

Neither Here nor There

On the Ambiguity of Being Indian in Brazil

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If one agrees with Bruno Latour (1994) that a hybrid or quasi-object is an entity resulting from the combination of natural processes and human industry (the ozone hole, frozen embryos, and Dolly are some examples), it is irresistible to let one's imagination fly over familiar conventions and land on the hybrid Indian, with special attention to its Brazilian version. I am referring to the image of the "Indian" as an artifact (more on this term later) composed of human and natural traits. In the popular – and often not so popular – imagination, Indian and Nature are metonymical expressions of one and the same phenomenon. Hence, public policies aimed at preserving flora, fauna, and Indian in fairly equal numbers aspire to protect natural resources and indigenous cultures as part of the country's patrimony to be enjoyed by future generations of citizens. This paper attempts to denude the ideology of the "Indian" as a hybrid entity or a quasi-object in Latour's parlance. It also seeks to explore, albeit briefly, the rhetoric of "protected areas" as the privileged niche of the "hybrid Indian."

Indian as hybrid

As Latour's notion of networks, or Kopytoff's pursuit of the lives of objects, the idea of the hybrid Indian is couched in a number of presuppositions that lend themselves to an analysis that goes well beyond the Indians themselves, whether they appear in white fantasies or in flesh and blood. For Latour, networks are real like nature, narrated like discourses, and collective like society

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(1994: 12). In an analogous way, the hybrid Indian is at one and the same time natural like nature, narrated like a discourse, and conceived as a collective allegory of the nation. As a hybrid, the Indian is capable of coalescing the nation's flow of contradictions: if the country is esteemed to be wise and blissful, it owes it to the Indian heritage as the cherished children of Nature. If, on the other hand, Brazil is decried for its inability to reach the peaks of full development and enter the exclusive club of the First World, it is because there is Indian savagery in the land pulling the nation down into obscurantism. Each of these contradicting discourses is found both in the past and in the present, usually among elite circles (*círculo de notáveis* in portuguese). Together these positions represent one of the most flagrant features of Brazil, namely, a clear proclivity toward ambivalence (Ramos 1998: 284-292).

As a quasi-object, the natural Indian provides the drama, romance, and anguish that go into the making of a New World nationality. Cannibalism, nudism, intemperance, promiscuity are among the specters that european colonizers, even *avant la lettre*, attributed to the natural Indian and which kept them busy for centuries trying to “purify” him, that is, kill the Indian's “natural” side in order to promote him to full-fledged humanity in its Christian version, of course. In so doing, the colonizers built themselves as the exact opposite of their prey, and proceeded to call themselves civilized. An example among legions is what the Salesian Brüzzi Alves da Silva (1962) thought of his Tukano novices². The gauge for judging the Indian's character malformation is, it goes without saying, the Christian white man.

In Latour's analysis, the West admits of no mingling of nature with culture (1994:16). Yet, the Indian's usefulness as counter example or inverted mirror of the White man's self-attributed qualities resides precisely in this abhorrent (con)fusion of categories. It is, in Bartra's (1994)) felicitous expression, an exercise of putting the wild man in the looking glass. Why, he asks, “did the european conquistadors arrive with wild men in their number?”

2 A sample: “The Indian, being physically slow of movements, is also sluggish in giving us the most obvious response. Morose in understanding our orders, finds it difficult to follow our thinking ... [The Indian] feels inferior to the white man ... [Vis-à-vis] the *civilizado*, whose superiority he acknowledges and feels, he always shows docility ... He will ... produce a reasonable piece of work under two conditions: a fearful respect for the white man and constant surveillance ... Natural liars, [they exhibit] their charming naiveté. [They] lack the control of a more developed and educated intelligence having instead their spirit informed by childish, incoherent and even absurd fables and beliefs” (Brüzzi Alves da Silva 1962: 138-169).

(1994: 2) Because, he continues, the “man we recognize as civilized has been unable to take a single step without the shadow of the wild man at his heel” (1994: 3). The real reason for such an ambiguity is, in Bartra’s view, much deeper: “the wild man and the european are one and the same, and the notion of barbarism was applied to non-european peoples as the transposition of a perfectly structured myth with a character that can only be understood within the context of western cultural evolution” (1994: 4-5).

Such is the fate of the brazilian hybrid Indian. If the civilized state of the brazilian nation is called into question, there are the seven hundred thousand plus Indians to prove otherwise, a number not so small as to go unnoticed, and not so large as to threaten Brazil’s integrity. Small as their numbers are, they continue nonetheless to be the object of much debate regarding their future: continue to be part of nature or get educated and obliterate all traces of Indianness. Totaling less than 0.5 percent of the country’s population and widely dispersed through an enormous national territory, the Indians are like a trophy of the conquest: when not literally commoditized in various ways through the tapping of their knowledge, their handicrafts, and their genes (Ramos 2006), they are good material to erect a modern Brazil that knows how to separate nature (Indians, fauna, flora) from culture (arts and sciences), in a classical Latourian operation. In short, the social trajectory of the hybrid Indian is a zigzag through the ambiguities of the nation.

Hybrid Indian as process

The Indian as hybrid should be perceived as “a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being” (Kopytoff 1986: 73). Igor Kopytoff examines the social life of objects, their plasticity and vicissitudes, as a device to uncover often disguised structures and histories: “the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by another. Such shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions” (1986: 64). In a comparable manner, following the trajectories and processes of the hybrid Indian, one should be able to disclose a moral economy of differential ethnic power. It should be emphasized, however, that these trajectories and processes entail transformations in their object

that are not, necessarily – in fact they never are – linear or evolutionary³. Like Kopytoff’s objects, the Indian-as-part-of-Nature also treads a meandering path established by specific political actors and clearly discernible conjunctures. Depending on the historic moment, ideological persuasions and political contexts, the word “Indian” can be an offense or a mark of agency. The hybrid Indian can at one time be seen as guardian of the country’s borders (Meireles 1989; Farage 1991), and, at another time, as a threat to national security, and, *mutatis mutandis*, back again. He is the epitome of radical otherness, but can be praised for his genetic and cultural contribution to brazilianness. He is part of Nature, but, as a popular saying goes, “there is too much land for so few Indians.” All these senses and counter senses point in one direction, what Bartra identifies in the “myth” of the wild man as mirror for the european (1994: 204), and Kopytoff defines as “the uncertainties of valuation and of identity” in the modern, “homogenized world of commodities” (1986: 90).

Of artifacts, artifices, and “protected areas”

The Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language says the following:

“Artifact – any object made by man, esp. with a view to subsequent use.”

“Artifice – a clever trick or stratagem; a cunning, crafty device or expedient ...; trickery; guile; craftiness.”

Given the obvious common etymological origin of these two words, it might be stimulating to, “artificially,” put them to a use that may seem to most readers as surprising. I was surprised exampleto come across the term *artifact* to refer to pieces of nature such as protected areas. When Henyo Barretto Filho applies this expression to conservation units, stimulated by a metaphor evoked by a statesperson, according to which the spirit that presides over the creation of an ecological station is the same as that which presided over the construction of Medieval cathedrals (Barretto Filho 2003: 10), I immediately associated *artifact* with its makers, known in portuguese as *artífices*. But whereas the word *artífices* as makers of artifacts carries no negative

3 My thanks to Wilson Trajano for pointing this out to me.

connotation, the etymologically related *artificio* is by no means as neutral and seems to be close to the English *artifice*. Such slippages of meaning, so creatively explored by Raymond Williams (1985), have the effect of bridging semantic gaps and, in so doing, end up revealing layers of possible interpretations previously undetected. To put it in a nutshell, the *artifices* ('artisans') of environmental policies had to juggle with some conceptual *artificios* ('artifices') in order to compose an artifact that would either preclude or harmonize the coexistence of Indians with protected areas, later renamed as conservation units (Barretto Filho 2003: 4). Whereas some *artifices* ('artisans') sustained the position that protected forests would be incompatible with indigenous dwellers who, like any other human beings, would necessarily interfere with the environment, others defended another line of reasoning: "the Indian is assimilated to nature, hence, nothing more 'natural' than to preserve him as well as the natural environment" (pace Menezes 1990, quoted in Barretto Filho 2003: 15).

Justifiably one may ask which position is more harmful to the living Indians: to treat them as marauders and poachers in their own lands, drive them out and, to boot, decimate them in the act of eviction as happened at the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 (Bensusan 2006), or deny them full humanity by merging them with stones, plants, and animals as simply other crude natural resources. In the first case, although facing injustice and cruelty, the Indians had their human agency recognized. But in the second case, under the cloak of protection, they are reduced to quasi-objects with no will, plans, or future of their own.

In the passage from *artifice* to *artifact*, the figure of the Indian as hybrid acquires a special political significance for, like a looking glass, the hybrid Indian reflects back his *artifices* (makers) at work in the production of national objects of control. It is in this sense that the term *artifice* (*artificio*) as clever trick or stratagem is appropriate to describe the juggling act performed by environment planners. *Artifices*, makers of hybrid Indians, reach the climax of their artifacts – protected areas and Indians – by a metonymic operation that foils the very real ontological distinction between indigenous peoples and their physical milieu. Behind the benign gesture of protecting indigenous lands, there is the perverse twist of annulling their existential, social, and political agency, thus disseminating well into the 21st century the curse long placed on the Indians as the eternal children of Nature.

Moments of being ...good or bad

There are moments in the life of the Brazilian nation when its glaring ambivalence shines particularly bright. In these moments the “Indian” stands out like a beacon, or rather, a lightning rod, galvanizing the country’s civic energies. By moments I don’t mean discrete time units, but rather national moods alternately set in favor or against the Indians. For the sake of this discussion I have elected three such moods very briefly as examples of 1) the problematic construction of national identity; 2) the calculating assertions of territorial sovereignty; and 3) the dubiousness of the sense of universal citizenship.

From maker of brazilianness to obstacle to progress

Brazil’s origin myth indulges the Indian with the honor of ancestor of its citizenry. Together with African slaves and Portuguese colonizers, autochthonous Indians added their blood to the melting pot that boiled down to a unique Brazilian identity. It should not go unnoticed that this myth or fable of the three races is mute about the toll the Indians paid in territory to the new country. Touchy as it has been and continues to be, the issue of indigenous territories is no subject for fables. With the government having set aside about 13 percent of the country’s territory for the exclusive and permanent use of the Indians, a national cliché has it that there is too much land for so few Indians. In the past, as in the present, the national economic frontier respects no borders, and invasions of indigenous lands are a recurring strife in the countryside. In turn, Indian blood as heritage is somewhat of an abstraction with no material cost and is even cause for a certain folkloric pride inscribed in the common gag that one’s Indian grandmother was caught in the woods with a lasso and then had her blood transfused to generations of Brazilians. This tale warrants the teller the legitimate claim to Brazilianness.

It was this search for legitimacy and intellectual self-sufficiency that, after Brazil’s independence from Portugal (1822), prompted a number of writers in the 19th century to appeal to indigenous themes in a literary movement that became known as “Indianism” (Candido 1967, [1975] 1993; Ramos 1998: 60-70). A romantic movement, Indianism portrayed the Indian in not so different a fashion as do many present day environmentalists: a good Indian is a natural Indian, an extension of the virgin forest, with no malice or corrupting habits. It is, in short, a matrix that has been frequently reloaded, but has maintained the original design. At that moment in Brazilian history, it was important to

stress nobility, honesty, loyalty, heroism and stoicism as qualities that were inherent to the Indian, but which, in some mysterious way, contaminated those who, about a century later, were oddly dubbed “neo-brazilians.”

The counterpart of the romanticized Indian was the backward Indian who prevented Brazil from fulfilling its (non)manifest destiny as The Great Nation in the Tropics. The sadness of Brazil was one topic of discussion. In Paulo Prado’s vision ([1928] 1997), colonial Brazil was a sad spectacle (it is ironic that Prado contrasted Brazil’s sadness with what he perceived as England’s imagined jolliness [p. 43]) of a lazy, lascivious, evil, and sick populace whose repulsive condition was the result of “the madness of erotic concerns. Of these excesses of a lustful way of life, indelible traces linger in the brazilian character ... They produce somatic and psychic disturbances in the organism, accompanied by a profound fatigue that easily takes on pathological aspects, going from disgust to hatred.” The elements that led to such an appalling state of affairs were “the climate, the land, the Indian woman or the african female slave” (1997: 139).

Paulo Prado died in 1943 and his book *Retrato do Brasil* had long been consigned to the dusty shelves of curiosities before catching the attention of a generous university professor who took upon himself the task of re-publishing it. But Prado’s ideas about the source of Brazil’s troubles are alive and well in minds such as that of political scientist and former Minister of Science and Technology, Hélio Jaguaribe, one of the contemporary “notables” in the country’s socio-political scenario. Periodically Jaguaribe casts a public diatribe about the harm indigenous peoples do to the country’s image. Their ignominious obsolescence, he affirms, jeopardizes Brazil’s future as a developed nation. In the mid-1990’s, he proposed his version of a “final solution”: education would transform them all in mainstream brazilians so that, by the twenty-first century, there would no longer be Indians in Brazil (Ramos 1998: 20-21). His chronology for such a grandiose transformation, compressed in a time capsule, reminds one of the biblical narrative on the emergence of the Earth and its inhabitants. In the hands of a diligent demiurge nothing is impossible.

Jaguaribe’s tirade seems to mean that in his mind there is no room for an educated Indian, which, according to his reasoning, would be a contradiction in terms. You are either an Indian or an educated person, as though the two possibilities could never combine in a sort of physical complementary

distribution; mixing both would be a fatal grammatical error. For wits of the Jaguaribe kind, it is in the Indian's nature to remain a natural Indian or nothing at all or, once a hybrid, always a hybrid. Jaguaribe, a self appointed Scientist General, warns: hybrids can be harmful to the nation's health.

Once again the old saying that old habits die hard has a freshly new application.

From sentry to threat

In centuries past, when the Brazilian hinterland was yet to be completely under the control of the central government, indigenous peoples living along the border, especially in the north, were regarded as the watch dogs of the international frontiers. Enslaved Indians were, so to speak, the common currency among European powers in dispute for portions of the New World. "From allies to vassals [the Indians] drew up the frontier" (Farage 1991: 19). Brazil, both as colony and as independent nation, experienced a number of skirmishes with European countries intent on enlarging their overseas business. The Dutch, especially in the 18th century, dominated most of the commerce in the Rio Branco region (Farage 1991). In time, they limited themselves to Surinam. In the 19th century, the French attempted to enlarge their colony in the Guiana Shield, pushing it down to the Amazon River. Brazilian diplomacy won the dispute that had the Swiss Federal Council as arbitrator (Meira 1989), while England, with similar plans, having Italy as arbitrator (Menck 2001), won dominion over a chunk of land that borders with what is today the Brazilian state of Roraima, home to many Carib, Arawak, and Yanomami peoples (Ramos 2004).

To the west, in the region known as *Llanos de Mojos* between Bolivia and Brazil, the 18th century witnessed the "presence of missions, fortresses, towns; settlements; alliances with Indians; navigation; 18th century Guaporé astonishes for its effervescence" (Meireles 1989: 12). Spaniards and Portuguese, in their prodigious, but frustrated efforts to people that remote frontier, rivaled in their power to subdue the region's many indigenous groups. While it lasted, this era was marked by the massive presence of indigenous peoples who, despite themselves, contributed to the prolonged squabble for control of that frontier. On either side of the dispute, the Indians served as human barriers.

As more and diversified actors entered the frontier zone, the Indians' status as sentinels was turned upside down and they were converted into living

threats to national security. Missionaries, researchers and NGOs are among the new actors who came to disturb the armed services' monopoly of power over the Amazon. By mid 20th century, the Indians were regarded by the military as gullible and untrustworthy, since devoid as they are of patriotic feelings toward Brazil. In the 1980's, indigenous peoples on the northern border were accused of striking deals with foreigners to deplete the region of precious metals, from gold and diamonds to strategic minerals. Reduced to a mere puppet of western missionaries, etc., the Indian of the military imagination was also a threat in another way. With their large populations (in flagrant contradiction to the long nurtured image of Amazonia as a vast human void; see Ramos 1996), indigenous peoples like the Yanomami, whose territory straddles the watershed between Brazil and Venezuela, were – and still are – considered a separatist peril to both countries. It is feared that they will be instigated by maneuvering foreigners who crave the Amazon to create an independent state amidst the rainforest. Such unfounded and ethnographically crassly misinformed speculations have the effect of keeping land warranties for frontier Indians permanently on the verge of elimination. These obsessions run counter to any reasoning in the opposite direction, not just by anthropologists, but by other professionals who have a minimum of knowledge about the actual situation of amazonian Indians. “The Indians were never a threat”, says historian *Ciro Flamarion Cardoso*, “on the contrary, their knowledge of forest resources and of coastal and river navigation was most useful to the colonists” (1984: 19). Turned into enemies of the nation, indigenous peoples like the Yanomami have been the object of numerous attempts to undermine their territorial rights (*Albert* 1989, *Ramos* 1979, 1995) in the name of the false premise of their threat to national sovereignty. Here the Indian is no longer simply a child of Nature, but an amorphous entity ready to be manipulated by the enemies of the nation. In the military's conception, the Indian is neither an internal nor an external enemy, neither here nor there, hence, impossible to control.

From innocent victim to savage instinct

In contemporary Brazil, either the Indian is inoffensive until proven savage, or he is essentially savage behind an apparent innocence. Each of these ideological renderings corresponds to two sides of the same coin: the hybrid Indian with a Janus face. The innocent child of Nature shows its full

innocence when he is a victim of civilized bad habits. The incurable savage, no matter how much civilized veneer he succeeds in acquiring, sooner or later, will reveal his true uncontrollable nature. There is nature in the former, there is nature in the latter. Two examples from the 1990's illustrate this point.

Just after April 19, 1997, the official Day of the Indian, a middle-aged man, Galdino, from the Pataxó ethnic group of the state of Bahia, was burned to death on the streets of the state capital, Brasilia, by a group of upper-middle-class youngsters who later claimed they were just playing around and did not know the man was an Indian, not a simple homeless person. The youngsters defended themselves by saying they did not know it was a crime to burn homeless people. It then surfaced that burning the homeless in the middle of the night was a frequent sport in the country's big cities. The nation's revulsion at their gratuitous act of mindless cruelty was magnified because the victim was an Indian. The case reverberated through public opinion, already inflamed by political scandals and unpopular government measures. A generalized sense of indignation encompassed issues that were troubling the public. The result was that the case of the Pataxó murder was conflated with the plight of landless peasants, general resentment for rampant political corruption, the humiliating treatment of civil servants by the central administration, and its questionable privatizations of state companies. The slain Indian was converted into a sort of immolated victim of the country's deep social injustices. A significant spin off of this gruesome story is that the prestigious painter, Siron Franco, was commissioned to erect a monument for the dead Pataxó on the very spot where he had been burned. Considering that hundreds of dispossessed Brazilian children and adults, peasants and urban dwellers were brutally murdered in the years before, this homage to one dead Indian shows the degree of indigenous visibility in Brazilian minds. For years afterwards, the murdered Pataxó stood as a symbol of Brazil's prejudice and inequality. A pure and poor Indian, like a sacrificial lamb, lay on the altar of inequity.

Let us go to the other extreme. A paradigmatic example of Indian as savage occurred during the Rio Summit in 1992 and involved a young man, Payakan, from the Kayapó ethnic group. The popular weekly news magazine, *Veja*, had a long report on how this man and his Indian wife had "savagely" raped an eighteen-year old white virgin at his ranch in Pará State. Stories about the case

ran in the press for two months, with much emphasis on the brutality of the assault and sprinkled with shocking details: “Payakan and Irekran join their hands and introduce them into the student’s vagina. They drink the blood and spread it on their bodies,” reported one of the most important newspapers in the country (*Folha de São Paulo*, June 11). Sadistic sex and cannibalism were fused into a single emblematic act involving offending male and female Indians and a white female victim (Ramos 1998; McCallum 1994).

Whether or not the accusations were justified, the man and his wife were condemned before they were tried. Payakan’s public life helps understand the torrent of insults poured upon him. His political success was catching up with him. In 1988 he had been in the public eye for having been tried, with another Kayapó leader and the late US anthropologist Darrell Posey, on charges of having denigrated the image of Brazil after a series of meetings with World Bank officials. Two years later he was awarded the United Nations’ Global 500 prize and, with Jimmy Carter, the prize from the Society for a Better World, for his defense of the environment. He had also caught the media’s attention for having accumulated wealth by selling mahogany to foreigners. The unusual combination of wealth and Indian offended many a Brazilian for whom Indians should be limited to what Nature provides. The ambiguity of his case exploded on the cover of *Veja* with his enlarged photograph in full Kayapó regalia and face painting with the caption *The Savage*. The cover story was headlined “*The Explosion of Savage Instinct*” and did not fail to juxtapose his alleged rape with his fat bank account.

Galdino, the innocent victim, and Payakan, the savage rapist, are truly archetypes of a classical dichotomy in the history of Indian-white relations. Their stories reveal much more about the frustrations, fears, and illusions of their mundane analysts than about them as individuals, much less as representatives of their ethnic groups. Their dramas only exist because non-Indians assumed the role of co-authors and, as such, played around with the script to whet the public’s appetite for things exotic, out of the ordinary and tailor made for their collective fantasies.

The stories of ambivalence toward Indians presented here are but a few examples of a much greater universe of the contradictory behavior the Indians have had to put up with in the 508 years of Brazil’s existence. Adding together all the contradictions that have surfaced along the history of interethnic contact, a double bind pattern clearly emerges, and, as Gregory

Bateson (1972) clearly demonstrated, double bind is one of the most effective techniques to create insecurity and dependence, and reach the ultimate goal of domination.

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