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Corruption flows in our blood : mixture and impurity in representations of public life in Brazil

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"Corruption Flows in Our Blood": Mixture and Impurity in Representations of Public Life in Brazil¹

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with issues of democracy and citizenship in everyday life. It reports on the results of an investigation of social representations of public life in Brazil. The project concerned the quality and contradictory nature of public spaces in Brazil and how these spaces are represented in the register of symbolic experiences. Its main focus was on how Brazilians represent the space "out there", how they construct social knowledge about this space and, in so doing, how they look back on their own identity. The experience of everyday life involves representing – in diverse ways - the world that is "out there" when the privacy of the home is left behind. When the door of the private home closes behind one, one enters a space which is both physical and symbolic. This space makes its own demands upon people, requiring them to understand its signs, calling for socially established behaviors, etc. Which representations emerge from this encounter which a community has with its own sense of "we"? How do these representations come about? How do they reproduce or change old meanings and practices? How do they shape the object they represent? What is the social psychology of such transformations? And how can they help us to understand realities that can and should, if correctly identified, be open to further substantive transformations?

In the first part of the chapter I introduce the context and the theoretical approach of the investigation and outline its main findings; in the second part I discuss the representations uncovered with reference to² how the cultural exchanges between Europe and its other shaped and, indeed, still shape, the self-interpretation of the emerging peoples of the Americas, and³ the impact these representations have in contemporary Brazilian public life. These two aspects, I argue, are crucial to an understanding of the intimate connection between social representations and culture and of the existing relationship between symbolic constructions and their object.

The Background

To come to grips with a social reality which defies explanation, and to explain its specific logic and momentum, is a difficult task both conceptually and empirically. However, if the structural problems of Brazilian society defy the theoretical creativity of social scientists, they also reveal- in their dramatic social effects - the difficulties of sustaining a *sense communis* and a public life. The dilemmas of public life in Brazil are not new. On the contrary, they are as old as the history of Brazil itself and there is a long tradition of research, ranging from anthropology to psychoanalysis, concerned with the configuration of Brazilian public life and its structural problems (Faoro, 1975; Costa, 1988; da Matta, 1991, 1992, 1993; Chauí, 1992, 1993; amongst many others). Yet, to describe the situation of Brazilian society today is no easy task.

Five hundred years after its "discovery", Brazil still struggles with many of the problems which have marked its history, namely, famine, poverty, violence and corruption. The signs of social unrest are crude, and quite explicit. They stare one in the face and there is little one can do to avoid observing them. I am talking precisely about twenty-five million deprived children of whom, between seven and eight million live in the streets; about 24.7 million illiterates and one of the highest rates of child mortality in the world - 87 per 1000 (Dimenstein, 1991). I am talking about famine which is still the main cause of death; about the absence of sanitary conditions for a large proportion of the population, about the instability of the economy, which only recently managed to control an inflation rate which, for the previous years had varied between 20% and 25% a month - and still, these are only a few of the statistics describing our social conditions. Seventy-five per cent of Brazil's 150 million people now live

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² Sources: IEGE - Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (the official Statistics Office in Brazil) and World Bank.

³ At times when some streams of post-modern critique praise the end of history and the dismissal of the subject, I think it is important to reaffirm that history exists (it certainly insists) and it *has* a subject.

in urban areas. Over twenty cities have more than a million inhabitants and *Rio de Janeiro* and *Sao Paulo* are two of the five largest cities in the world. Brazil has the highest concentration of land ownership in the world - as high as the concentration of income. The richest ten per cent of the population earn half of the national income (53.2%) and the poorest ten per cent receive less than one per cent (.6%).

In contrast: Brazil is a rich country. It is the fifth largest country in the world and, industrially, it ranks eleventh in the world league. Indeed, Brazil's economy is strong.

Its industrial sector is comparable to those of developed capitalist economies. Natural resources are plentiful, ranging from the Amazon jungle to the fields in the south. This, maybe, is the first big contradiction shaping public spaces in Brazil: the extreme, but highly concentrated wealth and the extreme, but widely distributed, poverty. Inequality in Brazil is not a political slogan - it can be found throughout the social fabric.

Any reflection on the nature and meaning of the public sphere in Brazil must depart from these realities. Recent research covering the last decade of our history - the decade of the transition from dictatorship to democracy - has revealed a highly problematic landscape (Moises & Albuquerque, 1989). Failure to resolve economic and social problems and increasing frustration with the institutions of the state in general - which are marked by corruption, inefficacy and bureaucracy - have led to what I would call a *disenchantment with the public sphere*. Some of the symptoms of this disenchantment are clearly apparent in everyday life and nowhere can this be better seen than in criminality which, in the Brazilian case, has become a social pathology.

More quietly, less brutally than on the streets, but just as effectively, the political arena has been one of the major sources of distrust and disenchantment with public life. Corruption with impunity is an old issue and its taken-for-grantedness in everyday life is symptomatic of its embeddedness as a pattern of social behaviour. The gulf between public rhetoric and private enterprise is enormous. The distance between words and deeds, the autonomy of language when spoken by politicians, where anything can be said, where words acquire their own meanings, all unconnected with what actually happens, permeates the chain of social relationships. When explanations for this yawning gulf are discussed in public, they are expressed in terms of private reasons. What sounds like magic realism, becomes, in reality, fact.

The assessment above may sound too pessimistic if images of an "other" Brazil are to be brought into focus. Carnival, music, popular culture in the streets, solidarity in *the favelas*, resistance, *mestizaje*, art, humour and literature comprise the other face of Brazilian society. The richness of Brazilian culture, and that of Latin America as a whole, is well-documented and whoever knows Brazil can testify to the intensity of its culture. In fact, the interplay between culture and politics in Brazil is complex and will be discussed more fully later. Suffice it, for the present, to say that the institutional void between family and state in Brazil - typical of societies with problems in consolidating democratic forms of government - originates in part in the pervasiveness of emotional and family ties throughout the social and political fabric (de Aragão, 1991). Brazilian anthropologists and sociologists alike have been at pains to make sense of the enigma of a culture rooted both in collectivism, solidarity and emotion and in authoritarianism, corruption and violence (daMatta, 1991; Ortiz, 1986; Chauí, 1993). It is precisely these disjunctions which present the most challenging paradox in the constitution of public life in Brazil. Not only because they blur the frontiers between public and private life; they also produce a specific space of contradictions which defies the very relationship between representations and reality.

Most of these phenomena, to be sure, originated in colonial times. The emphasis on dogma and hierarchy which characterised the culture of Iberian Catholicism, the weight of patrimonial confusion between private and public rights, the various forms of corruption by heads of important families (including nepotism and favour), and even the structure of Latin thinking itself, with its preference for discourse over the empirical (Eco, 1989) are as old as the rituals of magic and dance performed by the Indians and by the African slaves. Actually, the encounters engendered by the conquest of the Americas are not only the site of the symbolic struggles that redefined European identity. They are also considered to be at the very heart of the inception of Latin American societies (Orlandi, 1993).

Unity in extreme diversity has been the hallmark of Latin American culture. As Fuentes (1988) points out, Latin America is black, Indian and Mediterranean. It was the magic universe of the indigenous peoples, with their respect for the sacred and the mysterious that the Iberians met for the first time. Todorov (1992) has shown how, at the heart of this encounter and its subsequent development, the question of the relationship between self and other arose. No other encounter, he argues, is so extreme

or so exemplary: "the discovery of America, or the Americans, is certainly the most astonishing encounter of our history. We do not have the same sense of radical difference in the 'discovery' of other continents and other peoples: Europeans have never been altogether ignorant of the existence of Africa, India and China" (Todorov, 1992:4). Besides, the path from discovering, taking possession and destroying, which marked the conquest of the Americas, is a paradigmatic case of relation to alterity. It is the capacity to meet and to understand the other in his otherness which explains the fact that, notwithstanding the military superiority of the Aztecs, their knowledge of the terrain and their supremacy in terms of numbers, they were defeated. The Spaniards could perceive what the Aztecs could not: their different vision of the world provoked the Aztecs to consider the Spaniards as part of their mythological universe. The Spaniards by contrast, saw the Indians as a remote, different and distant other, whose role they could not assume (Mead, 1934). Understanding otherness therefore is not a sign of tolerance in Latin America: the genocide of the sixteenth century, the largest in human history, shows that understanding the other is not the same as co-existing with otherness and appreciating difference: it can also be dangerous.

The populations coming from Africa in the centuries which followed comprise yet another tradition in the culture of Latin America. The African people, who with their enslaved labour, produced much of the wealth of both colony and metropolis, survived mainly by defending and diffusing their own culture, principally their music and dance. In African cultures music is an integral part of the religious life of the community, which expressed itself through rituals, myth, dance and sacred objects (Rowe & Schelling, 1991). Music and dance are interwoven and the black body, caught in the motion of dance, enslaved labour and music, became one of the means through which the black subject not only resisted, but transformed itself into an object of desire.

These historical encounters might explain the profound faith in the power of ideas over facts in Latin America; they can explain why art and other forms of cultural expression have been the main site of resistance and change throughout the continent. But, above all, they could explain, a *deep sense of "otherness"* in Latin America, which since those times is both a characteristic of cultural expression and a sign of danger. Yet, such encounters might also explain the strength of personalism, the victory of the paternalistic *caudillo* and the weakness of civil societies, for' kinship, historically, has been the essential form of sociality in Latin America.

The problems identified above, arising from quite specific historical, social and economic circumstances, affect human experience in all its domains and go far beyond the realm of economic exchanges. This is where one needs to consider the symbolic effects of such a situation. History and social structures are co-constructed by social psychological subjects, who know, act, invest with affection and render with meaning the realities in which they live.

The Public Sphere

Debate about a public sphere is not, of course, restricted to Brazilian society. Actually, the debate about a public sphere lies at the very heart of contemporary discussions concerning the limits of democracy and of citizenship. When, in the 20s, Walter Lippmann (1927) wrote *The Phantom Public* he was already pointing out that there is "nothing particularly new in the disenchantment which the private citizen expresses by not voting at all". His proposed solution was to delegate the functions of the public to a group of competent experts, since there is simply not enough time in the day for a citizen to perform all of the tasks expected of him.

Lippman's recommendations were unequivocally elitist and remote from the agenda of a critical theory of public life. But, odd as they may be, his remarks seem amazingly to the point. Today, perhaps more than ever, the *res publica* has been called into question.

Taking the work of Habermas (1989; 1992) as a starting point, social scientists have queried both the denotation and the connotation of the public sphere. How does the public sphere epitomise the principles of freedom, equality and solidarity which, since the 18th century, have been the cornerstones of western rationality? The work of Habermas is centred on the emergence, development and transformation of the bourgeois public sphere in Europe and remains the most complete account, to date, of this new category of capitalist society. Habermas defines the public sphere as a space where

citizens meet and talk to one another in a fashion which guarantees access to all. It is a sphere where the principle of accountability is developed leading to a transformation in the *nature* of power as such. Power, indeed, can be exercised, but it must be exercised in an accountable and visible fashion. Habermas is concerned to demonstrate and to discuss how the critical functions of the public sphere are weakened through its structural transformation. Consumerism, the mass media, an expansion of the state in advanced industrial societies, are all elements debilitating the contemporary public sphere and provoking what Habermas calls a "refeudalization of the public sphere". Although his critique is sharp, Habermas, in describing how the public realm unfolds and declines in modern societies, is concerned with demonstrating how it evokes a concomitant commitment - as a space which can be recovered; as a project that can still sustain the rationalisation of power through public discussion.

Hannah Arendt, another important contributor to the debate, takes the Greek experience of the polis as her starting point. *The Human Condition* (1958) is, beyond doubt, a tribute to the public realm, which she describes as the space where people can enact in speech and in deed the plurality and uniqueness which characterise the human condition. The public realm is the space which belongs to all, and is common to all. Because it demands the abstraction of purely private interests, the public sphere is conducive to the production of permanence and history, insofar as it allows the life-span of each person to be transcended. It is, perhaps, in Arendt's oeuvre that one finds the closest expression of the public sphere as a *normative* concept. By grounding the public sphere in the human condition of plurality, she calls our attention to the need for recognising the multiplicity of social logics characterising human existence.

At a time when post-modern critiques champion the supremacy of differences for their own sake and conceive of public life as sheer fragmentation, Arendt's account seems more necessary than ever. For plurality, the quintessence constituent of public life, does not lead necessarily to fragmentation. To be different for humans is not the same thing as being apart from each other; on the contrary, the very commonality of the public realm allows differences to appear. How can one recognise difference if not in relation to alterity? And yet, difference is not as sovereign as some streams of post-modernism would insist. Criteria for establishing the legitimacy of differences are achieved through dialogue and joint action, activities which are part and parcel of the public realm. In this process, different perspectives constantly meet, compete, negotiate, re-define themselves, are accepted or discarded. That is why the acknowledgement of different perspectives and attempts to negotiate them in public always presupposes a common foundation upon which the terms of the debate take form. In the current debate about the public sphere, notions such as a common basis for public debate are often considered out of place. Of course contemporary societies produce fragmentation and dispersion; one just needs to look around. But to reduce the interpretation and assessment of contemporary societies to their conditions of actualisation is to impoverish social thinking by depriving it of any critical endeavour. Far from being wiped out by the fractures to be found at the core of our contemporary societies, the notion of a public sphere remains a project to be achieved.

Now, how can a social psychologist look at these issues? Traditionally our social psychology has been concerned with the private subject, or even more narrowly, with the private individual. Such a concern has shaped whole programmes of research where attitudes, feelings, cognitive processes and so forth were considered essentially personal. Yet, I would contend that the meaning of the public sphere and the form it assumes in different societies has concrete implications for social psychological phenomena. Research developed around the theory of social representations corroborates this view, and in this sense, comprises a new paradigm for the understanding of social-psychological phenomena. Drawing as it does on both sociological and psychological traditions of research, with ancestors as diverse as Durkheim, Piaget and Freud (Moscovici, 1989), the theory endeavours to counteract a purely individualistic perspective and to resolve many of the dichotomies such as those between subject and object, individual and society and between theory and method that have so plagued the history of social psychology. Over against a philosophy of the "pure" subject and a philosophy of the "pure" object, the theory of social representations emerges as a framework which centres its epistemic gaze on the relationship between the two. As such, it escapes from being either a social psychology of the isolated subject or a social psychology bereft of people.

Moreover, and perhaps even more relevant to the problem in hand, social representations themselves are symbolic phenomena produced in the public arena. They are rooted in the meetings, in the cafes, in the streets, in the media, in the communicative practices of the public sphere (Jovchelovitch, 1995). In such spaces social representations incubate, become crystallised and are transmitted to others. This is where a community as a whole develops and sustains a knowledge of itself, that is, social representations.

In the Field: Searching for the Meaning of the Public Sphere

In order to investigate representations of public life, it was first necessary to identify the object of study - the public sphere - and to consider how it might be approached. Table 1 reveals the various aspects of the object of study together with the techniques used to explore each of those aspects.

Table 1: The object and methods of approaching the public sphere

The Public Sphere and Its Actors		Methods
The space of the street	„ordinary citizen“	focus groups
The mass media	mass media	content analysis
Institutional politics	politicians	narrative Interviews

The public sphere is thus operationalised along two dimensions: *the space of the streets* (which corresponds to the 'natural', day-to-day settings of public life) and *the arena of politics* (which corresponds to the institutionalised public sphere). Both dimensions reflect significant aspects of the concept of the public sphere. On the one hand, the space of the streets represents a space which is common to all, which presupposes access for *everyone* in contra-distinction to the private space of the household. On the other hand, the realm of politics, which is *par excellence* the realm of the public sphere, insofar as it involves (at least ideally) the notions of decision-making about life in common and accountability for those decisions. The mass media of communication are fundamental to the constitution of the public sphere. I am considering the media as the *medium* of the public sphere and I have treated them as such, analysing their contents in relation to the dimensions mentioned. Hence the public sphere involves, here, two spaces (streets and politics) and one mediator (the press). From these three dimensions emerge three others. They concern the strategic social actors who, routinely, on a daily basis, re-enact the public sphere. These strategic social actors are politicians, the "citizen in the street" and the media. The media are also considered as social actors in so far as they are characterised by *intentionality* and produce an *effect* on the web of social relations. Content analyses of the press, focus groups and narrative interviews together comprise the range of techniques selected to assist in both the quantitative and the qualitative analysis of the representations.

From the Space Out There to the Space Within: Social Representations of Public Life in Brazil

The three empirical studies - the focus groups, the, narrative interviews and the content analysis of the print media - produced strikingly similar representational fields, which allowed for a triangulation of the data (Flick, 1992). As we just saw, the object "public life" was explored in terms of the streets and political life. Violence, fear, threats coming from every angle, the struggle for survival, inequalities, misery and separateness were the main signifiers giving meaning to the streets. Corruption, self-serving interests, mistrust, the split between the omnipotence of power and the impotence of those subjected to it, and the law as a source of ambiguous messages were notions giving meaning to political life. These, descriptions did not appear as loose concepts, They were intertwined with a particular set of explanations and of causes which were used to alleviate the otherwise unbearable situation of a common life represented in such stark terms. Thus this difficult state of affairs was linked to a theory of human nature and, more specifically, to a theory of the nature of the Brazilian character. It was through a discussion of the nature and being of Brazilians that the nature of public life could best be understood and justified.

It was in the qualification and the interpretation of this character that the different voices which were heard in the course of the research constructed a matrix of the representations of public life. The chain of associations linking the streets/the people to political life/politicians and political life/politicians to the streets/the people - an association in the data that was truly remarkable - had, as its generative nucleus the idea of a generalised self, the Brazilian. Whether it was the mentality of Brazilians the nature of Brazilians, the moral crises of Brazilians, the body of Brazilian or the 'being' of Brazilians, these were the notions used to explain and to link the representations of the streets to the representations of the body politic. The themes in the data were bound to a reflexive mode of reasoning in regard to human nature, moral values, and the conflict between reality and aspiration. What they expressed was a "state of being" which maps onto a "state of affairs", which organise it and, in turn, returns to that "state of being".

What about this "state of being"? It is "essentially corrupt", "impure", plagued by a "lack of unity" and characterised as "lazy". That is why the streets and the practice of politics in Brazil are as they are. The streets are a place of "indifference", "bars", "a war of all against all", "fear", "inequality". Politics are conducted with "indifference", "individualism", "apart from the people". Corruption, the major reality in politics "mirrors the streets" and, paradoxically, in spite of all attempts to keep the issues separate, the unity is re-established by "we get what we deserve" or "every people has the government it deserves": "we mirror each other". There various words and metaphors deployed in the talk of the different groups are strikingly similar. They relate, on the one hand, to separateness, to being apart, to fractures which range from metaphors of war and houses protected by metal bars, to the "mentality of Brazilians" which discriminates against, and is indifferent to, others. On the other hand, they relate to togetherness, to fusion, to mirroring. People who, whether they like it or not, have come together, just to find themselves, explicitly because of their mixing, "essentially corrupt" and "impure", contaminated by a virus called Brazil. The problem here is not one of objects usually classified as otherness, such as madness (Jodelet, 1991). The problem is how a society represents *itself* only to find the notion of its own image as threatening, contaminated and dangerous. The problem, therefore, is how otherness, most of the time carefully maintained at a distance, turns out to be at the very core of the representations which a society develops of itself.

Mixture and Impurity: Corruption Flows in the National Blood

Odd representations? No doubt. But they are quite close to old symbolic constructions which have permeated Brazilian thought and thought about Brazil since the nineteenth century. It is no coincidence to find the problems of identity, miscegenation, and contamination (corrupt blood) intertwined with the interpretation of public life. Establishing links between the illnesses of Latin American societies and the illnesses of hybrid peoples in general is constitutive of representations which, originating in Europe, sought, in purification, separation and exclusion, possible solutions to the problems of Brazil and of Latin America in general.

The representations reported above may sound remote, even unreal, to anyone unfamiliar with the Latin American 'question'. Yet, they are compelling evidence in the debate surrounding issues of cultural production, identity and public life in Latin America. Much has been written about the problem of mixture, or corruption in the blood and social life of all those countries whose primary identity was defined for them through their confrontation with a European centre (Bhabha, 1994; Dusserl, 1993; Orlandi, 1993; Ortiz, 1986; Ribeiro, 1994; Said, 1993). Notions of mixture and impurity, which were at the heart of European fears throughout the period of colonisation, have been powerfully projected and then reflected in the experience and self-interpretation of colonial peoples. By the nineteenth century some of these fears had acquired the status of scientific disciplines (e.g. colonial psychiatry), and the links between mixture, racial degeneration, illness and social backwardness were well consolidated, both in the centre and at the periphery (McCulloch, 1995; Young, 1995).

Degeneration, though never far from colour, has been more than just colour in Brazil. When Field Marshal Floriano Peixoto, dictator from 1891 to 1894, dispatched over 5000 men to impose the authority of the Republic on the rebellion at Canudos, he declared "as a liberal, which I am, I cannot wish for my country the government of the sword; but, and there is no one who does not know this, because the examples are there for everyone to see (...) this is the government which knows how to purify the blood of the social body, which, like our own, is corrupt". He apparently knew what he was saying. As Borges (1993) points out, degeneration in Brazil was a "psychiatry of character, a science of identity, and a social psychology." As in Europe, the concept of degeneration, provided grounds for thinking that national decline is to be understood through the metaphor of an ill body: the nation is comparable to a sick man.

"Corruption has no cure": the metaphorical use of corruption as an illness and one for which there is no cure, anchors it in two very old representations. One is the organic analogy between a corrupt public life and impure blood. The other is fatalism, the loss of a sense of historical time, of something which has no cure, no remedy. I already mentioned the first representation. Let us explore it in greater depth, for the links here are remarkable. Whether it is in a newspaper interview with a well-known Brazilian doctor, or in the voice of politicians for whom corruption is a "national malady", or in the discussion of any of the focus groups, for whom corruption was always linked to human nature and to the being of Brazilians, the metaphors point to a problem of illness and of degeneration. But corruption, as a national problem, has been leaping from political discourse to medical discourse for at least two hundred years in Brazil, something quite considerable for a country that has less than five hundred years of official history. One actually could go back to the first weeks of the "discovery" when Pero Vaz de Caminha wrote to the Portuguese king about the new land: "its waters are endless and everything will grow because of the waters it has. But if there is anything Your Majesty can do, the best will be to save this people".

A land where everything grows needs, like a garden, to be cultivated. It is no accident that, in the nineteenth century, Brazilian social thought identified the diversity of its culture, the different "levels of civilisation", as both a symptom and a cause of a national malady. Taking on board European theories of degeneration, three major themes emerged: (1) the disintegration of the national character into a

sterile laziness; (2) the diversity of mentalities in a tropical, primitive environment; (3) the analogy between social relations and parasitism. These themes, first proclaimed in a full bio-medical context in the 1880s and 1890s, continued in a more attenuated form in Brazilian social thought through to the 1930s. The identification of a "lazy Brazilian" character syndrome was the most important of these themes. The "ideology of laziness" was a stereotype which scientific thought elaborated and made more precise.

A hundred years of solitude and independence failed to alleviate these notions; they are still being voiced by Brazilians. They are used to represent public life and, as previously, they are both an expression (or a symptom) and a cause of the current malaise. They provide the Brazilian community the possibility of naming and explaining what is happening and making sense of it. Because of their very nature they produce contradictory effects, which draw upon both the positive and negative aspects of cultural mixture.

"We love; We Hate": Ambivalence in the Representational Field

Dull scenario? Indeed. However, is it possible to conceive of these representations only in terms of old ways of thinking which provide them a more secure anchor? I think not. The reasons are manifold but for reasons of space I shall discuss the one most directly related to the problem of contamination. If we look to the nature of the anchors themselves, they are not free from contradictions. This is the case, because the same logic that generates metaphors of illness and degenerated blood provides the elements for attraction and fascination which leads to miscegenation. Desire for a strange, different body also permeates representations of mixture, giving a character far from being purely negative to the blending of different people. The many narratives which appeared in the data, particularly in the groups, mostly involving black people, are dear evidence of that. The development of Brazilian thought and literature across the centuries (de Sant'Anna, 1993) furnishes further evidence. The various encounters between Portuguese settlers, indigenous peoples, and black populations are fraught with metaphors of passion, creativity, and fertility. Examples of the passions provoked by black people in white landowners abound both in reality and in literature. They all engendered a social imagination where blacks and indians transform the desire they arouse into a source of their own possible, though limited, power. This was particularly true in the case of blacks. There was a game to be played between people who were alien to each other; this game was also a way of transgressing boundaries. Thus, a gap emerged between a tendency to mix, linked to a desire for and a fascination with the different other, and a dominant self-interpretation which makes purity and whitening a valued goal to be achieved.

The ways in which representations of public life are constructed reveal a high degree of ambivalence. Images of corruption - of the social life, of Brazilian blood - are not incompatible to images of a pleasurable universe, where 'miscegenation' and hybrid forms of life play a central role. It is the impure togetherness which generates ambivalence. The blend of repulsion and desire; the ideal of purity and the actual - extremely concrete - "impurity" of miscegenation translates into a dialectics of irreverence and ambiguity which has characterised the data in the present study and, which indeed, is corroborated by the anthropology of Brazilian culture.

Re-presenting the Public: The object and its representations

An assessment of the possibilities of changing the pattern of Brazilian public life must consider how symbolic constructions about the public sphere evolve and give shape to the object they represent. In the current debate about public life in Brazil and everywhere for that matter - the contradictions of Brazilian culture and the representations which shape the possible knowledge which Brazilian society has of itself must be taken into account. These representations are neither "distortions" of reality, as the positivist tradition would read them, nor autonomous in relation to reality, as the post-modern trend in social psychology would believe them to be. Rather, they are in a relationship to this reality. It is the nature of this relationship that needs to be understood, not only because of its empirical consequences but also because of the theoretical problem which it poses. Different representational systems involve different commitments with the object(s) they represent. Contrary to scientific knowledge which seeks a relationship of total commitment to the truth of its object, social representations express rather a commitment to the truth of the lived, with its illusions, its sorrows, its practicalities and its wisdom. But no representational system can do without an object, from which it draws both its conditions of possibility and its desire to signify.

As I hope I have shown with the Brazilian case, social representations of public life cannot be conceived outside of the social and cultural circumstances which shape the objectivity of the Brazilian public sphere in each of its historical moments. But precisely because of their commitment to the lived, social representations can invest with a human face the historical objectivity of the public sphere, allowing us to see how historical objectivity acquires life and meaning through the symbolic activity of social actors. Perhaps no other misunderstanding in the social sciences is so potentially dangerous as the idea that objectivity and subjectivity are mutually exclusive. By giving sovereignty to one at the expense of the other, we preclude both our historical substance and our ability to reshape it.

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