

SACRED WRITINGS, PROFANE WORLD:

Notes on the History of Ideas in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Like other Ibero-American countries, Brazil is a country whose Catholic origins would mark its cultural uniqueness for centuries to come. It was a new country, born in the wake of the great discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and dependent in its first centuries on Portuguese colonizing efforts that paved the way for the modern era, similar to the other Iberian countries of America, which were dependent on Spain. Brazil was also marked by the historical vicissitudes of the late Middle Ages, by the short Renaissance experienced in the Iberian countries, and by the Counter-Reformation and long decadence of the centuries that followed. After giving the world its first glimpse of modernity, Portugal and Spain appeared for centuries to be fortresses of tradition. Fruit of a history that was divided between seduction by the past and fascination with the new, Brazilian culture still shows traces of these origins.

In more recent times we have preferred to simplify the image of that past, obeying the economic orientation that has become the dominant feature of our intellectual life and the main current of a style of thinking. Even our memory of the most distant past has been subordinated to the same one-dimensional logic of economic interest that we generally apply to present situations. Yet by relegating cultural and political passions to the margins, we are left with only a partial view of history that ignores essential aspects. This paper attempts to shed light on some of those forgotten truths.

RESUMEN

Como otros países iberoamericanos, Brasil es un país cuyos orígenes católicos marcarían su singularidad cultural en los siglos siguientes. Fue un país nuevo, nacido en las vísperas de los grandes descubrimientos de los siglos XV y XVI y dependiente, durante sus primeros siglos, de los esfuerzos colonizadores portugueses que prepararon el camino para la era moderna; similar a otros países ibéricos de América, que dependían de España. También Brasil fue marcado por las vicisitudes históricas de la Baja Edad Media, por el corto Renacimiento experimentado por los países ibéricos y por la Contra Reforma y la larga decadencia de los siguientes siglos. Luego de darle al mundo su primer atisbo de modernidad, Portugal y España parecieron ser, durante siglos, las fortalezas de la tradición. Fruto de una historia dividida entre la seducción del pasado y la fascinación con lo nuevo, la cultura brasileña todavía muestra trazos de estos orígenes.

En tiempos más recientes hemos preferido simplificar la imagen de este pasado, obedeciendo a la orientación económica que ha devenido la característica dominante de nuestra vida intelectual y la corriente principal de un estilo de pensamiento. Aún nuestra memoria del pasado más distante ha sido subordinada a la misma lógica unidimensional del interés económico que generalmente aplicamos a las situaciones presentes. Sin embargo, relegando a los márgenes a las pasiones políticas y culturales nos quedamos solamente con una visión parcial de la historia que ignora aspectos esenciales. Este trabajo trata de echar luz sobre alguna de estas verdades olvidadas.

...the conquest of the New World is the origin of a terrible knowledge, that comes from our being present at the very moment of our own creation ...

—Carlos Fuentes, *El Espejo Enterrado*¹

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SACRED WRITINGS

In a superb book about the cultural origins of the United States, the historian Daniel Boorstin wrote that Americans have always gone through history with the conviction that they were on the right path. According to the author, the Pilgrims were certain that they were creating a new space for human liberty in America. Puritan Francis Higginson wrote at the time, “that which is our greatest comfort ... is that we have here the true Religion and the holy Ordinances of Almighty God taught amongst us ... , and if God is with us, who can be against us?”³

Obviously, with these words Boorstin was documenting the internal conviction of a culture in a specific era, regardless of the assessment that members of another culture, in another era, might make of that conviction. He also documented the remnants of a belief in the importance of faith for salvation, in the spirit of the Protestant Reformation that to this day dominates US culture. Yet the testimonies that Boorstin gathered surprised me as I read them, and I believe they would have surprised any Ibero-American reader.⁴ With them, he offers a very different understanding of the origins of his country than the one we would be obliged to make about our own.

If I had to find a single phrase that captures Brazilian culture and history, I would choose the Portuguese historian Oliveira Martins's reference to a popular saying about Portuguese culture: "God writes straight with crooked lines." In his words, the defining trait of Portuguese—and, I might add, Brazilian—culture is the recognition that men's actions obey "ideally sublime laws" that are eventually "tainted by defects and vices."⁵ The best example would be the poet Luís Vaz de Camões, who "feels and expresses the historical greatness of the Indies Empire, which in the poet's view is a Babylonia, a well of ignominies."⁶ This cultural trait not only characterizes Portuguese culture but perhaps Iberian culture in general, in the sense that it simultaneously conveys the feeling of greatness in historical acts, the fragility of men, and the precariousness of the circumstances in which they must act. Might he who remembers the greatness of the Indies Empire and its "well of ignominies" also recall the historical greatness and ignominies of Hernán Cortés's New Spain?

In contrast to North American tradition, the Iberian tradition is able to recognize in itself a complex mix of good and evil, of right and wrong. It can be said that the Iberian mindset typically seeks to avoid orthodoxy, tending toward behaviors of permeability and adaptability to circumstances, as if Iberian moral strength could dispense with the need for subjective certainty regarding the ways of the world. As such, Iberian mysticism was of an earthly variety; its practitioners knew nothing about theory and philosophy and discovered their own road to God. They can be seen as extreme cases of exaltation of the personality, perhaps the most important value in a culture that prizes people above norms. "Wanderer, there is no road; the road is made by walking," wrote the poet Antonio Machado (1875–1939), expressing this trait with particular pride. The

Iberians' accomplishments as adventurers and discoverers of the world—and the ventures establishing a cultural style that was many years in the making—did not happen by chance.⁷

It is impossible to separate the cultural differences between Iberians and Anglo-Saxons from the differences characterizing them in the religious crises of the late Middle Ages and, later, in the great Reformation and Counter-Reformation movements. The New England colonies had their origins in the idea that man is predestined and alone before God. The Ibero-American colonies originated with the older belief that the Son of God became man. It was a Christian belief, similar to those of the Protestants and Puritans, but with the difference that the Spanish and Portuguese understood it in terms of God's intimacy with the material and the worldly. Catholic culture of the late Middle Ages followed the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), for whom “God is not the pure Act of thought, but the pure Act of existing that created the Christian world of truly existing individuals from nothing.”⁸ In contrast to the Platonism of St. Augustine, which saw God as a pure idea that was distant from men, Thomism sought God's union with the world. Beginning in the thirteenth century, it established a cultural tradition that would become, through the activism of the Jesuits from the sixteenth century onward, an essential part of the Ibero-American cultural legacy.

This essay aims merely to gather images of culture from history, not to question or judge the religious convictions of any person or people—especially because, as noted earlier, history cannot be described or explained in terms of a single dimension. As important as they may be, religious choices, like economic ones, are not sufficient to explain the history or culture of the era in which the world entered the modern age. The era was one in which religious motives, changes in mentality, and ambitions of wealth and power came together in a surprising way, gathering enough force to shatter the limits of the medieval world and open the doors to the New World. The dimension of religious life provides a good point of departure for understanding this opening to the world, not because it is the only one possible, but because it offers the surest route to understanding the ideas of the time. In the late Middle Ages, as in the entire medieval period, the production of thought was the mission of the clergy.

OPTIONS FOR MODERNITY

To the surprise of anyone who is accustomed to thinking of the Anglo-Saxons as modern and the Iberians as backward, the North American historian Richard Morse wrote, in *Prospero's Mirror*, that in their era the Anglo-Saxon and Iberian colonies represented two “options” for entering the modern world. Established over a long period that spanned the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, these two traditions—the Iberian and the Anglo-Saxon—grew out of “a common moral, intellectual, and spiritual matrix.”⁹ Morse was aware of the differences that Max Weber established between Protestant and Catholic countries in his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹⁰ But Morse refused to believe that such differences implied a divorce between these two cultures, understood as essential and constitutive expressions of the modern era and western civilization.

According to Max Weber, in the Catholic world human acts were to be judged before a “tribunal of the conscience” where the confessor serves as judge in an “intimate forum.” This tribunal, we might add, depends on both the believer’s and the Church’s recognition of the existence of God, with the Church being an earthly, hierarchical institution. In the Puritan world, the “tribunal” disappeared and with it the external judge of the conscience, which led to radical changes in the view of the individual. While the Catholic spoke to God within the realm of the Church, the Protestant found himself alone and without intermediaries. Out of this, according to Weber, grew the individualist spirit of the Anglo-Saxons and the Calvinists in particular. In the anguish of their aloneness before God and the uncertainty about their own salvation were the roots of a powerful psychological impulse that would lead men to seek signs in the world that they were among the elect. Such beliefs also formed the foundation for the ethic that placed a value on work for its own sake, leaving behind the Thomist idea that a person should possess only the wealth he needed to live well. The origins of capitalism are found in this work ethic.

The phenomena that accompanied Europe’s shift to modern times were not exclusive to the Anglo-Saxons. The well-known divergence between Protestants and Catholics over how they conceived their relationship with God was insufficient to cause a

divorce between Iberians and Anglo-Saxons.¹¹ Moreover, if we were to investigate the two traditions' order of entry into the modern world, we would have to conclude that the Iberians arrived first. They also had to confront themes related to the world's diversity well before the Anglo-Saxons did, including the fundamental theme of the existence of a new humanity. In the long Reconquest they would face the Moors, and in the Age of Discovery, the Blacks and Indians.

Spain and Portugal departed for the New World ahead of Holland and England, and the Iberian colonies thus preceded the English. The history of Brazil and the Hispanic-American countries began in the early sixteenth century, ten or twenty years before the start of the Protestant Reformation. North American history began with the Pilgrim colonies of New England, fruit of religious turbulence that came a century after Luther posted his message on the doors of the Wirttemberg church. Since the Ibero-American countries were born before the Reformation, it would be some time before the ideas of the Counter-Reformation would reach them—in Brazil's case, principally through the work of the Jesuits. Because their order was established just after the Council of Trent, the Jesuits obeyed the Council's declarations devotedly, including condemnation (as a Lutheran heresy) of the theory that denied the Indians status as human beings.

According to Morse, the vitality of Thomism in the "late Scholasticism" of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain and Portugal was not a consequence of the Iberian countries' backwardness, but of their relative modernity. It resulted from peculiar circumstances, including conflict (and coexistence) with the Moors in the wars of Reconquest that spanned seven centuries, and which created the possibility for Iberia's early experience with the formation of nation states. The Portuguese and Spanish, more than any other European people, were the first not only to create nation states but to have to adapt the requirements of Christian living to the task of incorporating non-Christian people into European civilization. St. Thomas's *Summa contra Gentiles*—which served as a guide for conversion of the Moors—made the broad case for the idea that "pagan" societies were ordered by natural philosophy, allowing the view that human beings could thus be considered both Christian and "natural." If for St. Thomas the Church was a

“mystical body,” the State was the most perfect of human associations, a “political and moral body”—and pagans and infidels were also capable of political association.¹²

PRAGMATISM AND COMMERCE

As already noted, religion was not the only factor shaping the Ibero-American countries’ origins. Fundamental as they were, religious convictions were not the sole influence on the opening of a new era and the formation of unique national historical realities in Iberian America. Two observations can be made with respect to this fact, the first of which relates to the necessary distinction between religion and culture. While the countries of the Iberian Peninsula should be considered Catholic due to their closeness to the Papacy and clergy from the thirteenth century onward, they deserve this distinction even more for cultural reasons. For in these countries, the Catholic presence expanded beyond the sphere of the Church’s action, reaching non-Catholic segments and even non-religious activities in society. In this sense, despite moments of obscurantism (which were frequent, especially during the Inquisition’s most active period), Spain and Portugal were never exclusively Catholic. If they are correctly considered “Catholic countries” today, it is because the Catholic religion was sufficiently strong to leave indelible marks on their national cultures, both in the mother countries and in their former colonies in the Americas.

A second observation relates to a change in mentality that occurred over time for both theological and practical reasons, and to a cultural openness that—while initially formulated by religious thinkers (like everything else in the Middle Ages)—became independent from any religious connotations in its period of expansion. I am referring to the experimentalism that began specifically to affect Portuguese culture in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and first half of the sixteenth centuries, but which also characterized Hispanic culture of the era. Like the British, the Portuguese welcomed the influence of Roger Bacon (1214–1292), a thirteenth-century English Franciscan friar for whom experience was the most solid source of certainty: “Truth is the daughter of time, and not of authority.”¹³ Certainly Bacon distinguished authority and reason as sources of knowledge, and, moreover, he included them in his ideas about experience and mystical experience. Yet this did not detract from the novelty of his experimentalism, in contrast to a tradition

based solely on authority; nor did it prevent his consideration of mathematics as “the doorway and the key to the sciences.”¹⁴

Although still on the fringes of medieval thought in the thirteenth century, in subsequent centuries this valuation of experience would lead to a change in mentality that also had practical roots in the social and economic changes of the late Middle Ages. From the twelfth century onward, European cities and commerce were already experiencing a general resurgence. When the Italian cities’ monopolistic control of the Mediterranean blocked Iberian access to the Orient, Spain and Portugal were forced to look for alternative routes. Beginning in the mid-thirteenth century, they sought trade with northern Europe—Flanders, Normandy, England, Brittany, and even Norway—through coastal navigation.¹⁵

In Portugal, from the fourteenth century onward, experimentalism was linked to the art of navigation and the tradition and teachings of the classics, in a type of “dual thinking” that characterized much of the Age of Exploration. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the navigator Duarte Pacheco Pereira celebrated this Portuguese experimentalism in *Esmeraldo de situ orbis* with the famous words, “experience, which is the mother of all things, disabuses us and removes us from all doubt.”¹⁶

It is well known that Iberian experimentalism was not sufficiently strong to establish the foundations for broader scientific development, as happened in England. Yet there were relevant exceptions in the fields of geography, astronomy, mathematics, and the other sciences linked to navigation. Recognizably in the fifteenth century and first decades of the sixteenth, Portugal experienced a Renaissance in the areas of science and technology, without which the Age of Discovery would not have been possible. This change in mentality, combined with the adventure of discovery, with religiosity and even with mysticism, was transmitted to the conquistadors of the following centuries.

Undeniably, greed for wealth and power was another part of the mix in this Iberian dawn of modern times. For some time this was a recognizable element of the wars of the medieval nobility that spread throughout the peninsula during the Reconquest and throughout Europe during the Crusades. Such motives spurred trade, the form this activity took from the thirteenth century onward, and distinguished it from what would later be called commercial capitalism. During the Crusades, the Reconquest, and the Age

of Discovery, ambitions of wealth and power combined with the old medieval notion of honor that included booty and pillage as legitimate rights of the victor, along with enslavement of the vanquished in battle. Commercial capitalism, at first limited to a few Italian cities, would later emerge, beginning in Holland in the seventeenth century, as one of the consequences of the Iberian adventures.

More than anything in literature or the arts, the *opera magna* of the Portuguese Renaissance was to push beyond the limits of the Mediterranean and conquer the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Its greatest achievement was the conquest of the sea and the lands beyond the sea. In light of all the great accomplishments of the Renaissance, these discoveries were no small feat. With the Spanish, the Portuguese achieved the discovery of the world as we know it.

Brazil was born from the same historical and cultural mix that inspired Prince Henry the Navigator and the Portuguese nobility who supported the Aviz dynasty, as well as the struggle against the Moors. The discovery of America in 1492 coincided with the recapture, with Portuguese assistance, of Granada, the last Moorish stronghold in the peninsula. In 1497, Vasco da Gama departed for the Indies, following the trail blazed in 1488 by Bartolomeu Dias' circumnavigation of the Cape of Storms—or the Cape of Good Hope, as the king wished it to be known in historical memory. Decades later, in the midst of the sixteenth century, the decline would begin, although some attempts at cultural expansion would continue. Following the brief blaze of Spanish and Portuguese humanism, the same mix of mysticism with the medieval spirit of adventure, and of pragmatism with centralization of power, would prevail. In Brazil and Portugal, submission to the rules of the Council of Trent (1546) would also continue as a consequence of the Jesuits' lasting influence over the next two centuries.

THE SEEDS OF DECADENCE

Iberia's greatness in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought with it distortions and excesses that would eventually lead to its demise. Whatever the complex combinations imposed by the passage of time, all these religious, economic, and political aspects were present as dimensions of the explosive and contradictory mix of motives

that led Portugal and Spain to a phase of global power in the Age of Discovery. A combination of greed, warrior spirit, and mysticism joined with the vices and paroxysms associated with the long processes of centralization of power.

As the fifteenth century gave way to the sixteenth, many examples of this were apparent, beginning with the “well of ignominies” that characterized Portugal’s ultimately unsuccessful effort in the Indies. As for Spain, at the beginning of the sixteenth century the same ignominies had come to light in the violent conquest of the Caribbean, New Spain, and later, Peru. Here was the first expression of a problem that would remain constant in the Ibero-American countries’ history: that is, recognition of the conquered populations of the New World.

Also as the fifteenth century gave way to the sixteenth, the religious, economic, and political conventions of the Iberian royal families obliged the Jews to leave Spain and to be converted to Catholicism, by force, in Portugal. At the very same time as Columbus and Isabel were negotiating new plans for a voyage to America in one of the most brilliant moments in the opening of the modern age, human beings were being burned alive in autos-da-fé in Spain. Meanwhile, in Portugal at almost the same time, the Crown applied the absurd formula of “believe or die” against the Jews, a practice for which Christians had always criticized the Moors.

Thus the figure of the “New Christian” emerged in Portugal, as the result of a maneuver through which the Portuguese Crown aimed to keep the Jews and their wealth in the country while at the same time denying them the right to practice their religion. The policy reconciled interest in power and money with a need to appease popular anti-Semitism in the streets of Lisbon, as well as the interests and anti-Semitism of the Spanish royal family. Although it had serious consequences for Portuguese culture (and its economy), the maneuver did not impede Jewish capitalists’ participation in Portuguese maritime ventures. The Jews would play a role in Brazil’s creation as financiers of voyages, technicians, and (exiled) colonists. They had done the same in a previous era—and without being forced to make a false religious choice—as backers of Prince Henry’s navigation ventures. The farcical creation of “New Christians” was not enough to prevent persecution since the Jews, after being forced to give up their religion in public, were still

accused of practicing it in private. On one tragic morning in 1506, more than 500 Jews were massacred in the plazas and alleys of Lisbon.

In Portugal, this was one of the reasons why the figure of the *empresario* (entrepreneur) would always be suspected of heresy as a “New Christian,” and although he participated in the Crown’s ventures, he was eventually weakened and subordinated to the Crown, which retained control over the discoveries. Added to religious intolerance were the nobility’s greed for wealth and power and a medieval mentality that was unable to understand the relationship between personal initiative and profit. As such, relatively closed groups tended to monopolize capitalist and artisanal activities. Besides the “New Christians,” there were foreigners—mostly the English, French, and Dutch—who legally or illegally conducted a good part of the peninsula’s external trade from Lisbon or Seville.¹⁷ Individuals and activities that might have constituted the seeds of a commercial bourgeoisie were under suspicion in Portugal. Many of these individuals, especially the Jews, moved to Holland where they had freedom to act.

It was only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the Portuguese Crown, now in complete decline, sought to attract Jews, first through the efforts of Father Antonio Viera and later the Marquis of Pombal. Portugal, and later Spain, had opened the way to the New World but were condemned to remain at its margins; the countries became minor actors in the new commercial era of European capitalist development. In the Ibero-American countries, the effects of these origins would serve as a cultural obstacle to development for some time.

The glorious era of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ended, in Portugal’s case, with the “dull and despicable sadness” of a prolonged decline that began well before the disappearance of King Sebastião at Alcazarquivir in 1578. The epic poem *Os Lusíadas* by Luis de Camões, published in 1572 but still poignant today, is a late work of the Portuguese Renaissance that in its time could already be read as the epitaph for a century and a half of glory. Spain would still have its “golden century,” but it was a century of decline, despite the exceptional brilliance of its literature and painting. Carlos Fuentes writes that *Don Quixote*, published in 1595, “is a book that exemplifies Spanish decadence ... Spain’s epic era had ended ... The dream of utopia had failed in the New World. The illusion of a universal monarchy had evaporated. ... After El Cid and Isabel

the Catholic, after Columbus and Cortés, St. Theresa and Loyola, Lepanto and the Armada, the party was over.”¹⁸

Recognizing the differences in emphasis between the Portuguese and Spanish, the Iberian countries’ entry into modern times nevertheless lacked the orthodoxical rigor of the North American Puritans and later, the clarity and distinction required by the Cartesian modernity of the French. The Iberians’ entry into the modern era was even more complex because the guiding principles of the Counter-Reformation were as much a form of resistance and rejection of modern times as a way for the Church to adapt to the age of Reformation. While inspired by a medievalist ethic, the Jesuits in some cases (as in Brazil) acted as paradoxical agents of our first modernity in their defense of indigenous people, education, and some of Antonio Viera’s economic policies. In any case, it seems certain that the countries borne of Iberian adventures—which inaugurated the modern era of western history—came into the world against the current of what would come to be considered modernity. Might it be said that we came into the world along crooked lines?

As in Anglo-Saxon America, some of these peculiarities of origin remain in Iberian America today. Along with the religious—and by extension, cultural—belief in the humanity of a God that stays with us on our path through the world, these roots generated ideas and convictions that appear in the Ibero-American countries’ history over time. Without a doubt, the roots are deeply religious, but they have always lacked the intrinsic certainty and theoretical rigidity found in orthodoxies. While the New England colonies walked along fundamentalist paths that are perceptible to this day in modern North American society, the Iberian colonies were influenced by diverse and sometimes contradictory experiences. Their beginnings were part of an atmosphere of diversity and conflict in which fundamentalism was one possible trend but probably not the strongest one.

THEMES SHAPING CULTURE

The Europeans thus arrived to the New World with both religious and profane visions, and with their gaze divided between wonder at new people and lands and preparations to conquer them. From the very beginning, their gaze was divided between the conquest of the world for God and the conquest of the land and people for their own

power and quick enrichment. The adventurers and conquerors destroyed populations, but they also formed alliances with indigenous leaders. At the same time—amidst changing decisions by the Crown and through papal bulls—they created small and large spaces for “social incorporation” that in a broad sense would serve as the basis for themes that shaped the Ibero-American countries’ culture throughout the coming centuries. Thus it is not surprising that from the beginning they were concerned with understanding, well or badly, the societies they found.

Because their gaze was both sacred and profane, both divided and distant, they were unable to recognize the people they found in their path as people. At the same time, they were also interested in creating people. Brazil is an example of this view, which originated in the earliest days of the colonial period and was still very much in vogue in the nineteenth century. The image of the “country without a people”¹⁹ lasted well into the creation of the State under the Orleans-Braganza dynasty.²⁰ In the same way, elements of this image lasted even into the twentieth century, in the idea of the amorphous country whose society would have to be organized by the State.²¹ The gaze was mixed with a Catholic religiosity at first and became more and more profane over time, emerging in Iberian America as the hallmark of a civilizing effort that is still continuing in some countries. This construction, which began with the destruction of indigenous cultures in its first phase, is in many ways considered unfinished today.

It would be a long while before this external gaze, at first religious and warlike and always divided and arrogant, would take root in the new land. The project of “spreading the faith and the empire” was always susceptible to internal conflicts, but in the end it was the same for those engaged in the great debate over the “indigenous question” that would last for two centuries in Brazil. Ending only with Pombal’s decision in the second half of the eighteenth century, its importance for the formation of Brazilian society and culture is difficult to exaggerate. The two groups of combatants during the first centuries—the Jesuits on one side and the settlers and conquerors, Brazilian but mainly Paulistas, who were called *bandeirantes*, on the other—had a somewhat common ideal of conquest. Both similar to and different from the settlers, the Jesuits “were colonizers; the work they had taken on was of a temporal nature and as such, could only be carried out through temporal means,” wrote João Lúcio de Azevedo.²² Almost as old

as the Portuguese debate over the “Jewish question,” the “indigenous question” would emerge among the themes shaping the country’s culture, later taking its place in terms of relevance alongside the “Black question” that extended from the colonial period into the nineteenth century.

The religious connotation of these themes was as evident during the conquest and colonial period as it had been in Portugal during the Age of Discovery. But unlike sacred writing appearing in papal bulls, original themes related especially to the Indians but also to the Jews and Blacks would always depend on the licenses and decisions of the Crown (oscillating between pressure from the Vatican and the Jesuits) and the conquerors’ profane interests. Beyond the Crown’s concern with issues of territorial domain and issues resulting from its difficult proximity with Spain, during the next three centuries it was the over the Jews, Indians, and Blacks that the newly created country would witness its greatest conflicts. In the same way, the historical solutions for incorporating these human groups produced some of the most lasting traits of Brazilian culture. We must examine this past to find the roots for understanding Brazilian culture’s characteristic ambiguity with regard to the racial question. That ambiguity also affected social relations, giving them both their authentic capacity for inclusiveness and tolerance and their peculiar ability to mask conflict and prejudice.

This cultural ambiguity, with its particular dialectic of conflict and integration, has even earlier precedents in the Iberian peninsula. According to Gilberto Freyre, the Christian populations of Iberia who lived under Muslim rule (the Mozarabs) felt the strong influence of Arab culture and “would constitute a deep, vital element of the Portuguese national character.”²³ Arab blood and traditions predominated in the formation of the Portuguese nation, through a racial and cultural miscegenation that was the legacy of centuries of conflict and integration. When the Portuguese began to colonize Brazil, the old conflicts of the Reconquest were believed to be somewhat diluted, and many descendents of the Moors felt fully integrated into the Portuguese nation. Consequently, throughout Brazilian history the Arab presence, which began in colonial times, was never characterized by conflict. Moreover, Arabs who immigrated after Independence were absorbed by a Brazilian culture that in some ways was prepared for this ancient miscegenation. More recent immigrants (that is, from the nineteenth

century onward) have found Brazilian culture to be highly permeable thanks to the solutions (or half-solutions) achieved in the conflicts of a more distant past.

Ethnic and religious themes are not the same as social themes, but throughout history they have created the cultural space and repertoire through which social themes would be perceived and treated. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the question of the poor would be added to those of the Indian, the Jew, and the Black. By this I mean that the elites became aware of the poor's reality; poverty as such had existed since the country's origins. Emerging at the end of the nineteenth century, this theme—which would in modern times be referred to as social inequality—became obligatory in a country of extreme inequality.

Rather than occurring chronologically and finding their solutions in a linear sequence as Brazil formed a country and national culture, these themes shaping our culture have been present from the very beginning and are closely tied to the process of national construction. The only sequence that one can legitimately speak of is that of the dominance of one theme or another in various eras of the history of ideas or politics. Accordingly, the theme of the Jews dominated the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century. The Indian theme prevailed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Black question in the nineteenth. The theme of the poor—or of inequality—would become dominant beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century.²⁴

The passage from one theme to another over the centuries did not mean that the earlier themes had been entirely resolved. Because these themes were present from the beginning, they remained present throughout time and despite all the changes imposed by historical circumstances. Because of what it says about our history, whose antecedents are in the fifteenth century, the question of the traffic and enslavement of Blacks is almost as old as the Jewish or Moorish questions.

Just as we can look for the roots of this particular cultural ambiguity in history, we can also find the roots of some specific cultural traits there. In the first place, it was in facing the question of how to incorporate (or exclude) the Jews that colonial Portuguese culture left us the legacy of ambiguity about initiative that generates profit. The ancient medieval tradition that closed Jews off from activities that were considered noble left the doors open only to those activities from which Christians were barred. Because of the

culture's later resistance to the individualist concepts of the Reformation, it was enormously difficult to recognize the freedom of initiative of ordinary individuals. Initiative could be attributed to the nobility and, beyond that, regulated by the norms governing the Second Estate, but only as these applied to power and warfare. Thus, in Brazilian culture profit, and by extension success, would always be greeted with suspicion and tainted by illegitimacy.

The devaluation of labor comes from this same medieval tradition. Saraiva observes that in the Indies—and we might also add, in Brazil—“the disdain for manual labor [represented] an ideal even among peasants, whose economic misery caused them to be confused with poor noblemen who were reduced to very limited resources or a makeshift life.”²⁵ Historians document a similar contempt for manual labor in the Hispanic American colonies. In Brazil, as in the other Ibero-American countries, this tradition first manifested itself with the subjugation of the Indians, who were later forced into slavery in Brazil or into the *encomienda* system in the Hispanic American countries.²⁶ In the Brazilian case, this tradition of disdain for labor was reinforced by the large-scale enslavement of Blacks. It is to this tradition that we owe negative attitudes toward the value of labor, especially physical labor, which persist in Brazilian culture today. Despite the well-known ability to work that Black Brazilians demonstrated over centuries, the valuation of labor would only find a place in our culture after the European migrations of the late nineteenth century.

NATURAL INEQUALITY

Iberian medieval traditions combined with the circumstances of conquest and colonization in a slavocratic regime that lasted for four centuries, making inequality intrinsic to the hierarchical society whose creation we witnessed in Brazil. A concept took shape here that was also supported by then-prevalent interpretations of the gospels and humanistic readings of the classics, which understood inequality among men as natural. This notion of natural inequality preceded and contradicted the egalitarianism of contractualists like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, which justified the English, American and French revolutions and imposed itself on practices and customs in Brazil, which for centuries was a country of slavery. The same thing happened in Mexico and Peru, whose

vast indigenous populations were subjected to the *encomenderos*' domination from the beginning.

In sociology, when we speak of “inequality” we refer to a relationship of domination (or authority) or a relationship of “superior” to “inferior” (or vice-versa), whatever the social meaning attributed to the term. It is not just a “difference” but a difference based on some type of hierarchy, wealth, prestige, or power. As such, what we understand as “equality” does not necessarily mean uniformity; it may also present differences. This is the case in pluralist, modern, and democratic societies, which recognize differences among individuals and citizens who are equal in principle. According to the same premises, equality may also exist among people who are socially unequal, as with the equality of Christians in medieval society. “Unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, unto God the things that are God’s”—this is the principle that in the declining days of the Roman Empire permitted recognition that men have souls and are equal before God.

Thus, in diverse ways and means, the inequality inherited from medieval Iberian culture found its own reasons to coalesce as something natural in Ibero-American culture. A fundamental tenet of Church doctrine in the Age of Discovery was the recognition that the Indians, while pagan, had souls and should therefore be conquered for God. The same thinking was applied to Blacks. The different treatment of these two cases, in which the Church fought the enslavement of the Indians while accepting that of Blacks, was not a result of theological interpretations but of medieval traditions and customs that considered Black slavery to be normal, a result of the greed and violence that characterized the world’s entry into the modern era. Slavery was in the customs of the Middle Ages and in the revival of the classical writings of antiquity.

In the impasse between Church doctrine and society’s traditions was a winding road that often led to sophistry. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Portugal, as in Brazil in later centuries, one could hear the argument that the capture of Blacks in Africa and their transport to Europe and America was a way to save their souls. Similar arguments were made, in some cases, to justify the enslavement of indigenous peoples. Las Casas fought the practice in Mexico during the same era as Nóbrega and Anchieta in Brazil; while both criticized the settlers, they admitted that the evangelization of the Indian

would only be possible in the context of colonial expansion. And at that time, they knew that colonization depended on the Indians' subjugation.

In the United States, equality was assumed to be natural from the outset. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson reaffirmed the equality of the Pilgrims, Puritans, and Whites in the New England colonies in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Yet if this were so, how do we understand slavery? How, after slavery, do we understand the virulence of North American racism?

In the classic study *The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), Gunnar Myrdal writes that this egalitarianism, limited to Whites, was a premise of North American racism.²⁷ In contrast to the Iberians, who considered inequality to be natural but understood that even Black slaves had souls, Anglo-American Whites allowed slavery because they believed that Blacks were less than human. Blacks could become slaves not to save their souls but precisely for the opposite reason: they did not have souls and therefore could not be saved. They could be enslaved because they were not men.

If the virulent nature of Anglo-American racism has an egalitarian premise, the ambiguities of Brazilian racism are based on the premise of an inequality that our culture allows as natural. According to Brazilian tradition, which has medieval roots, all men have souls and belong to the same humanity created by God and are recognized as His children. Yet each fulfills different functions in "Christian society." Blacks are equal before God, but unequal in the world of men, where God confers on them not only different but unequal functions with respect to Whites. As such, Black slavery was not only possible but justifiable: if it did not exist, Blacks would continue to be pagans in the African jungles, lost to God. Bringing them to America, even at the cost of their enslavement, would be a way to incorporate them among God's people. It was a difference in conceptualization that had repercussions for the nature of racism: since they were also children of God, slaves must not be treated with brutality, a point of honor in the Jesuits' struggle. Though they could be considered "things" from a legal standpoint, they must not be treated as "things" in the realm of human relations. During the Empire, this ambiguity prevented the creation of a Civil Code since it would have required

recognizing the universality of rights, which was not possible as long as slavery existed. At the same time, there was not support for the creation of a Black Code or separate legislation for slaves, as occurred in the United States.²⁸

In a society that thus internalized inequality, the recognition of equality could not come from within society. It would have to come from outside—from the State, from religion, or from the influence of other countries. At first, the recognition of the Indians' equality (in the sense that they could not be enslaved) would come primarily from the Church and evangelization. Next, in the most decisive moments of Portugal and Brazil's history, such egalitarian influences came from the State. Not coincidentally, it was a State that was experiencing growth, as occurred first with Pombal, next in the Brazil of Pedro II, and still later with Getulio Vargas. Such changes always took place at moments when the State rose above and went against society's mainstream, even for a short time.

In the style of an enlightened despot, Pombal imposed the Indians' freedom on the settlers who had enslaved them, and on the Jesuits who had defended them but who had, with the support of the old Portuguese nobility, refused to submit to the State. At the same historical moment, Pombal declared equality among "New Christians" and "Old Christians." Pombal included the liberation of Jews and Indians as part of Portugal's first major attempt at intellectual and cultural reform, with consequences for Brazil's territorial unity and independence. The abolition of Black slavery in Brazil would have to wait another century, during which other decisions began to slowly create the foundations for a society based on free labor. In both cases it was the State that took the initiative, and which despite being influenced by the prevailing cultural mentality managed to act as if it was outside society, introducing new directions that in the long run would modify society.

HISTORY AS A CONSTRUCTION

To speak of the history of ideas does not assume the omnipotence of ideas. Just as sacred writings combined (and sometimes conflicted) with profane traditions, the ideas that directed the country's construction could not avoid being influenced by the circumstances in which they developed. These ideas create a country's culture as part of the same movement in which—seeking ways to adapt to the realities they find in the path

of their own intervention—they are surprised by the peculiarities and serendipities of the society taking shape. Some of Anchieta and Nóbrega’s writings illustrate their surprise at the reality of the Indian, who was unknown to medieval culture. And while the settlers were familiar, Anchieta and Nóbrega registered surprise at the new and sometimes eccentric behaviors that new circumstances imposed on all of them. (As Barléus, a Dutch Calvinist, would comment, “There is no sin below the Equator.”)²⁹ It is in this movement—multiplying, expanding, and deepening throughout history—that the external gaze present at the new countries’ origins became a permanent part of their reality.

What is true about ideas and men is also true of society. The effect of ideas originating from the external gaze has limits, which become more clearly apparent at the time the ideas are taking shape, contributing at least partly to the creation of a new society. And almost always, the process brings surprises. The Peruvian Garcilazo de la Vega discovered at one point that he was neither Spanish nor Indian, but mestizo. The Portuguese adventurers João Ramalho and Diogo Álvares, left on the beaches of the newly discovered Land of Santa Cruz to raise families, must have had moments of surprise with their mestizo children who were neither Portuguese nor Indian but instead the first generation of Brazilians. In the same way, and directly related to the colonization efforts, there must have been a point at which the success of the Pernambucan sugar economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rendered the old colonial model from Madeira a distant memory. Similarly, Brazil saw very early—in the first half of the seventeenth century in Pernambuco and in circumstances that would lead to war with Holland—signs that a new nation was beginning to take shape.

Religious and profane gazes also mingled in another fundamental aspect. Both England’s and Iberia’s former colonies share not only a religious origin but the fact that they are “new countries.” In the sixteenth century these countries were a novelty in the history of the world—a novelty that religious controversies helped to accentuate through the basic theme of the conquest of humanity for God. This religious aspect in turn highlights yet another feature, which is sometimes sacred but more often profane: the “new countries” are peculiar in that they are born of an intention. That is, they haven’t existed “forever” as some Old World countries can assert; they are born of an intention or intentions. As the Uruguayan poet Ángel Rama wrote, in the Ibero-American countries,

“the ideal preceded the material; the signs preceded things; the geometric tracings of the outlines preceded our cities; and the political will to exploit preceded our productive system.”³⁰

By any analysis, both the English and Iberian colonies were born of a European gaze that was often mistaken, beginning with Columbus who imagined he had reached the Indies. Despite its many mistakes, the gaze also found reasons for amazement at and excessive violence against nature and the Indians. But at least after the mid-sixteenth century, the mistakes were never enough to keep the peninsular countries from trying to construct new countries in this part of the world. More quickly than is recognized, Portugal and Spain moved from the phase of establishing commercial outposts in America to adopting a colonization strategy. In Portugal’s case, it was an obligatory strategy, given the ambiguity with Spain around the Treaty of Tordesillas, the fear of French and later Dutch ambition, and of pirates of varying origins.

Thus if history is always a construct, in the new countries it is more so than anywhere else. These countries owe their existence to projects that came as much from the State as from the Church, and in Brazil’s case, from the Society of Jesus in particular. In the case of the United States, they came from dissident religious movements that sought new territories for preaching the faith. Whatever these projects might have been, they served as proof that these countries came into being as modern history did, and constitute an essential part of it. This means that their construction, whether following “straight” or “crooked” lines, has a permanent commitment to modernity.

ENDNOTES

¹ Carlos Fuentes, *El Espejo Enterrado*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1992, p. 17.

² There are notable exceptions to this one-dimensional, economicist view of history, among them the work of Gilberto Freyre and Sergio Buarque de Holanda—both culturalists—and more recently, Raimundo Faoro, who has focused more on history and political thought. These authors' signature works include: Gilberto Freyre, *Casa grande e senzala* (Critical edition, edited by Guillermo Giucci, Enrique Rodríguez Larreta and Edson Nery da Fonseca, first edition Madrid, Barcelona, Havana, Lisbon, Paris, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Lima, Guatemala City, San Jose: ALLCA XX, 2002); Sergio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil* (in *Intérpretes do Brasil*, edited by Silviano Santiago, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Aguilar, 2000); and Raimundo Faoro, *Os donos do poder: Formação do patronato político brasileiro* (Porto Alegre, Editora Globo, 1976).

³ Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*, New York, Vintage Books-Random House, 1958, p. 5.

⁴ Obviously, Boorstin's reference to "Americans" is cultural rather than geographic, as it is in this essay, whose references to "Americans," "Anglo Americans," and "North Americans" are interchangeable. To describe the people usually called "Latin Americans," I prefer to use the term "Ibero-American," which obviously includes all Americans of Portuguese and Spanish descent. It also includes Mexico, which is geographically North American, as well as the "Hispanic" populations residing in the United States. The term "Latin American" would be too broad for the purposes of this essay, since it includes American people of French origin who, nevertheless, are not studied here.

⁵ Joaquim Pedro de Oliveira Martins, *História de Portuga*, Lisbon, Guimarães Editores, 1991, p. 9.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Many analyses of Iberian culture can serve as references here. Worth special mention are the descriptions of "personality" and "adventurer" in Sergio Buarque de Holanda's *Raízes do Brasil*. See also Miguel de Unamuno's *Sentimento Trágico de la Vida*, Madrid, Akal Editor, 1983. Unamuno places feeling and faith above reason, forming the basis for a critique of reason and its impersonal, abstract norms.

⁸ Gilson, Étienne, *La Philosophie au Moyen Age*, Paris, Payot, 1952, p. 540.

⁹ Richard Morse, *O Espelho de Próspero: Cultura e Idéias nas Américas*, Sao Paulo, Editora Companhia das Letras, 1988, p. 22 and after. This book, originally written in English as *Prospero's Mirror*, was overlooked and not published in the United States but has had a fertile application in Brazil. The works it influenced include Luiz Jorge Werneck Vianna's "Americanistas e iberistas: a polemica de Oliveira Vianna com Tavares Bastos," in Elide Rugai Bastos and João Quartim de Moraes, editors, *O Pensamento de Oliveria Vianna*, Campinas, Brazil, UNICAMP, Editora da Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 1993.

¹⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Unwin University Books, London, 8th edition, 1967.

¹¹ Morse, p. 45.

¹² Morse, p. 42.

¹³ Cited in Antonio José Saraiva, *História da Cultural em Portugal*, Lisbon, Jornal do Foro, 1962, p. 372.

¹⁴ Saraiva, p. 372.

¹⁵ Saraiva, p. 391.

¹⁶ H. de Oliveira Marques, *History of Portugal (Volume 1: From Lusitania to Empire)*, New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1972, p. 284. Original in Portuguese: *História de Portugal (Vol. I: Das origens às revoluções liberais)*, Lisbon, Palas Editores, 1975, 151).

¹⁷ Saraiva, p. 11.

¹⁸ Fuentes, p. 202.

¹⁹ From John County's important *Slavery in Brazil*, 1881.

²⁰ One year before Independence, in 1821, the University of Coimbra Press would publish the *Memoria* of João Severiano Maciel da Costa, the future Marquis of Queluz, on the necessity of abolishing African slavery in Brazil: "In Brazil, as a result of the accursed system of slave labor, the population is constituted in such a way that there is no class which can truly be called a people." As Wilson Martins points out, this observation would be repeated "by Louis Couty sixty years later, with the same truth but with considerably greater success among Brazilian readers." Wilson Martins, *História da inteligência brasileira*, São Paulo, T. A. Queiroz, 1992, vol. 2, p. 105.

²¹ Oliveira Vianna, *Populações meridionais no Brasil. Populações rurais do centro-sul*, in Silviano Santiago, editor, *Intérpretes do Brasil*, vol.1, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Nova Aguilar, 2000.

²² Father Serafim Leite confirms Azevedo's view: " 'Because of the particular conditions in America, the Jesuits could not be the same mere missionaries that they had been in Asia: they were also colonizers.' " Quoted in Laerte Ramos de Carvalho, *As reformas pombalinas da instrução pública*, São Paulo: Edusp/Saraiva, 1978, p. 105.

²³ Gilberto Freyre, *Casa grande e senzala*. Critical edition, Guillermo Giucci, Enrique Rodríguez Larreta and Edson Nery da Fonseca, editors. First edition Madrid, Barcelona, Havana, Lisbon, Paris, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Lima, Guatemala City, San Jose: ALLCA XX, 2002, p. 231.

²⁴ It is important to mention, albeit briefly, the "Protestant question," which was absent in Spain and Portugal and their colonies in contrast to France and England and their colonies. This was because Protestants were never numerically significant in the Iberian countries. They would only become important in the Ibero-American countries in the last decades of the twentieth century, with the growth of diverse evangelical denominations.

²⁵ Saraiva p.278.

²⁶ The Spanish *encomendero* did not own the land, which continued to be the Crown's property under the *encomienda* system, but he acquired the privilege of charging the indigenous community under his rule tribute in gold, specie, or labor. Along with the Crown, he assumed the responsibility of "hispanicizing" the Indians and indoctrinating them in the Christian faith.

²⁷ Myrdal, Gunnar, *American Dilemma—The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1944.

²⁸ Ângela Alonso, *Idéias em movimento. A geração 1870 na crise do Brasil-Império*, São Paulo, Paz e Terra, 2002, p. 58.

²⁹ Barleús's comment is quoted in Latin ("*Ultra equinoxialem non peccavi*") in Manuel da Nóbrega, "Nota Preliminar," *Cartas do Brasil*, Belo Horizonte-São Paulo, Editora Itatiaia-Editora Universidade de São Paulo, 1988, p. 7.

³⁰ Quoted in Werneck Vianna, p. 352.