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In the periphery of fear*

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Of the various insecurities and uncertainties of late capitalism, fear has acted as a force that drives subjectivities and functions as a powerful ally of the enforcers of social control. In Brazil, the diffusion of the fear of chaos and disorder has traditionally had the effect of activating strategies of neutralization and disciplining of the population.

In order to discuss this fear in the periphery of capitalism, I would like to quote from a text by Debret, a French painter who came to Brazil with the French Artistic Mission in 1816 in order to produce the official iconography of the Brazilian empire. The text refers to the stage curtain painted for the Court Theater upon the occasion of the coronation of Emperor Pedro I, in 1822.

> As theater painter, I was commissioned to do the new curtain, the sketch for which showed the Brazilian population expressing their devotion to the Emperor, seated in his throne under a rich canopy suspended from palm trees. This design was shown to Prime Minister José Bonifácio, who approved it, asking me only to replace the palm trees with a regular architectonic motif, in order to remove any suggestion of a natural wild state.[1]

Debret's testimonial points to the basic conflict in the city's scenery: the need to disguise the wildness that is so much a part of it. This conflict is brought out by the introduction of liberalism in Brazil. The Brazilian slaveholding class struggles for the hegemony of paternalism and of the "politics of domination based on the image of the inviolable benevolent will of a slaveholding class that must remain uncontested as a means to preserve the subjection of slaves and independent free workers."[2] In this world everything and everyone exist in order to satisfy the will of slaveholders. Helena Bocayuva analyses Gilberto Freyre's view of patriarchalism as the ordering element of Brazilian society. She discusses the class-derived power of the son of the plantation owner and his "morbid pleasures," his delight in games that are always vertical, hierarchical.[3]

In the Brazilian version of liberalism, no right could ever overrule the "right to property in its fullness," as it was spelled out in the 1824 Constitution, which preserved slavery without mentioning it by name. A unique concept of citizenship took form in the tropics: male proprietors vs. slaves, women and non-proprietors. In the 1830 Criminal Code, the death penalty is "hideously easy to obtain for slave defendants, but slaveholders are beyond its reach."[4] According to Batista, the Brazilian penal system, in its gross corporality, laid bare fundamental ambiguities. "The slave was a thing in the general scheme of the juridical order (the kidnapping of a slave was classified as theft), but in terms of penal law he was a person."[5] It was in this historical context that the ground was laid for Brazilian police authoritarianism and vigilanteism, in the historical sense of the cruelty of a system that allowed "a slave woman found with her tongue sewn to her lower lip to be returned to the lady who owned her."[6]

As to civil law, the Portuguese Ordenações Filipinas of 1604 were in force in Brazil until 1917. They governed "the issue of power and discipline in the sphere of the family, the fundamental institution for the practices of social control and discipline, in the transition to modernity."[7] According to Neder and Cerqueira Filho, they amounted to "an ideological and affective structure that gave support to the parental function on the basis of an authority capable of replacing the overarching figure of the paterfamilias."[8]

Fear is a fundamental key for a reading of the conservation and expansion of the founding monopolies of the interests of the slaveholding class.[9] This very specific political being, the Brazilian slaveholding class, developed what Neder has called hyperbolic views of the dangerous classes.[10] The growth of the conservative project of the nineteenth-century Brazilian restoration was based on the naming of specific and fundamental fears.[11]

In the 1830s, the entire country was swept by passions and projects: the radicalization of liberalism, the abolition of slavery, the utopia of a racially-mixed nation, citizenship for all. "Who are the people? Blacks and mestizos? This is the Brazilian circumstance, its ethos, that makes unethical any movement for freedom that includes them."[12] In addition to the Malê rebellion in Bahia, there was the republican and egalitarian Farroupilha revolt in the South in 1835. In the Northeast, Pernambuco and Ceará rebelled against the imperial order. In Pará, the Cabanagem, an uprising of Indians, slaves and poor people put up a heroic resistance from 1831 to 1836. The revolutionary wave lasted until 1850 (other movements were the Sabinada, the Balaiada and the Praieira), the period during which the agricultural and slaveholding basis of the Brazilian Southeast "pacified" the empire through the hegemony of a conservative alliance that came to control state power and violently suppressed popular revolts. In the Cabanagem alone

40,000 out of a population of 100,000 were killed.[13] "This improper nature of our thinking was — and not by chance, as we shall see — a constant presence, pervading and unbalancing the ideological life of the Second Reign down to its smallest details…. The mere existence of slaveholding brought out the improperness of liberal ideas."[14]

So it was that urban uprisings, military mutinies, peasant and messianic rebellions erupted in quick succession. Just as government troops were rushed to the South to quash the Farroupilhas, the Malê rebellion broke out in Bahia. Proprietors around Brazil, from North to South, shook with fear. The ruling oligarchies were particularly afraid of abolitionist organizations. The Permanent Triple Regency had abolished the slave trade in 1831, giving rise to a legal contradiction that would end only with abolition: once the slave trade became illegal, the huge mass of slaves smuggled into the country were legally free men and women. The insurrections rose against an economic structure that had remained unchanged after Independence, and in favor of a concept of nation and citizenship that would include Indians, blacks and the poor — the Brazilian people, in short. "The fundamental outcome of three centuries of colonization and of successive projects that aimed at making Brazil economically viable was the constitution of this population — five million inhabitants, one of the largest in the New World then — and the simultaneous ethnic transfiguration and acculturation of its various constitutive matrices. Up to 1850, only Mexico (7.7 million) had a larger population than Brazil (7.2 million). By then, the real outcome of colonization was already the formation of the Brazilian people and its incorporation into an ethnic, economically integrated nationality."[15] This was the population that was fed into the "man-eating mills" of the economic cycles through which the periphery was incorporated into the metropolis.[16]

The contradictions of liberalism in the Brazil were deepened in actual practice, in the absolute sovereignty of the police in action, as the streets were increasingly mobilized. A decree of November 1825 created the post of police commissioner, invested with the power to prevent public gatherings, repress vagrancy, keep track of capitães-do-mato (the men who caught runaway slaves), eradicate quilombos (communities of runaway slaves), and administer whippings in public places. Such were the bases for the legal and institutional architecture of the police force in Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere in Brazil.

These processes must now be understood in the context of the modernization of the incorporation of the periphery into the civilizing process.[17] To Foucault, colonization was the first development of racism, the genocide of colonialism. Zaffaroni has expanded Foucault's notion of coercive institution to Latin America as a whole, a sort of huge laboratory for the observation of the

pathology of inferior races.[18] What nineteenth-century Brazilian medicine faced was a threatening prospect of a black, Indian and above all mixed-race population, seen as necessarily inferior, degenerated, pathological and dangerous. How to "regenerate" it? It was also at this stage that European medicine neutralized Indian and African folk medicine.

The frightened intimacy described by Batista as the inquisitional practice that can be seen in the Ordenações Filipinas was compounded by the fear of the promiscuity brought about by the large number of household slaves. Debret's and Rugendas's prints depict an intense domestic proximity between slaves and masters. Jurandir Freire Costa has shown how the idea of the comfort of slaveholding was transformed into the fear of disease,[19] pointing out that this medical and political view of the slave came in the wake of economic change. "Medicine redefined black power, attributing to it an irrepressible force, the force of disease and immorality. Suddenly white households saw themselves as invaded by a hitherto unsuspected enemy. The image of the promiscuous slave was their scarecrow."[20] The fear of poisoning was one of the specters of slavery.

According to Costa, slaves were placed in the same category as miasmas, insects, unwholesome air and unwholesome habits, seen by medicine as sources of organic and moral ills. This attack on the image of the slave was important as a maneuver of medical power. "Finally, slaves in general, male and female, were manipulated so as to make families feel repulsion toward their own homes; no longer a place of shelter and protection, the home was transformed, with the advent of hygiene, into a place of fear and suspicion."[21] The fear of the viscous, of the trespassing of boundaries, the major danger to be faced by modernity, was intensified in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro: the city was literally sleeping with the enemy.

> Everyone is aware of the domestic troubles that are often brought about by slave women. How many men have not crept out of their nuptial bed to befoul themselves in the filthy slave quarters, preferring the slave woman to a loving, adorable wife?[22]

From this angle, the African population concentrated in the city is metaphorized as a swamp, associated with the fear of contagion. Slaves are seen as an obstacle to hygiene and to the "creation of a healthy Brazilian family,"[23] because of the "pathologies introduced" by them, of black wet nurses, of the degradation of costumes, or of prostitution. From this point on, a scientific

discourse took shape that aimed to place the slaveholding ideology in the very heart of Brazilian social formation.[24]

Rio's landscape was in sharp contrast with the life of slaves in the city, according to Mary Karasch. According to her, the slaves' Rio was "a city of boundaries, of limits to freedom. Some of these boundaries could be crossed with relative ease, and a few through narrow gates, but others were impenetrable walls…. The limits were everywhere, except in the forested mountains that surrounded the city, where runaways lived in a precarious condition of freedom."[25]

In order to understand the survival of this memory of fear in today's Rio de Janeiro, one must take into account some contemporary processes associated with late capitalism: first, a radical aestheticization of culture, which associates the symbolic order with the economic order, generating a forceful everyday reality that naturalizes a rigidly hierarchical social order. Second, there is the struggle for order and against chaos, which today implies the criminalization and stigmatization of poverty, of non-consumers, of the new pariahs. Third, in Brazil these processes are reinforced by the slaveholding heritage present in the penal system, with its genocidal, selective and hierarchical tradition. Last, in order to perpetuate a penal system based on extermination, there must be a moral discourse about crime.

These synchronic processes are all pervaded by fear. This fear is a globalized feeling of insecurity, but it implies a quite concrete everyday experience of fear. In this way, these processes give rise to discourses, to criminological theories based on common sense but which amount to a defense of extermination and imply a crime-fighting policy that requires the shedding of blood.[26]

If, as Zaffaroni has said, Latin America has traditionally been a sort of a gigantic coercive institution, a sort of natural criminological apartheid, the control of fear in the streets of the city today follows the fundamental principles of what might be termed the shopping-mall aesthetics. The poor, the inadequate consumers, are the very synthesis of self-locomotive filth, the obstacle to hygiene, to cleanliness and order. These new pariahs make it difficult to determine boundary lines and establish an order.

Loïc Wacquant, discussing the replacement of the welfare state by the penal state in the U.S., speaks of the prison as the successor of the ghetto.[27] The new institutional complex, he writes, is "made up of remnants of the black ghetto and of the penitentiary system, to which the ghetto is connected by a close relationship of structural symbiosis and functional substitution." Like the ghetto, the prison is a special institution where the most visible members of the

"dangerous" multitudes can be confined. There is an obvious parallel between the U.S. ghetto and the Brazilian favela, and in order to understand it we must examine the painful history of slavery in the New World. The discourses of the favela as the locus of evil lead to some fundamental developments of the culture of fear. As Sônia Wanderley has observed, this way of looking at the problem of urban violence produces a state of alarm.[28]

A recent study of the discourses of fear in the Rio de Janeiro press shows that the favela is depicted as the locus of evil and the trespasser of boundaries, a hotbed of monsters. The idea of a spreading stain of barbarism, polluting order and cleanliness, overstepping the permissible limits of visible poverty, has had lethal consequences. Biological metaphors begin to crop up in the newspapers: the shantytowns are seen as tumors, mushrooms, amoebae, and so on. The people who live there are branded as animals, insects, beasts, termites, viruses.[29] The discourse that animalizes evil resorts to two figures: extermination and cleansing. Police operations are seen as hunts with a hygienic purpose. Purity and hygiene are the opposite of filth and disorder. And, as Bauman has written, the notion of purity is one of the ideas that, when embraced, lead to the baring of teeth and the sharpening of knives.[30]

The fear of the periphery in neoliberalism exacts a heavy toll. In Rio de Janeiro alone more than five thousand people were murdered in the first half of 2003, most of the victims belonging to the same social class, the same age bracket and the same ethnic group. The system imposes itself through terror.

The diffusion of the images of terror generates violent policies of social control. The juridical and police structures based on our civilizing process are never deconstructed, never attenuated. It is as if the memory of fear, carefully constructed, gave rise to a genocidal penal architecture whose targeted victims were constantly metamorphosing, from Indians to blacks to the poor and the insurgent. It is as if torturers were always at hand, ready to step in and clean up the garden.Latin America as a coercive institution is turning into a veritable concentration camp.[31] Passetti speaks of the paradox of the poor neighborhoods in the peripheries of big cities that clamor for more security and that are the prime suppliers of bodies to the penal system. Prisoners are increasingly seen as inmates of concentration camps, and assume the corresponding identity.[32] Like the nineteenth-century swamp metaphor, the periphery powerfully condenses the idea of contamination, viscosity and invisible danger.

Writing about memory and reminiscence, Birman observes that only the acknowledgment of failure leads to a desiring assumption about the present and a history geared to the future. Desire is always something that can be

accomplished only in the future.[33] In order to break through the culture and architecture of fear in the periphery of capitalism, it is necessary to elaborate the madness, to desire the future on the basis of a memory in which the singular and the collective are intertwined, to embrace in a radical way the savage that is deeply entrenched in us.

* Translated by Paulo Britto.

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[15] RIBEIRO, Darcy. O povo brasileiro: a formação e o sentido do Brasil. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995.

[16] Cf. RIBEIRO, Darcy. Op. cit. The cultivation and marketing of cocaine make up the "man-eating mill" of late capitalism in Latin America.

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[20] COSTA Jurandir Freire. Op. cit., p. 126

[21] COSTA, Jurandir Freire. Op. cit., p. 123.

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[23] MACHADO, Roberto et alii. Danação da norma: a medicina legal e a construção da psiquiatria no Brasil. Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 1978, p. 354.

[24] Cf. MICELI, Sérgio. In O enigma da mestiçagem. Folha de São Paulo. Jornal de Resenhas, 8 May 1999; and CHALHOUB, Sidney, op. cit.

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