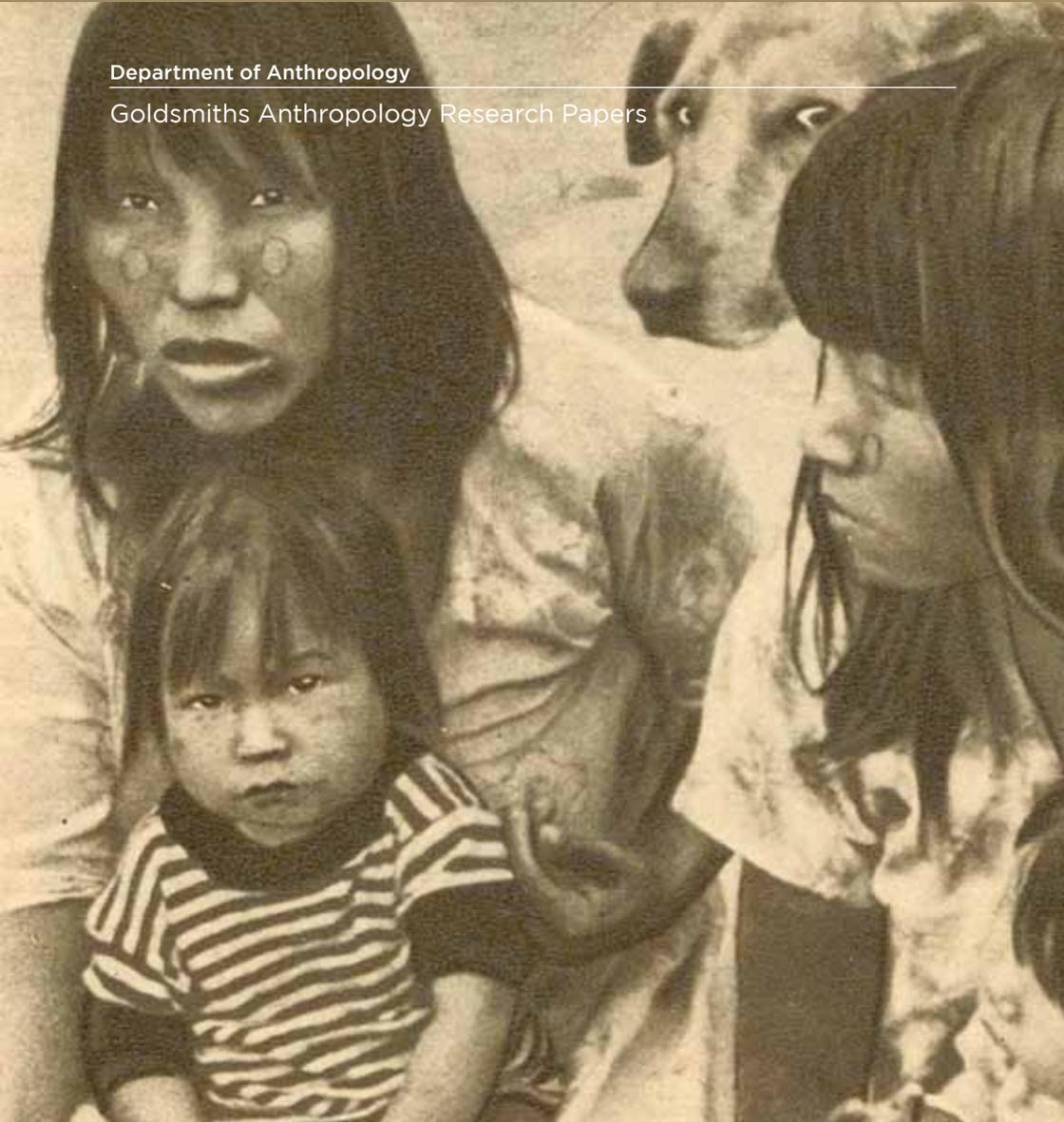


Department of Anthropology

Goldsmiths Anthropology Research Papers



**Indigenism and Cultural
Authenticity in Brazilian Amazonia**

Stephen Nugent

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Editors: Mao Mollona, Emma Tarlo, Frances Pine, Olivia Swift

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GARP Number 15

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Stephen Nugent teaches anthropology at Goldsmiths. His most recent book is *Scoping the Amazon: Image, Icon Ethnography* (2007).

ISBN 9781-9041-58981

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First published in Great Britain 2009 by Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross SE14 6NW, U.K.

Additional copies of this publication are available from the Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, U.K.

Syncretism and essentialism

It is well known that the conquest of New World peoples, commencing in the late fifteenth century, had devastating consequences across both continents as well as the Caribbean. In the aftermath of conquest, however, and with the subsequent establishment of diverse colonial societies, the place, status and life-chances of subject peoples varied enormously. The extent and significance of this variation defeat the utility of expressions such as 'the South American Indian'. Even the briefest examination reveals a complexity of historical, cultural and religious factors that – at this stage – militates against satisfactory pan-continental generalizations.

In this paper I look at some issues concerning the paradoxical status of the Indian in Brazil, numerically insignificant (perhaps 300,000 out of a population of 180,000,000), but symbolically vital to Brazilian national identity. Ramos (1991) refers to this phenomenon as the 'hyper-real Indian'. This extreme example of simultaneous over- and under-representation in the national imagination produces, it is argued here, an unstable notion of indigenism and one that is subject to arch-political manipulation.²

Contemporary Brazil, in common with other New World states, does acknowledge to some degree the cultural authenticity claims of First Nations peoples dispossessed/disenfranchised in the course of conquest and colonization, but there is also a crucial sense in which indigenism and cultural authenticity are opposed concepts in Brazil. The reason for this is that cultural authenticity writ large in Brazil is represented most forcefully by complex syncretic claims (e.g., that Brazil is a racial democracy) rather than based on recovery of atavistic, essentialist origins. It requires no overdeveloped sense of cynicism to regard some of these syncretic claims (e.g., fusion of cultures) as rhetorical and often rather shallow, but they emphatically represent an official view although one that has been the focus of much discussion and dispute for centuries.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ESRC Seminar Social Policy, Stability and Exclusion in Latin America: Ethnicity, Gender and Identity on 27 February 2003.

² It is counterintuitive – but typical of the politics of indigenism in Brazil – for example, that under the regime of Fernando Collor, the process of indigenous land demarcation was accelerated and that under the regime of Lula it has become regressive.

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The now-official version of this syncretism is famously represented from the late nineteenth century onward in the work of influential public intellectuals such as Paulo Prado, Oliveira Vianna and especially Gilberto Freyre. Earlier manifestations of the syncretic tendency, in the prescriptions of the Marquis of Pombal in the mid-eighteenth century (with regard to the positive value of miscegenation between colonists and indigenes for the sake of the Amazonian labour pool), for example, and in later comparisons of slavery in various regions of the Americas following Tannenbaum (1963/1948), frame the issue as a long-term feature of Brazilian racial discourse.³

Although Tannebaum's endorsement of the relative merits of slavery in Brazil has been widely disputed and derided by social scientists (not to mention ordinary Brazilians), there is still a widely held view that inter-racial relations in Brazil more closely approximate a desirable state than is true elsewhere. William Styron (1963),⁴ for example, a novelist of advertised liberal stripe, writes in a review of the reprinted Tannenbaum volume that:

[I]t is a striking fact that today there is no real racial 'problem' in Brazil; a long history of miscegenation

has blurred the color line, legal sanctions because of race do not exist, and any impediments toward social advancement for the Negro are insignificant. That this is true is due to an attitude toward slavery which had become crystallized in the Portuguese and Spanish ethic even before slaves were brought to the shores of the New World. For slavery (including the slavery of white people), as Tannenbaum points out, had existed on the Iberian peninsula throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Oppressive an institution as it may have been, it contained large elements of humanity, even of equality, which had been the legacy of the Justinian Code.

Discussions of race in Brazil have exceptionalist qualities which are not exhausted – even if they are dominated – by disputes surrounding the question of racial democracy. The main point is that syncretism, whether viewed positively – as was clearly the case in Freyre's culturalist account (see Cleary n.d. for discussion) – or with

³ In his account, Portugal's long quotidian familiarity with Africans, through Moorish domination, allowed a so-called benign slavery to prevail in Brazil (in contrast to the less 'familial' North American brand).

⁴ www.nybooks.com/articles/13784.

despair – as in the cases of Euclides da Cunha and Gobineau (see Schwarz 1999), has been placed at the centre of the modern nation-building project of Brazil. In its most reductionist form, Brazilian syncretism invokes notions of European mental agility, African physical fortitude and Indian natural nobility, but even these crude tokens of racial myths of origin are themselves qualified: the Europe of the magic triad is less mother empire Portugal than it is France (especially the France of Comte and Benjamin Constante) and Britain; the Africa was a continuously renewed Africa in as much demand for slave labour exceeded the capacity of the Brazilian slave population to reproduce itself; and the Indian virtually disappeared in the early modern period. Demographers are of the view that upwards of 90 per cent of all native peoples had disappeared within two hundred years of contact (see Denevan 1992). Thus, we have even in the basic elements of syncretic Brazil a compromised ‘authenticity’ such that the exceptionalist case made on behalf of Brazil by Brazilians and others is far from a simple subject of analysis. Indeed, the demotic racial codes that prevail in Brazil are difficult to calibrate with those of the official census (see Telles 2002 for discussion).

‘Racial democracy’ – a problematic term in any circumstances – becomes shorthand for an unresolved debate in history and the social sciences, one whose core concept, race, is by most scientifically reputable accounts, meaningless⁵ despite its ubiquity and social utility. While ‘racial democracy’ is highly recognizable as a feature of Brazilian discourse, and is for some a defining feature of Brazilian national identity, it is questionable whether this national preoccupation is autochthonous rather than of distinctively non-Brazilian origins. In *The Spectacle of the Races*, for example, Lilia Schwarz (1999) persuasively argues that the racial debate that underpins a substantial part of the nation-building myths of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Brazilian commentators consists of selectively and unreflectively appropriated bits of European racialogical speculation that were mobilized by competing intellectual institutions⁶ in Brazil seeking to claim a central role in constructing the new republic. There is not much consistency to these borrowed fragments of nonsensical speculation aside from

⁵ See Travasso and Williams (2004) for recent discussion.

⁶ Their geographical distribution – from Belém to Rio – reflected the regional, oligopolistic character of political and economic power in Brazil.

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the assumption that phenotypical differences among human groups have some significance, but this fact hardly stands in the way of such debates taking on lives of their own.⁷

The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) has for decades compiled counterintuitive portraits of racial distribution, using the categories white, black, brown (*parda*), Indian, or Asian. According to Levine and Crocitti (1999: 386):

In the 1990 census, based on the IBGE's five terms for skin color, the Brazilian population is divided up as follows: 55.3 percent white, 39.3 percent brown, 4.9 percent black, and 0.5 percent Asian; no statistics for Indians were provided.

This rendered account of racial distribution takes place against the following taxonomic backdrop: in 1976, IBGE collected the terms used by Brazilians themselves to identify their skin colour (recognizing that Brazilians include attributes other than skin colour – hair texture, ear shape, etc. – in ascertaining significant differences) and 134 terms were collected. These included not only the predictable range of sub-sets (*branca*/white as well as *branca-suja*/dirty-white, *alva*/pure white, *alva-escura*/off-white, and *alvarinta*/bleached white) as well as

distinctions that appear not to depend on colour categories (*burro-quando-foge*/'burro-running-away' and its antonym *cor-firma*/'no doubt about it' (Levine and Crocitti 1999: 386-7).

Regardless of one's views about the accuracy of the relationship between perception and representation,⁸ it seems clear that Brazilians (like other people) both overvalue and undervalue perceived racial differences as marked by skin colour across such a variety of social contexts that the fixity of 'race' is belied.⁹

As the IBGE data make clear, 'Indianness' is statistically inconsequential in census terms. Brazil's 350,000 Indians constitute far less than one per cent of the national

⁷ Multicultural discourse – in no small part a culturalist critique of traditions of bio-cultural determinism and racism – has inadvertently supported a new kind of racist discourse: acritical multiculturalism's emphasis on essentialism and the irreducibility of culture neatly complements a crude biological determinism. See Turner (1994) for related discussion.

⁸ And Sapir and Whorf still have their defenders. For an analysis that strictly distinguishes between perception and representation, see Hirschfeld (1996).

⁹ Travassos and Williams (2004) note that, 'Parra et al. have recently shown that skin color in Brazilians cannot be used as a genetic marker, because physical traits have been shown to be a poor predictor of African ancestry in this population'.

population). Yet 'the Indian' has a very public role in Brazil in terms of nation-building ideology (one leg of the racial tripod), as exemplified in demotic speech ('lazy as an...') and – in recent decades – as a mainstay in the discourse of 'politics from below' as prominently revealed in the expansion of parastatal/non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially those directly concerned with indigenous rights (Brazil has some 300,000 NGOs; see Edwards and Fowler 2002). The simultaneous centrality (an element of the national iconic triad) and marginality of 'the Indian' may appear baffling or paradoxical, but is at the heart of the so-called 'Indian problem' in Brazil. As noted earlier, Ramos (1991, 1998) in one of the most sustained and insightful commentaries on 'the Indian problem' has identified at the centre of this complex domain not 'the Indian' but the 'hyper real Indian', the native agent who in pursuit of human rights is obliged to acquiesce to the contradictory expectations of non-Indians.¹⁰

Before looking further at Ramos' analysis of the dilemma of Indians' pursuit of sovereignty within the framework of the state, it is useful to disaggregate – however sketchily – received notions of what the Indian represents in the contemporary politics of Brazil from what is known about Indians from the ethnographic, archaeological and historical records. This exercise is important not only from the point of view of dislodging a stereotypical Indian society (small-scale, hunter/forager/horticultural, remote forest-dwelling, technologically rudimentary: the archetypal noble savage) that is perhaps less typical of pre-conquest social formations than is commonly imagined, but also from the point of view of putting the Indian presence prior to the emergence of 'the Indian problem' into a perspective less burdened by pathological metaphors.

¹⁰ Under federal law Indians still appear to be 'more or less competent' (that is, have the status of wards of the state), yet full competence (citizenship, right to a passport, etc.) comes at the cost of denial of Indianness as primary identity (as opposed to 'Brazilian').

The origins of the modern Indian in Brazil

Amerindian ethnography in Brazil since the Second World War has produced a rich literature based on case studies of individual societies. For the most part these societies are (or were) located far away from white settlements, a strong indicator borne out by the historical record that Indian societies' life chances diminish in direct relation to the degree of contact with colonists and colonial society. The characteristic generic Indian society reflected in the bulk of ethnographic studies has, implicitly but more often explicitly, been regarded as a stunted kind of society whose development has been held in check by the natural constraints of the humid neo-tropical forest. Such concepts as 'carrying capacity' (with a knapsack of Malthusian connotations) and 'protein hunger' (with strong carnivore-centric connotations) have featured prominently in the normative, cultural ecological accounts of Amazonian 'natural savagery' (with its attendant metaphors of nomadism, primitivism, atavism, heathenism and cannibalism; see Ramos 1998 for extended discussion).

The historical record is fragmented, but at its core is a very different kind of 'typical' Amazonian society, one that

clearly includes forest-dwelling Indian societies, but alongside large-scale sedentary riverine societies. The first accounts by European travellers portray an Amazonia with profoundly different social characteristics than those found today, or indeed since the eighteenth century.

There has been some overlap in modern accounts: Curt Nimuendajú (né Unkel) famously pursued excavations of so-called *terra preta* (black soil) sites in the period before the Second World War, confirming the plausibility of earlier reports of large populations, but in recent decades, a number of archaeologists including Roosevelt (1991) and Neves and Heckenberger (2001), have provided substantial evidence confirming the existence of Amazonian riverine societies of a scale and complexity not seen since the earliest years of colonial contact. Simultaneously, geographers and demographers have substantially increased estimates of pre-colonial populations in the region. When Steward published his influential *Handbook of South American Indians* (1946-50) it was estimated that the pre-conquest Amazonian population was in the range 500,000 to one million. Contemporary estimates are in the range five to 15 million (Hecht and Cockburn 1989a: 12).

The point of this slight digression is two-fold, first that contemporary Amazonian and Brazilian Indians are presented in national terms as a special kind of Indian, an exemplar that serves not the interests of Indians as indigenous peoples (i.e., in terms of an accurate portrayal of their history and former mastery of the Brazilian landscape), but those of a nation state which has imposed itself upon what was left of the Indian world post-conquest and rendered a kind of Indian suitable for that new nation's image of itself; or as Ramos (1991: 94) has put it:

Indigenism's actors play their roles on a stage that has been erected on the ruins left by the internal conquest of the Indians. This stage is animated by the most discordant points of view and by divergent ethical, social, and political interests.

Second, contemporary claims for indigenous land demarcation are widely seen by white Brazil as out of proportion, on a scale inappropriate for nomadic aboriginals. Ignorance about the Indian of the past is highly functional from the point of view of a state that wishes to minimize the importance of pre-conquest peoples' domestication of 'green hell', 'the final frontier', or 'the lost world'.

The modern Indian: 'relatively incapable'

A syncretic, modern nation which as a colony was able to free itself of imperial control with relative ease, Brazil – not unlike the U.S. – has a relationship with the past quite different from that of European nations which use institutions such as museums and practices such as archaeology to make often vaunted claims about their superiority (e.g., direct line back to Athenian democrats). There is an alternative practice in Brazil and the U.S., however, concerning claims to early tool-making immigrants from Asia, hence the passion surrounding the significance of the clovis point dates (for a taste, see Slayman 1996). In Brazil, archaeology appears to be much less valued socially, but the importance of 'the earliest Brazilians' is no less diminished even if official policy towards indigenous peoples is perversely contradictory. An outstanding example of such a contradiction is provided by the case of Shavante leader Mario Juruna (the first Indian to become a Federal Deputy). Invited to attend the Tribunal of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in Paris, where cases concerning genocide against three indigenous groups in Brazil were to be publicly aired, Juruna asked FUNAI

(the National Indian Foundation and *in locus parentis*) to assist him in acquiring a passport. His request was turned down by FUNAI's Indigenist Council who feared – correctly – that Juruna would not hesitate to condemn Brazil's sorry record in defending the rights of Indians. There were many reasons given for the refusal (foreigners' meddling in national affairs; participation would concede that there was a basis for the tribunal; Juruna did not speak the languages of the Nambikwara or Yanomami – among the groups bringing charges against the state – therefore could not represent them; that he was an Indian, child-like ward of the state, not an adequate representative of Brazil; and so on). Juruna eventually received a passport when the Tribunal elected him president of the jury and the Brazilian court was effectively shamed into submission. (The protracted debate over Juruna's right to a passport is analysed at length and with great subtlety by Ramos 1991: 104-14).¹¹

As this and many other examples reveal, Indians are 'denied the status of nations by the Brazilian government' and 'their position is kept in a liminal ambiguity that is fertile ground for legal experiments and interpretation' (Ramos 1991: 95). By law, for example, Indians as citizens are 'relatively incapable'

and are analogous to children in being wards of the state. Hence, even land demarcation (a term denoting a legal transfer of title from the state to an Indian group), a tortuous, step-wise bureaucratic process characterized by intractable delays, does not actually confer ownership on Indians, only the right to possess the land: the sub-soil remains with the state such that, 'their lands are taken to be public goods, and, as is notorious in the country, a public good is good for private appropriation' (Ramos 1991: 97). Despite ostensibly progressive features of indigenous legislation embodied in the new constitution of 1988, it is hardly clear that Indians are in a convincingly stronger position than they were prior to the new constitution (whose composition followed the return to civilian rule 1985, after two decades of rule by 'the generals'). Current conflicts, for example, in Mato Grosso do Sul involving Kiowa claims to land currently occupied by farming interests

¹¹ More recently (1988) two Indians representing a Kayapo group were charged with treason following a trip they made to Washington D.C. to meet with World Bank officials to protest over planned incursions in their region. The charges were eventually dropped although both Indians' effectiveness as political leaders was seriously undermined by intense media scrutiny and manipulation following a subsequent court case (see McCallum 1994).

and in Roraima involving Macuxi and Wapixana Indians whose federally conferred demarcation rights are being contested by local government interests, reveal the persistence of fundamental incompatibilities between the state and indigenous interests, and the seemingly intractable issue of how one sovereignty (that of the state) can tolerate the (limited?) sovereignty of sub-sets such as Indian groups.

Amazonia as a regional enclave

This discussion of indigenous policy in Brazil thus far has paid little attention to the fact that however central Indians are to the symbolic apparatus of the state, most of them live in a region of Brazil – Amazonia, comprising the states of Pará, Amazonas, Amapá, Roraima, Acre, Rondônia and parts of Mato Grosso, Tocantins and Maranhão – which is in many respects marginal. The rural oligarchies within whose alliances national political power has long resided are not well represented in Amazonia. The export economy which saw the national capital shift from Salvador to Rio to Brasília involved Amazonian production only to a modest degree (with the notable exception of the rubber industry, 1820-1915). Although Amazonia has

great symbolic significance in terms of the nation's projection of itself (and the region accounts for about 60 per cent of the national territory) it is burdened by a pre-modern caricature that overemphasizes exotic, natural, mythical and frontier elements at the expense of a more prosaic reality. This (in part) actual and (in part) imagined marginality is not without advantages, however, as recent modernization experiments have shown: the rapacious, unregulated and thoughtless desecration of the region and its peoples by large-scale extractive industries and agro-pastoral development have been significantly enhanced by the region's appearing to be a virtually unoccupied natural landscape in which remnants of Indian societies and ersatz peasants carve meagre livings while awaiting the cargo of modernization.

One of the consequences of the promotion of this frontier image (and the period specifically discussed here commences c. 1970 and continues today) and the activities related to it has been the emergence of various forms of grassroots resistance and a new kind of agency attributed to Indians and others at the receiving end of national development policy. Although the viability of a pan-Indian organization has been episodic and

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less than emphatic, a capacity for mobilization has been evident. The successful disruption of plans to create hydroelectric dams within the Xingu River complex (1989) represented a significant milestone not least because of the show of solidarity amongst Indian groups otherwise quite resistant to the forging of what might appear to be fruitful alliances. Similarly, opposition to Decree 22/91 (1996), which granted non-Indian commercial interests the right to challenge official demarcations of Indian lands, has galvanized a pan-Indian solidarity.

This frontier aspect has also revived the image of the bold and aggressive Indian in both positive and pejorative senses. Attacks on road builders during the early stages of the construction of the Transamazon Highway led to the elevation of the image of the fierce savage (although arrows were hardly convincing evidence of the military might of Indians). In a positive sense, the alleged passivity of the timid nomad, humble servant of the forest, was forcefully dispelled both through collective action at the regional and national level and the emergence of media-savvy Indian leaders who press the Indian case on national and international platforms. Mario Juruna, for example, was notorious for his use of the tape recorder to document the

utterances of government officials with whom he came into contact, and Paulo Payakan (one of the Kayapo unsuccessfully prosecuted for treason) is an adept, mission-educated spokesperson whose public persona may include a leisure suit as easily as it does a feather headdress.

Amazonian regionalism, with its connotations of frontier, nature dominance and remoteness from the mainstream, also affects the way non-Indian Amazonians are perceived, among the best known of whom is Rubber Tapper Union leader Chico Mendes, assassinated in 1988. The emergence of these new Amazonian political forces has in crucial respects been a complement to Indian efforts to gain legal recognition of their rights, but the non-Indian ethnic/racial dimensions have been subsumed under a label that defines the actors not in terms of their origins, but in terms of their alleged dependence – like Indians – on a natural economy of extraction, hunting and gathering and horticulture, hence the generic label Forest Peoples.¹² In this case the disavowal of the centrality of race/ethnicity is partially a result of an environmentalist tendency to link social

¹² The 'Forest Peoples' designation refers to Indians, peasants and *quilombistas* (descendants of runaway slaves).

justice and environmental conservation, but the perception that Indian and other traditional Amazonian societies are united in their interests may be more rhetorical than substantive. The emergence of a Forest Peoples label is not an autochthonous development, but one that derives from NGOs and other lobbying interests in a manner like that of the state: the constructions placed on Indians conform to the needs of non-Indians. Even those who officially espouse the Indian cause have placed bureaucratic and professional efficiency as priorities which deny the faithful articulation of what Indians themselves take to be their own interests (see Ramos 1999: 272-6).

A similar contradiction has arisen in NGO mobilization on behalf of explicitly peasant interests in Amazonia which are often seen to be 'Indian-like' (in as much as they live in the hyper-real forest). Chico Mendes, for instance, representing rubber tappers seeking the establishment of extractive reserves, worked closely with the U.S.-based Environmental Defense Fund whose fundraising efforts involved portraying Mendes as a green politician rather than a red activist, and did so on the grounds that potential U.S. supporters were less likely to give money to a communist than an environmentalist. For some

this strategic compromise betrayed the fundamental purpose of the Rubber Tappers Union. (For a bitter exchange regarding this strategy see Hecht and Cockburn 1989b).

Another regional aspect that has bearing on racial and ethnic relations, although not necessarily with direct reference to indigenism, concerns the ways in which the demographic collapse following conquest has been compensated for by formal and informal means of labour recruitment. In Amazonia, the national solution to a labour shortage – importation of African slaves – was unsuitable in light of the relative ease of escape into the forest as well as environmental obstacles to plantation production. The emergence of rubber as a valued tropical preciousness (beginning in the early/mid nineteenth century) prompted mass migration of landless poor from northeastern states. Precise figures are not available, but it is commonly reckoned that at least 300,000 *nordestinos* entered Amazonia. Because rubber trees (*hevea brasiliensis*) were unsuitable for rationalization in commercial plantations (see Dean 1987), tappers had to follow the natural distribution of the species, resulting in a highly dispersed population of neo-Amazonians (as well as many Indians forcibly co-opted as tappers). At the

same time, Amazonia was significantly internationalized. The trade in rubber was directly between the region, via the major ports of Manaus and Belém, and Europe and North America, not with intermediation by southern centres of trade.

The compounded consequences of these demographic and trade-efficient features of the rubber industry, which lasted almost a century, were that Amazonia became a well-insulated enclave in which the dominant, mercantilist economic relations¹³ were agnostic *vis-à-vis* idioms of racial identity: as merchant capital is compatible with a range of labour forms (slavery, debt-peonage, the wage), so is it inclusive with regard to the cultural identities of commodity producers. This is hardly to deny the existence (and persistence) of potent forms of discrimination and prejudice based on raciological corruptions, merely to recalibrate their position in terms of a larger scheme of things in which racialized idioms were not the most important of cultural markers, but were subsumed under a mercantilist class structure in which subordinate social groups (Indians, *caboclos*, Afro-Brazilians) had a rough equivalence – perhaps not in terms of face-to-face interactions – but in terms of the dominant structural features of Amazonian society as a whole.

Regional enclave

Claims of cultural and racial/ethnic tolerance by historic and contemporary Amazonians may intermittently reflect self-serving and after-the-fact rationalizations, but the documented field experiences of many anthropologists and others living and working outside indigenous territories reveal a significant degree of ambivalence with regard to the centrality of racialized classification as a dominant cultural feature despite the apparent symbolic weight borne by such classification in the ‘land of racial democracy’. It follows that Ramos’ ‘hyper-real Indian’ is not dissociated from other kinds of Amazonian agency (in the sense that the latter are ‘real’ while the former is different, ‘hyper-real’), but it actually reflects features of the total system of racialized projection. There is a significant historical antecedent for de-racialized social identity in the *cabanagem*. The *cabanagem* was a popular revolt which took place between 1835–40 and involved the mobilization of Afro-Brazilians, Indians and peasants (*caboclos/mestiços*) united against

¹³ The argument that the long dominance of merchant capitalism had profound and unacknowledged effects on modern Amazonia is extensively pursued in Nugent (1993).

various fractions of a white elite. The 'mongrelization' of Brazil condemned by so many commentators (from da Cunha to Gobineaux) was typified in the mobilization of the diverse cultural fragments of Amazonia's colonial subjects.

The symbolic role of Afro-Americans¹⁴ in Amazonia at this date is significant and has been perceptively commented upon by Cleary (1998) whose analysis of the proto-proletariat of metropolitan Amazonia provides much insight into the construction of the racial/ethnic landscape of modern Amazonia. He notes, for example, that the racial lexicon of the North of Brazil was more extensive than elsewhere in Brazil (attesting perhaps to the relatively cosmopolitan nature of the region) and that the *taxa*, although initially organised as terms of descent, underwent a semantic shift to become terms of physical appearance (Cleary 1998: 133). With the inclusion of Jews (mainly from Morocco towards the end of the nineteenth century)¹⁵ as well as Japanese from the 1920s, Lebanese, French, British and Russians (among others) as well as internal migrants (especially *nordestinos*) there is a highly polygenic population, not one neatly or usefully encapsulated by a black/white/Indian system of classification. This is hardly to claim that forms of

discrimination (both persecutorial and merely contrastive) on narrow racial/ethnic grounds were banished (and certainly the singularity of Indians as different was a persistent feature), but unlike many other South and Central American countries, in Brazil and Amazonia there was much less convergence between racial and class status as in the formulation common in many other parts of Latin and South America whereby the low cultural and class status of Indians is counterposed against the high cultural and class status of those claiming primarily European identity, such that: *indio:low; ladino:high*.

It is a perverse curiosity that this kind of diminished dependence on racial/ethnic categories (and such mystifying folk notions as 'mixed blood') as codes for other kinds of social distinction is not widely referred to positively as 'racial democracy', but rather is typically referred to (often with strong pejorative connotations) as '*mestiçagem*' ('mixed blood' or mixed racial ancestry). This is an issue taken up by Schwartz and Salomon (1999) in

¹⁴ Significantly, they are generally referred to as 'slaves' rather than via a racialized term despite the fact that enslaved Indians are referred to as Indians, not slaves.

¹⁵ For a preliminary discussion of Jewish immigrants to Amazonia, see Nugent (2004).

an essay that argues for the inversion of the conventional view that *mestiçagem* represents *mongrelization*. Rather, they argue, ethnogenesis represents new categories of people, but not necessarily new categories of peoples, ‘and that for those that did, there were various choices for group definition besides internalizing the stigma of “mixed blood”’ (1999: 443). This seems to convey with accuracy a condition that prevails in Brazilian Amazonia, and helps explain the relative absence of terms used by non-Indian Amazonians to categorize themselves as a *people*. Schwartz and Salomon go further than this, however, and offer the argument that, ‘people of mixed birth formed not so much a new category as a challenge to categorization itself’ (1999: 444).

This restatement of what is implied by *mestiçagem* and the notion of ‘a people’ in the post-colonial South American context also has implications for a core notion of Indianness in Brazilian Amazonia: if focal concepts of ethnic/racial difference seem hard to pin down because they seem constantly to be renegotiated in a sort of compulsive relativising (e.g., X is black in relation to Y but half-caste in relation to Z except when Z is an urban senior addressing a rural female kin, etc., etc.), the Schwartz/Salomon suggestion provides a de-relativizing perspective by

making explicit how received European conceptions are both mimicked and refuted locally. Even though different Indian groups (the Mundurucú, say, or the Zoé) are unproblematically placed under the generic heading ‘Indian’ from the point of view of white society, this is not necessarily (in fact, probably rarely) the case from the point of view of any particular Indian group, which would typically adopt the position that it is a proper, pure Indian group while other Indian groups are polluted and lesser pretenders (*tupaíos*) or – in a word – *mestiços*.

The notions of Indianness attributed to Indians by non-Indians reflect often deeply embedded conceits on the part of the namers, not the named, and the presence of these conceits is strongly indicated by the continued reliance on folk notions such as race, mixed blood, half-breedness that have no scientific status, but considerable cultural authority.¹⁶ Racial categories that have coherence in one cultural realm (white discrimination against Afro-Brazilians is a reality regardless of whether Afro-Brazilians view

¹⁶ For an analysis of why discrimination based on phenotypical differences has persuasive power though the prejudicial content of such discriminations is clearly learned (i.e., cultural) rather than given behaviour, see Hirschfeld (1996).

themselves as Africans in Brazil or Brazilians who happen to look like Africans) are also prey to incoherence (as in the incommensurability of official racial census categories and subject-reported racial categories cited earlier). The notion of a pure, undiluted anthropological subject (whose pristine conservation is still seen in some quarters as a beneficent, if perhaps patronizing, obligation) implicitly rejects the possibility of self-determination suggested by Schwartz and Salomon's notion that *mestiçagem* represents not just a creative act, but in its challenge to categorization, a rebuttal of the notion of race. By one formulation cultural authenticity is conferred; by the other it is historically derived.

Is El Dorado really a platypus?

Earlier it was suggested that there were significant exceptionalist features in the position of indigenous peoples in Brazil. These include, for example, the discrepancy between high symbolic value (as in manifold, not status terms) and low proportion of national population as well as the correspondence between spatial and social marginality. There is another important aspect of exceptionalism, however, and this is one derived not

from the 'condition of the Indian', but from the 'condition of the state'.

In relation to the first kind of exceptionalism, Ramos argues that the voice of Brazilian indigenism is added to the chorus of universalism, citizenship and ethnicity (culture bearing groups encompassed by the expansionary nation-state) (1998: 94) such that Brazilian Indians are placed in the bizarre position of being foreigners in their own country. Dual-citizenship aside (e.g., Italian/Brazilian, increasingly appealing with the possibility of movement within the E.U.), in Brazil one may be a Brazilian, a foreigner or an Indian. The former two categories merge: foreigners may become naturalized, but Indians cannot for they are already 'naturals of the land' (Ramos 1998: 94):

Are they citizens? And, if deemed citizens, what kind of citizens would they be, given that they do not share the national language, history, symbols and the like, except in the specific context of interethnic relations?

The state's longstanding preferred outcome would be that Indians become 'emancipated', that is to say cease to be Indians. In much the same way that so-called 'free labour' is free only in the sense that it is free of any livelihood

option other than selling itself, so is an 'emancipated' Indian a contradiction.

In view of the long and complex history of the manipulation of racial categories in the debate over nation-building it is not surprising that the charged discourse of indigenism is seen primarily as an element or sub-set of a larger racial/ethnic debate. Yet these exceptionalist, indigenist features move not against a stable or uniform background ('the modern South American state'), but within the unique configuration of a semi-peripheral giant that de Oliveira, in his essay on the 'Brazilian platypus', argues has achieved a distinctive (exceptionalist?) form of *transformismo* (2003: 44). Like the platypus (an evolutionary dead end, a step behind Buffon's sad sloth, one maladaptation away from extinction¹⁷), for Brazil:

[It] is no longer possible to remain underdeveloped and take advantage of the openings allowed by the Second Industrial Revolution; and it is equally impossible to progress by digital-molecular accumulation – the internal requirements for such a rupture are wanting (De Oliveira 2003: 57).

By this reckoning, the current condition of indigenism in Brazil is defined both by an immediate and direct encounter

between Indians and the state as well as by the singular trajectory of the state itself. The 'Indian problem' reveals the contradictions of a state whose advances are still insufficient to dislodge it from its exceptional – and limiting – form of development, one of whose constituencies is 'the Indian'. That the fate of the Indian should be tied to the fate of Oliveira's platypus may be tragic, but is typical of the so-called 'Brazilian puzzle' (see Hess and Da Matta 1995, for examples). Brazil is an extremely wealthy country and has one of the most skewed income distributions in the world; Brazil is, with Mexico, a major example of an industrialized semi-periphery, yet still relies on the export of raw products for more than half of its foreign trade; as a syncretic nation, Brazil has a number of elaborate racial and ethnic codes, yet the Indian in most respects stands outside them, a social kind *sui generis*, but – strangely – a social kind often represented as a natural kind. De Oliveira adds to this 'puzzle' the defetishizing insight that the dilemma of 'the sleeping giant' lies not just in the labyrinthine nation-building

¹⁷ As quoted in Waterton (1944: 63), Buffon claimed that sloths were, 'the last possible term amongst creatures of flesh and blood, and any further defect would have made their existence impossible'.

project, but also in the global system in which Brazil endures a gradually worsening semi-peripheral position.

The notion of authenticity so often grafted onto indigenism is not only that declared, proclaimed and celebrated by adherents and their supporters, but it is also one derived from the historically specific features of Brazil's position within a global division of labour. A discourse about race, identity and ethnicity - the so-called 'Indian problem', for example - that confines itself to comparative analysis (as has so often been the case in studies of ethnic and class relations in South and Latin America) and loses sight of larger dynamics risks merely reproducing a debilitating folk discourse (syncretism, 'racial democracy', identity politics?) and at the same time disavowing the claustrophobic possibility outlined by de Oliveira, that is a Brazil in which the delusions of an 'evolutionary' development obscure recognition of the dramatic erosion of its very conditions of existence.

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