

## WHITENING, PROGRESS, AND THE TROPICAL LABORATORY: THE RECEPTION OF RACIAL THEORIES IN POST-ABOLITION BRAZIL

BRANQUEAMENTO, PROGRESSO E LABORATÓRIO TROPICAL: A RECEPÇÃO  
DAS TEORIAS RACIAIS NO BRASIL PÓS ABOLIÇÃO

EL BLANQUEAMIENTO, EL PROGRESO Y EL LABORATORIO TROPICAL: LA  
RECEPCIÓN DE LAS TEORÍAS RACIALES EN EL BRASIL POSABOLICIÓN

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### ABSTRACT

This article proceeds from the hypothesis that understanding the historical construction of racial hierarchies is indispensable to explaining the persistence of racism in Brazilian society. From a historical-critical perspective, it examines the formation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racial theories and analyzes how this theoretical and political repertoire was appropriated and re-signified in Brazil, particularly after the abolition of slavery. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in a bibliographical review of classical and contemporary authors whose research addresses racism, Eurocentrism, and coloniality. It concludes that confronting Brazilian racism requires denaturalizing the role of science in the production of hierarchies as a necessary condition for affirming the dignity and plurality of human beings, regardless of their differences.

**Keywords:** Slavery. Scientific Racism. Eurocentrism.

### RESUMO

Este artigo parte da hipótese de que a compreensão da construção histórica das hierarquias raciais é indispensável para explicar a persistência do racismo na sociedade brasileira. Em perspectiva histórico-crítica, são analisadas as teorias raciais dos séculos XVIII e XIX, examinando-se, também, como referido repertório teórico-político foi apropriado e ressignificado no Brasil, especialmente após a abolição da escravidão. Metodologicamente, adota-se uma abordagem qualitativa, fundada na revisão bibliográfica de autores clássicos e contemporâneos cujas pesquisas contemplam o racismo, o eurocentrismo e a colonialidade. Conclui-se que o enfrentamento do racismo brasileiro exige a desnaturalização do papel da ciência na produção de hierarquias, como condição para afirmar a dignidade e a pluralidade dos seres humanos, independentemente de suas diferenças.

**Palavras-chave:** Escravidão. Racismo Científico. Eurocentrismo.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo parte de la hipótesis de que comprender la construcción histórica de las jerarquías raciales es indispensable para explicar la persistencia del racismo en la sociedad brasileña. Desde una perspectiva histórico-crítica, examina la formación de las teorías raciales de los siglos XVIII y XIX y analiza cómo este repertorio teórico y político fue apropiado y resignificado en Brasil, especialmente tras la abolición de la esclavitud. Desde el punto de vista metodológico, el estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo basado en una revisión bibliográfica de autores clásicos y contemporáneos cuyas investigaciones abordan el racismo, el eurocentrismo y la colonialidad. Concluye que para hacer frente al racismo brasileño es necesario desnaturalizar el papel de la ciencia en la producción de jerarquías, como condición necesaria para afirmar la dignidad y la pluralidad de los seres humanos, independientemente de sus diferencias.

**Palabras clave:** Esclavitud. Racismo Científico. Eurocentrismo.



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## INTRODUCTION

Brazil became, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a privileged laboratory of racial experimentation, in which racial mixing, far from representing an ideal of harmonious coexistence, was frequently conceived as a problem to be managed by the State and by the elites. The local reception of deterministic, evolutionist, and eugenic theories, developed largely in Europe and the United States, opened a body of knowledge in which Black people, Indigenous peoples, and mixed-race populations were systematically associated with degeneration, pathology, and criminality.

This supposedly scientific framework ultimately provided the foundation for institutional practices that permeated law, medicine, policing, and public policy, reinforcing both material and symbolic inequalities. The coexistence of egalitarian discourses, embodied in legislation and official declarations, with discriminatory practices corroborates the idea that racial inequality is often reproduced under the guise of institutional "normality."

It is precisely within this context that the present study is situated. Proceeding from the hypothesis that racism constitutes a central analytical category for understanding the historical construction of racial hierarchies in Brazil, this article reconstructs some of the principal theoretical trajectories that shaped modern racial thought and examines how they were subsequently appropriated and transformed within the Brazilian context. From a structural

standpoint, the article is organized into three parts: (a) the first explains the relevance of the racial question to the analysis of structural racism in Brazil; (b) the second examines, from a historical-analytical perspective, the process through which hierarchies among human beings were constructed from Rome to the nineteenth century; and (c) the third investigates the specific *modus operandi* through which the underlying racial theoretical and political repertoire was appropriated and re-signified in the Brazilian context, especially after the abolition of slavery.

Methodologically, the study adopts a historical-critical perspective through a qualitative approach grounded in a literature review. To that end, it draws upon both classical and contemporary authors who examine the relationship between racism, Eurocentrism, and coloniality, as well as studies addressing the development of racial theories and their reception in Brazil.

## **THE RACIAL QUESTION IN THE WORLD**

The question of racism plays a central role in the present study because only by understanding this phenomenon is it possible to grasp the extent to which it has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the perpetuation of hierarchies based on phenotypic characteristics.

Accordingly, this section examines aspects of human segregation from Rome to the nineteenth century. It bears emphasizing, however, that the conception of racism that is of greatest interest to the present study emerged within the historical context in which Eurocentrism became dominant in the West, for it was only then that distinctions among human beings began to be systematically established on the basis of physical characteristics, such as skin color.

In this regard, the discussion of earlier historical periods serves an informative purpose, illustrating how human beings had already been developing strategies of segregation since the most remote times, although the present study focuses on the racial construction that emerged in Europe following the beginning of the intercontinental voyages.

### **Preliminary Reflections: On the Hierarchization of Human Beings from Rome to the Eighteenth Century**

Since antiquity, human beings identified similarities and differences among themselves. In Rome, individuals of non-Roman origin, especially those belonging to civilizations with which

Rome was at war and whose origins and cultural characteristics were often unknown, were referred to as *barbarians*. Western peoples of Christian tradition, in turn, commonly classified as *pagans* all those who did not share their religious precepts, thereby establishing a predominantly religious distinction. From a scientific perspective, however, proponents of deterministic<sup>2</sup> and positivist currents, strengthened during the nineteenth century, referred to the peoples of the "New World," particularly those of the Americas, as "primitives" (Schwarcz, 1996, p. 78).

Although numerous distinctions among human beings had been established since earlier historical periods, the differentiation of peoples became more systematic following the discovery of the "New World" (Todorov, 2005). From that moment onward, European natural philosophers and scholars focused on the exotic flora and fauna, as well as on the previously unknown civilizations whose customs were initially regarded as, at the very least, "picturesque."

With regard to the natural environment of the colonized territories, Europeans frequently drew comparisons with the biblical Eden because of the fertility of the soil, the diversity of the climate, and the richness of the flora, leading them to perceive, to a certain extent, an image of "paradise on Earth" (Souza, 1986). The customs of the inhabitants, however, provoked profound disappointment. Practices such as cannibalism, polygamy, and nudity outraged members of the supposedly "civilized" European societies, who seriously questioned the humanity of Indigenous peoples (Schwarcz, 2018, pp. 420–421).

The inability to understand the particularities of previously unknown peoples is well illustrated by the celebrated debate between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. The controversy centered on the legitimacy of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, the justice of war against Indigenous peoples, and the conditions under which their conversion to Christianity could be justified. Whereas Las Casas acknowledged the humanity and rational capacity of Indigenous peoples, despite regarding them as requiring Christian evangelization, Sepúlveda invoked Aristotelian notions of natural servitude and barbarism in order to justify Spanish domination over the Americas (Schwarcz, 1996, pp. 79–80).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Determinism is a school of thought that emerged in the late nineteenth century, according to which all events derive from prior causes. It therefore establishes relationships of cause and effect associated with the ideas of constancy, necessity, and predictability. See Schwarcz (1993).

<sup>3</sup> After embracing the Indigenous cause and joining the Dominican Order, Las Casas used his influence at the Spanish court to mitigate the suffering imposed upon Indigenous peoples by the colonization process. Although his ideas achieved relative success, they naturally attracted opposition in both academic and political circles, the most prominent of whom was Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. Sepúlveda wrote *Demócrates Segundo: o de las causas de la guerra contra los indios* in order to justify war as the appropriate means of conquering the West Indies. The two figures subsequently became the protagonists of the famous Valladolid Debate. Las Casas petitioned the Royal Council of Castile to prohibit the publication of Sepúlveda's work, fearing that its acceptance would further aggravate

At the historical moment in which European thinkers developed the first racial classifications, human differences were understood as the product of climatic and geographical factors, rather than biological ones. Consequently, many eighteenth-century racial theories considered it plausible that skin color could change if a particular group moved from a warmer region to a colder one (Buffon, 1839, p. 326).

The eighteenth century witnessed an intensification of debates concerning human inequality. In this respect, particular attention should be given to the Enlightenment, whose ideals were deeply rooted in the notion of human perfectibility and whose legacy was profoundly shaped by the French Revolution. Within this context, Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1755), contrasted the condition of human beings in the state of nature with the inequalities produced by civil society.

Although later interpretations popularized this reflection through the expression "the good savage," Rousseau's central concern lay in criticizing the historical development of civilization and the social institutions responsible for the production of inequality (Schwarcz, 2012, p. 10). From this humanistic perspective, reflection upon diversity became essential. Under the influence of the liberal revolutions and Enlightenment thought, the eighteenth century laid the philosophical foundations for understanding humanity as a single whole governed by the principle of formal equality.

Nevertheless, even within this historical context marked by liberal ideals, pessimistic theories concerning the civilizations of the Americas proliferated (Gerbi, 1982), among them those advanced by Buffon,<sup>4</sup> who defended the thesis that the inhabitants of the Americas were weak and immature. Observing the small size of the continent's characteristic fauna as well as the alleged fragility of its native populations, the French count concluded that America was an infant

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the condition of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Dissatisfied with the censorship of his work, Sepúlveda appealed to Rome for authorization to publish it. After learning of the controversy, Emperor Charles V ordered all printed copies of the work to be withdrawn and convened the Valladolid Debate in 1550. Held in two sessions, the debate unfolded as follows: in the first session, held in August or September 1550, Sepúlveda defended Spanish domination over the Indigenous peoples of the Americas; in the second, around April or May 1551, Las Casas argued against colonial violence and in favor of the humanity of the Indigenous peoples. For a more detailed discussion of the Valladolid Debate and the ideas of Las Casas and Sepúlveda, see Sousa (2019), Las Casas (2010), and Sepúlveda (1984).

<sup>4</sup> Georges-Louis Leclerc, Count of Buffon, was a French naturalist, mathematician, and writer. Buffon was a proponent of monogenism, believing in a single origin for all races, and endorsed the theory of racial degeneration. He regarded Adam and Eve as Caucasian and argued that other races had emerged as a consequence of environmental factors, such as sun exposure and inadequate diet. Following this line of reasoning, the French scientist believed that racial degeneration could be reversed through proper environmental control, allowing humanity to return to its original Caucasian condition. Among his principal works is *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, published in thirty-six volumes.

continent, naturally condemned to backwardness.

## THE RACIAL QUESTION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Throughout the nineteenth century, interpretations of the "New World" remained deeply polarized. As Schwarcz (1993) notes, this debate crystallized around three principal positions: (a) the profoundly dismissive assessments formulated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel regarding non-European peoples; (b) the proponents of monogenism,<sup>5</sup> whose conceptions were grounded in the biblical account of creation and, consequently, in the belief in a single origin for humankind; and (c) the proponents of polygenism,<sup>6</sup> who maintained that the human races originated from distinct lineages and therefore possessed different origins.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the growing prominence of the European bourgeoisie had become increasingly evident. Its growing sense of civilizational superiority fostered both the partition of the world and the colonization of territories previously unknown to Europeans. The notion of a linear and inevitable process of evolution left little room for questioning the presumed superiority of the European model of civilization, regarded as the highest expression of modernity. According to Dussel (2000a, p. 49), this conviction rested upon two principal assumptions: first, Europe's technological progress; second, the production of deterministic scientific knowledge, which gradually established itself as the dominant paradigm.

With the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, the foundations were laid for the consolidation of the evolutionist paradigm<sup>7</sup> (Marques Júnior, 2021, p. 63). Expressions such as "survival of the fittest" and "struggle for survival" quickly transcended

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<sup>5</sup> Monogenism is the theory according to which all humankind descends from a single original lineage. Historically, this conception was grounded primarily in the biblical account of creation, especially in the common descent of humanity from Adam and Eve. Accordingly, monogenists argued that the differences observed among human groups resulted from environmental, climatic, and geographical influences rather than from distinct biological origins. See Schwarcz (1993).

<sup>6</sup> Polygenism is the theory according to which the different human races originated independently from one another. In opposition to monogenism, its proponents maintained that each race constituted a distinct species endowed with its own physical, moral, and intellectual characteristics. This conception became one of the principal theoretical foundations of nineteenth-century racial thought by attributing a natural and permanent character to differences among human groups. See Schwarcz (1993).

<sup>7</sup> Evolutionism is the scientific current according to which the origin and transformation of species occur through a continuous process of evolution. With the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Charles Darwin proposed natural selection as the principal mechanism of biological evolution. It should be noted, however, that Social Darwinism did not derive directly from Darwin's own ideas, but from the appropriation of certain Darwinian concepts by later authors who extended them to the analysis of society and relations among human groups. See Schwarcz (1993) and Hofstadter (1992).

the field of biology and came to be applied to a wide range of other disciplines.

Within the humanities, the appropriation of Darwinian categories was both rapid and profound. Herbert Spencer argued that whatever proved advantageous in nature should likewise be advantageous for human beings and for society. Within this perspective, social evolutionism rapidly became one of the dominant intellectual currents associated with the origins of anthropology.

Taking technological development as the principal criterion of comparison, social evolutionists conceived humanity as a hierarchical structure resembling a great pyramid composed of successive stages corresponding to savagery, barbarism, and civilization (Quijano, 2011, p. 3). At its summit stood Europe; at its base, the Indigenous peoples of the "New World," regarded as representatives of an early stage of civilization.

Although the paradigmatic importance of evolutionism cannot be denied, it should be noted that many of its currents remained closely connected to the Enlightenment ideal of the formal equality of humankind. At the same time, however, numerous scholars, following the path previously traced by Buffon and de Pauw, developed a body of thought centered on human differences, giving rise to a scientific current of markedly deterministic orientation.

As Schwarcz (1996, p. 84) observes, polygenism experienced a renewed period of expansion during the second half of the nineteenth century. Arthur de Gobineau, whose *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* preceded the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, conceived races as permanent entities endowed with distinct moral and intellectual capacities, attributing civilizational decline to racial mixture. Building upon these earlier racial doctrines, later Social Darwinists appropriated selected concepts derived from evolutionary theory in order to transform racial differences into a supposedly legitimate object of scientific inquiry.

Within this intellectual tradition, two principal strands may be distinguished: geographical determinism and racial determinism. The former attributed decisive importance to natural factors such as climate and vegetation, maintaining that the historical destiny of civilizations depended fundamentally upon such conditions. Henry Thomas Buckle,<sup>8</sup> for example, argued that Brazil's luxuriant vegetation left little room for the development of civilization and human progress (Buckle, 1857, p. 692).

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Thomas Buckle (1821–1862) was an English historian and one of the leading proponents of geographical determinism during the nineteenth century. In *History of Civilization in England*, he argued that climate, vegetation, and other natural conditions exerted a decisive influence upon the development of civilizations. With respect to Brazil, he maintained that its exuberant tropical environment hindered the emergence of civilization because nature prevailed over human action. See Buckle (1845) and Schwarcz (1993).

The proponents of racial determinism, by contrast, as Banton (1977, p. 264) observes, directed their attention not toward the individual but toward the racial group to which the individual belonged. Accordingly, each person merely reflected the physical and moral characteristics attributed to his or her race. Such a conception proved fundamentally incompatible with nineteenth-century liberalism, whose gradual consolidation promoted the ideals of legal equality and social mobility after centuries of rigid social stratification.

In direct opposition to the principle of equality, authors such as Gobineau and Gustave Le Bon conceived races as autonomous, permanent, and immutable entities. Accordingly, every form of racial mixing was regarded from the outset as a mistake. As Schwarcz (1996, p. 85) notes, Social Darwinists sought to demonstrate the existence of "pure types," attributing biological and social degeneration to racial mixing.

Racial theories also triggered an elaborate political program advocating the subjugation and even the elimination of the so-called "inferior races." Such positions represented the radicalization of Social Darwinism and found their fullest expression in eugenics<sup>9</sup>. Coined in 1883 by the British scientist Francis Galton, the term expressed the idea that human intellectual capacities were fundamentally determined by heredity (Schwarcz, 1993, pp. 47–48).

Racial determinists, completely disregarding the individual dimension, directed their attention exclusively to the racial group and its presumed natural characteristics. Within this context, criminal anthropology, led by Cesare Lombroso, emerged from the premise that criminality, being hereditary, could be identified in advance through scientific methods.

According to criminal anthropology, it was therefore possible to identify criminals even before they committed a crime. Particular prominence should be given to the proponents of craniometry, among them Paul Broca, who argued that the measurement of skulls and the comparison of their morphological characteristics made it possible to establish hierarchies among individuals, peoples, and civilizations according to their presumed intellectual and moral capacities (Schwarcz, 1993, p. 30). These assumptions would later prove compatible with the premises of criminal anthropology, especially in the work of Cesare Lombroso.

Paradoxically, a theory that initially appeared destined to reduce the differences among

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<sup>9</sup> *Eugenics* is the doctrine formulated by Francis Galton in the late nineteenth century that advocated the "improvement" of the human species through the control of reproduction. Grounded in hereditary theories and profoundly influenced by Social Darwinism, eugenics proposed encouraging the reproduction of individuals considered biologically "fit" while discouraging—or even preventing—the reproduction of those regarded as "unfit." During the first decades of the twentieth century, eugenic ideas influenced public policies in several countries, including Brazil. See Schwarcz (1993) and Stepan (1991).

human beings ultimately came to support profoundly opposing conclusions. On the one hand, social evolutionists acknowledged the existence of hierarchies among peoples without denying the essential unity of humankind. On the other hand, Social Darwinists regarded racial differences as the fundamental organizing principle of humanity.

This historical reconstruction provides the necessary framework for examining how these theories were subsequently received and transformed in Brazil.

## **THE RACIAL QUESTION IN BRAZIL**

At the end of the nineteenth century, Brazil was undergoing a period of profound political instability. Slavery had been abolished in 1888 and, only one year later, in 1889, the Empire collapsed. These transformations triggered an intense debate concerning the new meanings of citizenship and, consequently, the manner in which the country's large Black population should be incorporated into the labor market.

Beginning in the 1870s, racial theories came to occupy an increasingly prominent place within Brazilian research institutes and educational institutions. A clear preference thus emerged for the theoretical models advanced by foreign proponents of Social Darwinism who, as previously discussed, defended the existence of immutable racial essences and regarded racial mixing as an inherently degenerative phenomenon (Santos; Barbosa e Silva, 2018, p. 256).

This development was by no means accidental. The racial question had already occupied a prominent place during the imperial period, particularly because of the Romantic nationalist project, which elevated the Indigenous figure to the status of a symbol of national identity. As Schwarcz (2012) observes, it is no coincidence that the young Brazilian monarchy embraced tropicality as an emblem of the nation, since it appeared capable of reconciling elements associated with European monarchies with Indigenous and African particularities. Thus, although the contribution of the Black population inevitably recalled the controversial legacy of slavery, the monarchy nevertheless sought to present Brazil as a nation distinguished by its unique racial composition.

The rise of Realism as the dominant intellectual current from the 1870s onward marked a decisive break with this celebration of diversity. In contrast to the Romantic perspective, many intellectuals dedicated themselves to warning against the alleged dangers of racial mixing, the supposed natural inferiority of the Black population, and, consequently, the need to promote the

whitening of Brazilian society (Skidmore, 2012, p. 81).

In May 1888, shortly after the abolition of slavery, several Brazilian newspapers published a controversial article by the Bahian physician and scientist Nina Rodrigues. In an article published shortly after abolition (Schwarcz 1993, p. 152), Rodrigues argued that human beings are not born equal. In direct opposition to the principles embraced by the legal order of the time, he rejected, on the basis of racial determinism, fundamental liberal concepts such as equality and free will.

According to Nina Rodrigues, physicians, rather than jurists, should occupy the central role in formulating policies to combat criminality, since only medicine possessed the necessary instruments to diagnose the mental pathologies allegedly responsible for criminal behavior. On this basis, he advocated the adoption of two distinct criminal codes—one applicable to Black people and another to White people—on the grounds that the two groups occupied different stages of the evolutionary process (Schwarcz, 1996, pp. 87–88).

To foreign observers, Brazil had long been regarded as a kind of natural laboratory because of the intense racial mixing that had characterized its historical formation. Arthur de Gobineau, who remained in Brazil for fifteen months as France's diplomatic representative, expressed, as Raeders (1988, p. 96) recalls, his discomfort with what he described as a population that was predominantly "mulata e assustadoramente feia."<sup>10</sup>

Racial mixing, one of the defining features of Brazilian history, was therefore not merely described; it was presented as the principal explanation for the country's backwardness. Even as liberal ideals continued to gain ground, racial interpretations became increasingly influential during the final decades of the nineteenth century, attributing Brazil's underdevelopment to the presence of Black and Indigenous populations (Chiavenato, 2012), who were regarded as responsible for the alleged "contamination" of the White race.

The accounts left by foreign travelers indicate that expressions such as "melhorar a cor" and "apurar o sangue" had by then become part of everyday language and were associated with strategies of social mobility. As Rugendas (1979, p. 140) observed: "O desejo mais pulsante do negro liberto era de que os seus descendentes pudessem, em algum momento, mediante o cruzamento com indivíduos de raças mais claras, integrar-se mais efetivamente à sociedade respeitável."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Translator's note: "mulatta and frighteningly ugly."

<sup>11</sup> Translator's note: "The strongest desire of the emancipated Black person was that his descendants might someday, through unions with individuals of lighter races, become more fully integrated into respectable society."

These accounts document the gradual dissemination of the ideology of whitening, according to which social respectability became inseparably associated with whiteness (Marques Júnior, 2021, p. 70). Thus, the permanent utopia of possible racial transformation became firmly established within the collective imagination.

In light of the widespread pessimism expressed by European and North American observers, the racial question gradually became one of the central themes in reflections on Brazil's future. Consequently, as Schwarcz (1993) emphasizes, many Brazilian intellectuals selectively appropriated, adapted, and reinterpreted theories developed abroad in an effort to construct a model of racial interpretation suited to Brazilian reality.

Over time, the ideal of the White race became increasingly associated with the idea of progress, particularly within the positivist framework inspired by Auguste Comte. For abolitionists who favored the country's industrialization, national progress could be achieved only through the importation of White wage labor. Within this perspective, Joaquim Nabuco (1988, p. 6) argued that Brazil's future depended upon the construction of a national identity through the "transusão do sangue puro e oxigenado de uma raça livre."<sup>12</sup>

Beginning in the 1860s, many abolitionists also contributed to disseminating the idea that relations between masters and enslaved people in Brazil had been predominantly peaceful, thereby reinforcing the interpretation that Gilberto Freyre would later formulate under the notion of racial democracy. Within this perspective, Nabuco (1988, p. 23) maintained that Brazil's principal conflicts were essentially conflicts between social classes, while the racial question occupied only a secondary position.

### **The Racial Question and Brazilian Scientific Institutions**

The origins of Brazilian scientific institutions date back to the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in 1808. It was only from the 1870s onward, however, that the country's schools of medicine and law, historical and geographical institutes, and ethnographic museums underwent a decisive process of institutional and scientific consolidation. Within these academic environments, owing in large measure to the prevailing orientation of the international scientific community, the racial question came to occupy a position of remarkable prominence (Schwarcz, 1996, p. 90).

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<sup>12</sup> Translator's note: "the transfusion of the pure and oxygenated blood of a free race."

Founded in 1827, Brazil's two law schools—Olinda, later transferred to Recife, and São Paulo—were established with the purpose of educating an intellectual elite capable of providing the recently independent country with genuine cultural autonomy (Lopes, 2013, p. 289). Despite this common objective, the two institutions differed significantly both in their theoretical orientations and in the professional profile of their graduates.

Whereas the São Paulo Law School was distinguished by its liberal orientation, the Recife School proved far more receptive to the racial question, adopting Social Darwinism and evolutionism as its principal theoretical references. Although the most elaborate reflections on racial mixing were developed within the academic environment of Pernambuco, Schwarcz (1993, p. 22) observes that it was the intellectuals of São Paulo who most effectively translated those ideas into concrete public policies, particularly through vigorous support for European immigration.

The importance of the Recife School in the formation of Brazilian social thought is closely associated with Sílvia Romero (1949, p. 104), the first intellectual to argue that Brazilian society consisted of "raças cruzadas" or "mestiços, se não no sangue, ao menos nas ideias."<sup>13</sup> The originality of Romero's thought lay not only in the conclusions he reached, but also in his adoption of ethnography as the principal interpretative framework for understanding Brazilian society. Consequently, the biological category of race came to permeate the entirety of his scientific thought.

Romero (1949) advocated a gradual process of whitening, conceived according to an evolutionary and Darwinian logic, which, in his view, could be accelerated through European immigration. Convinced that human beings were naturally unequal, he sought mechanisms capable of reducing both racial mixing and African influence in Brazil's biological, social, and political development.

It is well known that, between 1890 and 1914, approximately two and a half million Europeans<sup>14</sup> arrived in Brazil, their immigration having been strongly encouraged by the Brazilian State. In this regard, particular attention should be paid to a document issued by the

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<sup>13</sup> Translator's note: "crossbred races"; "mestizos, if not by blood, then at least by ideas."

<sup>14</sup> According to historical estimates, approximately two and a half million European immigrants arrived in Brazil between 1890 and 1914, attracted by public policies encouraging immigration and by the growing demand for labor following the abolition of slavery. A significant portion of the political and intellectual elite regarded this process as an instrument for accelerating the whitening of the Brazilian population, believing that European immigration would contribute both to national progress and to the country's racial "regeneration." See Andrews (1997), Skidmore (2012), and Schwarcz (1993).

*Diretoria Geral de Estatística*, cited by Andrews (1997, p. 97), which, in commenting on the results of the 1920 census, stated that the country was undergoing a gradual process of "arianização de nossos grupos regionais."<sup>15</sup>

It should be emphasized, however, that the idea of whitening the Brazilian population had become deeply rooted in the collective imagination long before European immigration reached the scale it would later attain. The foundations of this racial classification derive, to a considerable extent, from religious assumptions developed during the Middle Ages. Historically, white has been associated with goodness, innocence, and the divine, whereas black has frequently been associated with evil, sin, and the devil. Within this perspective, the transformation of evil into good and of the pagan into the believer was presented as the proper mission of the Christian faithful, in accordance with the precepts of Roman Catholicism.<sup>16</sup>

The first Brazilian schools of medicine likewise emerged following the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in 1808, as a response to the public health demands resulting from the sudden transfer of the royal court and its entourage. According to Schwarcz (1993), however, as also occurred with the law schools, it was only from the 1870s onward that these institutions acquired a more solid scientific and academic structure through the creation of new programs and the circulation of specialized journals.

The expansion of medical institutions became necessary not only because of the population growth resulting from the arrival of Dom João VI and the Portuguese court, but also as a consequence of the severe epidemics of cholera, yellow fever, and smallpox, whose spread contributed to the emergence of what came to be described as a genuine "hygienic mission" entrusted to physicians.

In the State of Bahia, forensic medicine became the predominant field of study, directing scholarly attention not toward disease or crime itself, but toward the criminal. Under the leadership of Nina Rodrigues, the Bahia School of Medicine embraced the theories of the Italian Positivist School of Criminology, according to which—as previously discussed—it was possible to identify potential criminals scientifically and, consequently, to prevent the future commission of crimes.

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<sup>15</sup> Translator's note: "Aryanization of our regional groups."

<sup>16</sup> The symbolic association of white with goodness and black with evil has its roots in the medieval Christian tradition. Over the centuries, white came to be associated with purity, innocence, holiness, and divine light, whereas black was linked to sin, darkness, the devil, and moral corruption. These symbolic representations contributed to the formation of a cultural imaginary that, in the modern period, facilitated the construction of racial hierarchies and the naturalization of the superiority attributed to the White population. See Delumeau (1989) and Eco (2013).

Bahian scholars therefore sought to correlate the assumptions of Lombroso's theory with the characteristics attributed to Black and mixed-race populations, in an attempt to construct an interpretative model for the alleged "racial degeneration" of Brazilian society. Phenomena such as alcoholism, mental illness, epilepsy, violence, and amorality gradually came to be invoked in support of Social Darwinist theses, attributing such "deviations" to particular races or to the effects of racial mixing.

Proceeding from rigidly deterministic assumptions, largely grounded in Lombroso's work, numerous physicians directed severe criticism against the Criminal Code, opposing the legal equality established by legislation inspired by liberalism. Within this perspective, Nina Rodrigues (1957) considered it unacceptable that identical legal rules should apply to racial groups which, in his view, occupied different stages of the evolutionary process.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, studies of mental illness assumed increasing prominence, further reinforcing the conviction that a natural hierarchy existed among races and that racial mixing was inherently harmful. It was argued that the high incidence of mental illness among Black and mixed-race populations constituted evidence of their alleged biological inferiority. As Schwarcz (1996, p. 93) observes, Nina Rodrigues tended to establish an almost mechanical relationship between racial mixing and mental illness.

In Rio de Janeiro, by contrast, attention focused primarily on public hygiene and, above all, on combating the epidemics that affected the country's major urban centers. During this period, Brazil also became known abroad as the "paradise of contagious diseases," particularly because of tuberculosis, whose spread produced especially devastating effects (Schwarcz, 1993, p. 165).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the success achieved in combating yellow fever significantly strengthened the political prestige of hygienist physicians, who promoted a project characterized by a high degree of State intervention in social life. Popularly described as a "health dictatorship," this approach sought to introduce coercive forms of intervention into the private sphere by imposing hygienic practices that until then had been little disseminated among the population.

Within this context, the concept of eugenics acquired particular prominence, closely associated, as Seyferth (2002) recalls, with the idea that racial mixing contributed to the degeneration of Brazilian society. An increasing number of scientific studies thus began to associate poverty and the absence of hygienic habits with Black and mixed-race populations,

proposing eugenic measures aimed at containing and segregating specific sectors of the population.

Eugenic practices encouraged unions between individuals regarded as healthy, with the objective of disciplining sexual instinct and preventing the reproduction of persons considered to carry hereditary defects that would inevitably be transmitted to future generations. Eugenics therefore formed part of a broader project aimed at creating a race regarded as biologically pure and strong.

Correlations were likewise established between immigration and the introduction into the country of pathogenic agents foreign to Brazilian territory. Such an interpretation was consistent with the position adopted by intellectuals associated with the São Paulo Law School, who opposed the entry of Asian and African immigrants on the grounds that they were physically and intellectually inferior.

In this regard, the following passage, published in the journal *Brazil Medico* (1912, p. 24), is particularly illustrative:

"Se a sociedade tem o dever de proteger o fraco, si ella deve assistência ao degenerado para o auxiliar a viver, tambem tem ella o dever de collocar-o na impossibilidade de ser nocivo, a fim de proteger a si mesma em sua evolução e de defender-se contra a propagação da degeneração. Tracta-se neste caso da defesa da raça, e por conseguinte da própria sociedade. Porque a salacidade desses idiotas e desses imbecis tem infelizmente consequencias, que são um desastre social. Os filhos oriundos da união desses degenerados, quer entre si, quer com indivíduos normaes, são idiotas, ou pelo menos seres que apresentam eivas profundas."<sup>17</sup>

As Schwarcz (2012, p. 18) observes, eugenicists, convinced that they could offer a definitive solution to the racial question and prevent the degeneration of Brazilian society, went so far as to propose the mass sterilization of individuals belonging to the races they regarded as inferior, as well as of mixed-race populations, with the objective of bringing about the disappearance of what they described as the "refuse" responsible for the country's moral and sanitary decline.

For scholars committed to eugenics, the solution to Brazil's racial question necessarily

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<sup>17</sup> Translator's note: "If society has the duty to protect the weak, if it owes assistance to the degenerate in order to help him survive, it likewise has the duty to render him incapable of causing harm, so as to protect itself in its own evolution and defend itself against the propagation of degeneration. In this case, what is at stake is the defense of the race and, consequently, of society itself. For the sexual drive of these idiots and imbeciles unfortunately produces consequences that constitute a social disaster. The children resulting from the union of these degenerates, whether among themselves or with normal individuals, are idiots, or at the very least persons who display profound defects."

required the adoption of radical measures of demographic control. Accordingly, during the first decades of the twentieth century, proposals advocating policies of racial segregation and demographic control enjoyed considerable support<sup>18</sup> (Stepan, 1991, p. 158).

Beyond the university environment, the racial question also occupied a prominent place within the Historical and Geographical Institutes, where a conception of history profoundly influenced by evolutionism and Catholicism became consolidated. The orientation of the *Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* (IHGB) was based upon the construction of an official, patriotic, and essentially White history, in which internal conflicts tended to be minimized through the naturalization of the country's principal social problems (Lisboa, 1995).

Ethnographic museums, in turn, devoted much of their activity to the study of foreign scientific production, showing comparatively little interest in Brazil's internal problems. The country's three principal museums—the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, the Museu do Ipiranga in São Paulo, and the Goeldi Museum in Belém—focused primarily on the controversies generated by European and North American evolutionism. Among the materials exhibited were the skulls of Indigenous peoples considered physically weak, together with other objects presented as evidence of the alleged infantilism of the Botocudo peoples (Schwarcz, 1996, p. 96).

Although they did not always explicitly endorse the theories of racial determinism, museums occasionally provided space for positions openly favorable to such conceptions. An emblematic example is that of Hermann von Ihering, director of the São Paulo museum, who, in 1911, amid the controversies arising from the construction of the *Noroeste do Brasil* railway—which was intended to cross territories occupied by the Kaingang people—publicly defended, in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, the need to eliminate that population, considering it an obstacle to the "desenvolvimento do progresso e da civilização" (Schwarcz, 1993, p. 64).<sup>19</sup>

As Schwarcz (1996, p. 97) recalls, João Batista Lacerda, then director of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, advanced one of the most radical formulations of the whitening thesis in the address he delivered at the First Universal Races Congress, held in 1911. In his view, the racially mixed Brazil of his own time would find "no branqueamento, dentro de um século, sua

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<sup>18</sup> The term *apartheid* designates the institutional regime of racial segregation implemented in South Africa between 1948 and 1994, characterized by the legal and political separation of the White and Black populations. In the present study, the term is employed analytically to refer to proposals for racial segregation advanced by certain Brazilian intellectuals during the first decades of the twentieth century, without implying the existence in Brazil of a legal system formally equivalent to that established in South Africa. See Stepan (1991).

<sup>19</sup> Translator's note: "development of progress and civilization."

perspectiva, sua saída e sua solução."<sup>20</sup>

It thus becomes evident that the formation of Brazilian society was profoundly influenced by deterministic theories, from which derived both the alleged inferiority of Black and Indigenous populations in relation to Whites and the notion that racial mixing constituted an inherently degenerative phenomenon.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The racial question in Brazil can only be properly understood when situated within a broader historical framework in which Eurocentrism and scientific theories grounded in determinism played a structuring role. The historical trajectory that culminated in the biologizing racial theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrates that the hierarchization of human beings did not arise abruptly but was progressively rationalized, refined, and naturalized.

As a former colony and a territory profoundly shaped by the forced displacement of enslaved African populations, Brazil became a privileged laboratory for the reception and reworking of such theories. The convergence of the national project, the ideal of progress, and the belief in the superiority of the White race created the conditions under which deterministic scientific discourse found particularly fertile ground in the country.

The debates that took place within the Historical and Geographical Institutes, the Schools of Law and Medicine, and the ethnographic museums demonstrate that science did not constitute a neutral space for the production of knowledge, but rather a powerful mechanism for the construction and legitimation of racial hierarchies. Within this context, authors such as Nina Rodrigues, Sílvio Romero, and other representatives of the period transformed categories such as degeneration, atavism, madness, infantilism, and criminality into interpretative frameworks through which the Black and mixed-race population could be "explained."

Within this scenario, the notion of the "defense of the race" came to function as a legitimizing principle for policies and practices of exclusion. The advocacy of the sterilization of so-called "degenerates," the proposal for separate criminal codes for Black and White people, and the association between poverty, disease, and skin color demonstrate how categories presented as scientific were instrumentalized in order to naturalize inequalities.

The narrative according to which Brazil was a harmonious society free from significant

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<sup>20</sup> Translator's note: "in whitening, within a century, its perspective, its way forward, and its solution."

racial conflicts contributed to shifting racism from the structural level to the realm of the exception, the "isolated case," or individual error. In this way, what had previously been asserted openly continued to operate in more subtle forms, concealed beneath cordiality and abstract egalitarian discourse.

It is therefore evident that confronting racism in Brazil requires far more than isolated reforms or mere declarations of equality. It presupposes a profound critique of the persistence of epistemic frameworks that continue to privilege the European perspective as the measure of the human while relegating other forms of knowledge to subordinate positions. It likewise requires a radical denaturalization of the role played by science in legitimizing hierarchies, recognizing that the production of racial, deterministic, and eugenic theories did not constitute a deviation from modernity but rather an integral component of a broader project of social control.

Recognizing the influence exerted by deterministic and eugenic theories in the formation of racial inequalities does not constitute merely an exercise in historical reconstruction. Rather, it is an indispensable condition for bringing to light the continuities that connect past and present. Only on the basis of such critical historical awareness will it become possible to build projects of society capable of breaking with the naturalization of racial hierarchy and affirming, in a substantive sense, the dignity and plurality of human experience.

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