworm disease). This would be eradicated by means of enforcing the construction of simple cesspools and rudimentary sanitary facilities, the use of footwear and through the distribution, free of any cost, of medicines against the disease. To eliminate small pox it would be enough to decree the obligatory vaccination “impaired up to now by the fear of the ignorant crowd, and by the senseless propaganda of half dozen of sectarian orthodoxy.”<sup>9</sup>

Similar proposal was made against trachoma, leprosy, brave wound... Apparently all the problems could be solved easily which made still more severe the criticism to the government that, out of ignorance, insensibility and small political interests, seemed not strongly seduced by the logical and natural conclusions of science. If up to then the mediocrity of this immense country was taken as a certificate of the inability of *mestiços* that carried in their veins a rotten blood, now, thanks to the perspectives opened up by hygiene, it became possible to introduce an invigorating trust in the future. Defenders of the campaign in favor of sanitation at once established connections between the inhabitants' morbid state and the economic and social interests of the nation.

It seemed urgent to redeem the infected inhabitants, to save them from the claws of the microbial fauna that weakened their vigor. The immigration, before defended as an economic solution and ethnical desirable, began to be questioned. From a racial interpretation of the social problems one migrated to a sanitary interpretation. The inhabitants of the backlands, before accepted as an inapt and inferior specimen unfitted to

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<sup>8</sup>PENNA, Belisário. Pequenos Cuidados Higiénicos. *Revista do Brasil*. 9 (33): 3-18, set. 1918.

<sup>9</sup>PENNA, Belisário. Alcoolismo, Opilação e Impaludismo. *Revista do Brasil*. 6 (23): 443-444, nov. 1917. Similar opinions were expressed by SODRE, Alcindo. A Higiene no Rio Grande do Sul. *Revista do Brasil*. 14 (54): 152-156, jun. 1920.



civilization, now were seen as victims, wrongly slandered and criminally abandoned to their own luck, without health, justice or education.

In that perspective, the eradication of the infect-contagious and endemic diseases was fought as in a crusade that had for goal to facilitate the implantation of efficient and productive work, inside the parameters demanded by the market economy. To rehabilitate and to give the Brazilians their real worth, or better, to discipline, to train, to moralize and to transform them into agents capable of making the countless potentialities of the country come true. This was the ideal spread out by the apostles of the hygienic approach.

To reach these aims one asked for the immediate adoption of a wide range of controlled measures, planned, and executed by the men of science, withholders of a technical and specialized knowledge, who should be invested by the public powers with a wide autonomy. Those modern crusaders, competent manipulators of the scientific truth, intended to act as an army, hierarchical and rationally organized, where each one had precise attributions. Their objective was to liberate the nation from the evils that corrode it.

Not by chance the example of the European war was evoked to demonstrate the immense capacity of the mobilization of the State, which had instruments to reach each inhabitant and make him feel the weight of its action.<sup>10</sup>

Side by side with the coercive measures - obligatory vaccination, war against vectors, disinfection of the dwellings, compulsory notification of contagious diseases, isolation of the sick, - an intense enlightenment campaign was thought of which should penetrate the homes, factories, schools and farms by means of "a vast, tenacious, insistent propaganda, through words, pamphlets, movies, gramophone, outdoors, posters so that those hygienic instructions could invade the brain of our people."<sup>11</sup>

Seizing the flag of the defense of a healthy, productive and useful life to the nation, the hygienic-sanitary instructions infiltrated in the daily life of the citizens according to the ideals of science. Its promoters, in a typically enlightening posture, declared a war against ignorance, prejudices, misunderstandings... To make its noble goal come true hygiene expanded, penetrating areas never touched before.

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<sup>10</sup>BRANT, Mário. A Valorização do Brasileiro. *Revista do Brasil*. 7 (28): 302, abr. 1918.

<sup>11</sup>PENNA, Belisário. Pequenos Cuidados Higiênicos. *Ob. cit.* p. 13

Thus the concept of health was being enlarged far beyond disinfection, as it is well expressed in the code of twenty-two items elaborated by the surgeon Chapot-Prévost, who reached world celebrity for having accomplished with success in 1907 the two Siamese sisters' separation.<sup>12</sup>

In agreement with that enlargement of the field of action of the sanitary ideas, the section Bibliography of the *Revista do Brasil* registered the publication of several childcare manuals. Although it praised the "self-denial... and the admirable instinct that Brazilian mothers are endowed"<sup>13</sup>, such qualities did not seem good enough to stop the high rates of infantile mortality which according to specialists, could only be explained by the lack of hygienic medical cares on the part of the mothers. The specialists wanted to instruct them, to teach them the secrets of a healthy feeding, the symptoms of the diseases and their therapeutics, a task only made possible by a pediatrician. Even if "the hygienic instructions were followed with some neglect, inherent in our people, it was believed that the fall in the mortality rates would be incalculable."<sup>14</sup>

The progress of biochemistry propitiated a better understanding of the working of the organism and the identification of new substances, such as vitamins.<sup>15</sup> Under its influence the concern with nutrition won great impulse in that period. Cooking was no longer a subject linked to the feminine sphere but something to be transformed into the science of digestion and of nutrition, "one of the most cultivated branches of physiology. Doctors are studying in laboratories all the subjects raised by that problem."<sup>16</sup> What to eat, how much, when – all this became a subject of investigation. Suddenly it was discovered the inadequacy of the national feeding, poor in milk, dairy items, eggs, green vegetables and fruits.

On the other hand, the way of how to prepare and to how present a dish correctly would demand "well advanced knowledge of physical-chemistry and biological chemistry", and the failure of certain recipes derived from the incomprehension of the phenomena which

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<sup>12</sup>Resenha de *Código da Saúde*, de Charles-Prévost. *Revista do Brasil* 26 (106): 166, out. 1924.

<sup>13</sup>Resenha de *Moléstias dos Lactentes e seu Tratamento*, de Leôncio de Queiroz. *Revista do Brasil*. 25 (104): 339, ago. 1924.

<sup>14</sup>Resenha de *Higiene para Todos*, de Barbosa Vianna. *Revista do Brasil*. 17 (67): 352-353, jul. 1921.

<sup>15</sup>CIÂNCIO, Nicolau. As Vitaminas e o Cálcio. *Revista do Brasil*. 25 (97): 88-87, jan. 1924.

happen in the fundamental operations in the kitchen, such as "the mechanisms of the formation and stabilization of the emulsions, the point of coalition of the fats, the underlying osmotic changes in the way of preparing a sauce, of frying a food or of doing a broth". As a result hygienists criticizes the feminists that aspired to move away from the stoves without suspecting that "the culinary art becomes every day more and more complicated and more interesting (and that) in the near future, that art perhaps will be placed beside the doctor's art."<sup>17</sup>

On behalf of the sanitary precepts, tasks traditionally feminine were being taken hold by a discourse that, if on one side it recognized the importance and the meaning of the care with children and of the management of the kitchen, at the same time disqualified their performers taking them as unconscious, unprepared and guided only by instinct and tradition. It was not a question of underestimating the role or the women's natural needs, nor to question the space that always belonged to them, but of imposing to them new recommendations, based on the scientific rationality.

In fact the hygienic-sanitary recommendations, under the excuse of liberating the individual and the environment of any element capable to disturbing the salutary state, revealed a growing voracity of establishing norms.

The analysis of the exhaustive material published in the *Revista do Brasil* regarding the ethnic subject makes clear, on one side, the central importance of the theme for the period and, on the other, alerts for the complexity with which it was involved. In the journal different approaches were expressed, side by side. Only with a patient work of deconstruction one can discern variations among them.

First of all it is possible to identify an inclination, with a strong racist origin which admits the inequality and the hierarchy among the human beings but that, confident in a certain reading of Darwinism, foresees a white tomorrow for the country. In that sense we understand the insistence as how to detect how far we had already walked in the sense of determining a definitive Brazilian type, result of a fusion that should form our own features in the anthropological world.

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<sup>16</sup>ALMEIDA, Miguel Osório. A Ciência e a Arte Culinária. *Revista do Brasil*. 23 (90): 183, jun. 1923.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, pp. 83-84.

This positive interpretation chose hybridization as a regenerative source. But it is important to stress that it was still moving inside the universe created by Gobineau, Lapouge and Le Bon, although with the fundamental difference that the alarming previsions of those authors, which condemned the Brazilian society to an eternal barbarism, were substituted by the certainty of our future whitening. The commitment with doctrines that professed an inherent inferiority would necessarily have to be fragile. Consequently it is easy to understand the oscillation between optimism and pessimism demonstrated by an intellectuality that needed to believe in the future but was not completely sure that it would win the bet.

The appearance of the possibility of taking the population not as racially inferior, the damned fruit of heterogeneous and incompatible elements, but as sick, opened seductive perspectives. After all, morbidity, as microbiology taught, could be extirpated. Blacks and *mestiços*, once considered indolent, lazy and refractory to progress, could be transformed into complete human beings, useful to the nation.

However, no matter how different the approaches were, they ended up sharing quite restrictive conceptions of citizenship. In the most orthodox version, the ethnic inferiority condemned most of the inhabitants to the status of not complete citizen, leaving little space for the exercise of the political and social rights. It was advocated the need for elevating his ethnic background, which should be made thanks to a selected immigration and the help of Darwinism. Sooner or later the inferior human being would finally disappear.

According to the hygienic discourse the population was taken as an agglomerate of sick people that needed to be cured, helped, treated to acquire full citizenship later on. The improvement of the sanitary conditions, the cure of the endemic diseases, the adoption of prophylactic measures, had to be imposed. Of course the people were seen as unprotected and impotent that would only be pulled up from their morbid state by means of the benefits of science. Useless to say that the beneficiaries had nothing to say regarding methods and procedures which they ignored. We should remember that education at this point had lost its priority. If not judged totally useless, its possibilities were considered limited. Hygienists did not consider it completely worthless, but they were inclined to postpone the educational program due to the larger task of curing fevers and expelling vectors.

The classic liberal model was the center of severe criticism, although by different reasons. To accomplish with readiness and agility the tasks that stopped the progress of the country, one clamored for a centralized and strong power, endowed with a national project with clear and objective goals, surrounded by a body of competent agents, experts in techniques derived from a positive knowledge. In other words, it took root a conception of the population as an inform, docile mass, on which the government should exercise its action.