

## THE AFRICAN LEGACY: THE POWER OF RACE AND CLIMATE IN THE FORMATION OF PEOPLE AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE FORMATION OF BRAZILIAN SOCIETY

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**ABSTRACT:** History has been cruel to those born in the tropics, and even more cruel to those who, in addition to tropical condition, were also blacks or Indians. The aim of this paper is to observe how blacks were treated within the travel literature about Brazil, especially in the writings published in *Revue des Deux Mondes*. From the analysis of French writing, we seek to bring the impressions of the travelers about blacks in Brazil, and how they saw this element from a civilizational and European perspective, in which the white man represents the progress and the black and Indian represent the civilizational backwardness. Thus, we try to show the views and prejudices to the black man in Brazil in the nineteenth-century, due to hypothetical racial issues and theoretical models which condemned the progress in the tropics.

**Keywords:** Travel Literature; *Revue des Deux Mondes*; Race.

### O legado africano: o poder da raça e do clima na formação do povo e o seu impacto na formação da sociedade brasileira

**RESUMO:** A história foi cruel com aqueles nascidos sob os trópicos e mais cruel ainda com aqueles que, além de tropicais, eram também negros ou índios. O objetivo desse artigo é observar como o negro foi tratado dentro da literatura de viagem acerca do Brasil, principalmente nos escritos publicados na *Revue des Deux Mondes*. A partir da análise dos escritos franceses, buscaremos trazer as impressões que os viajantes tinham dos negros no Brasil, e como eles viam esse elemento dentro de uma ótica civilizacional e europeia, na qual o homem branco representava o progresso, e o negro e o índio, o atraso civilizacional. Assim, buscaremos mostrar as visões e preconceitos sobre o homem negro no Brasil do século XIX, em meio a questões raciais e aos modelos teóricos que condenavam o progresso nos trópicos.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura de Viagem; *Revue des Deux Mondes*; Raça.

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Since the first European settlements in a territory to be called Brazil, the colonizer's visions about these newly discovered land was marked by ambivalences. There was the tropical nature, mightier than the European one, which charmed the eyes of men from temperate northern lands. The colored colonial population was always marked by differences in their habits, such as nakedness, cannibalism, and witchcraft, which supposedly shocked the civilized Christian eye. Although there was some admiration to certain indigenous habits, mainly as far as the French are concerned, the New World was contradictorily shown as a beautiful and prosperous land, but inhabited by people unable to drive its civilizing process onwards, as their rooted characteristics were much too primitive to what Europeans saw as civilization.

Thus, since the initial contact between colonizer and colonized, Brazilian men were pictured as naturally contrastive to Europeans, being the latter marked by moral superiority and the former, by civilizational inferiority. A number of explanations have been pondered around the world trying to show these differences and seeking for reasons about the inferior condition of tropical people. The climate soon gained prominence as a catalyst for such condition, passing as explanation to racial and intellectual flaws in colored people.

Since the ancient Greeks first pointed out Europe as a model of civilization to the world, the notion that the climate interfered in hereditary traits was stated. Greeks believed that the temperate climate produced strong men, while hot climate, weak and feeble nations. During the Great Navigations contacts between Europeans and people from the tropical climate reached a proportion never seen before in history. Such explanations began to gain more and more power, until they became a major element in explaining tropical peoples' inferiority in relation to Europeans (ARNOLD, 2000, p. 22; GLACKEN, 1967, p. 87).

Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, one of the most important Brazilian historians, highlights the success of the Portuguese colonization of Brazil by presenting a fifteenth-century concept, according to which, it was impossible for whites to inhabit the torrid zone. This showed that the Hippocratic Notion<sup>2</sup> was still alive. If this relationship between tropical

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<sup>2</sup> Hippocrates of Kos lived in ancient Greece in the fifth century BC, and is considered as the pioneer in studies of the influence of climate on human characteristics. In his *On Airs, Waters and Places*, he discusses the negative effects of hot climates on both people's intelligence and vigor, and compares it with those of people born under temperate climates, considering them stronger. Thus, the Hippocratic Notions refer to these notions that place the

climate and the inferiority of their people had existed long before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by then it gained more strength when supported by famous personalities who confirmed the hypothesis.

The great French Philosopher Montesquieu, for instance, constructed a general theory of climate which helped explain the plurality of customs and laws, based on the principle that "the empire of the climate is the first of all empires" (*Apud* VENTURA, 1991, p. 19).

According to Montesquieu, slavery, polygamy, and despotism result from the general apathy of inhabitants from warm climates. He believed that heat would bring relaxation to the nerve fibers. Therefore, the individual would lose all of their strength and vitality when exposed to high temperature continuously. Their spirit would be injured with laziness and lack of curiosity, unnerving the body and weakening courage. Hot weather favors the acceptance of servitude. As he says, "it is not surprising that the cowardice of people in hot climates has made them almost always slaves, and that the courage of people from cold weather has kept free. It's an effect that derives from its natural cause"<sup>3</sup>.

In this passage we notice that the vision of the French philosopher about hot environments is extremely negative. The same was true for extremely cold climates. The freedom prevalent in Europe could, then, be explained by virtue of being positioned in the ideal temperate zone of the world.

In other continents, natural conditions have brought despotism and slavery. Thus, Asia was a continent whose predisposition to tyranny would be explained by changes between very cold weather and excessively hot areas. Africa would have the characteristics of slavery and the weakness of their governments, precisely because of the torrid climate (VENTURA, 1991, p. 20).

It is also worth mentioning that Montesquieu was not the first to develop these ideas. For example, Jean Bodin, a century and a half earlier, had anticipated some of the paradigms

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warm climates as harmful to the peoples, while assuming that temperate climates are responsible for the formation of strong peoples.

<sup>3</sup> This excerpt was translated by me, the original one is: "não surpreende que a covardia dos povos dos climas quentes os tenha tornado quase sempre escravos, e que, a coragem dos povos dos climas frios os tenha mantido livres. É um efeito que deriva de sua causa natural [aqui citando Montesquieu]" (VENTURA, 1991, p.20).

that Montesquieu would mention in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). However, as David Arnold points out, the importance of Montesquieu is in his ability to absorb and synthesize these ideas about the influence of the environment on man ó ideas which circulated around Europe to be presented in an attractive and relatively consistent fashion.

Another Frenchman also related to the illustration. The naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, in his *Natural History of Man* (1749), adopts Montesquieu's theory of climate, placing man in a hierarchical and Eurocentric model of temperate climates. According to Buffon, "the temperate climate is located between 40 ° and 50 ° latitude, also in that area are the most beautiful and well-built men (...) from that, one should define the model and the unit to which all other nuances of color and beauty must refer to"<sup>4</sup> (Apud VENTURA, 1991, p .21-22).

At most, Buffon deepened attacks against Tropical Lands, if compared to Montesquieu, when the former defamed American Nature, accusing people of being less "active" than in the Old World. He believed that the heat and humidity (typical of "torrid zones" in America) were responsible for animals of smaller size and lower reproducibility. In the New World there were no lions, elephants, or giraffes. The continent was dominated by cold-blooded species such as reptiles and insects. Europeans neither fitted in tropical spaces nor did they diminish in size. All this, according to Buffon, due to heat and humidity, everything was prone to deteriorate and erode (Apud PRADO, 1999, p.181-182).

It is noteworthy that Montesquieu and Buffon are just a very small set of examples of authors who brought the explanation about the climate's impacts on the inferiority of American people. In addition, here I also coin Cornelius de Pauw, Raynal, Thomas Buckle, Alexis de Tocqueville. These men gave a lot of importance to ideas about the inferiority of the tropical climate in the New World. Evidences to these facts are present in works such as: *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), by Adam Smith, *Philosophy of History* (1837), by Hegel. Other issues related to the discussion of "oriental despotism" and the "Asiatic mode of production" are present in texts by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, not to mention Domingo Sarmiento, and Auguste Comte (ARNOLD, 2000, pp.28-29).

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<sup>4</sup> This excerpt was translated by me, the original one is: "O clima temperado se localiza do 40° a 50° grau de latitude; é também nessa zona que se encontram os homens mais belos e bem feitos (...) é daí que se devem tomar o modelo e a unidade a que se devem referir todas as outras nuances de cor e beleza" (VENTURA, 1991, pp.21-22).

However, if the climate was already being labeled as a natural catalyst of a horde of inferior people, an additional subject matter in the process which further helped one define these differences was race. From the Nineteenth Century, the environmental paradigm, marked by a climate and geographical determinism, became surrogate to theories based on race. As Bresciani explains, "the geographical environment and climate took center stage where the different races affirmatively outlined their various destinations" (BRESCIANI, 2007, p. 67).

The term race is not exactly something new, it has existed for a long time but it gained new connotations in between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It furthermore gained more outlined contours, when explaining that hereditary and physical characteristics which determined humanity. Therefore, these particular features would be able to show differences that brought the inferiority so low (BANTON, 1997, p. 39-75).

It is noteworthy that since Carl von Linnaeus subdivided humanity into Americanus, Asiaticus, Africanus and Europeanus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, concern about race even increased. This division is based on criteria such as geographical origin and skin color. Mary Louise Pratt explains that, Linnaeus praised Europeans` superior characteristics such as tenderness, wit, and inventiveness and thought that whites were governed by laws, while Indians, Asians and Africans were marked by negative characteristics, such as melancholy, pride, and greed. Asians were supposed to be stricken with negligence just like the Africans were meant to be indolent. Regarding Americans, Linnaeu brought them as people guided only by tradition (PRATT, 1999, p. 68).

Thus, it explains why, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a lot of negativity about the tropical regions existed in the European mind. For a very long time, they heard news showing that the whites born in tropical climates were inferior to the ones born in Europe. This belief took place apart from the notion that non-whites were also inferior. What is shown here is how black man of African origin, a prominent element in the racial formation of Brazil, was portrayed in the *Revue de Deux Mondes*.

But before we get to this issue, it is necessary to talk about the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, the main source of this research. The *Revue des Deux Mondes* was a famous long-termed magazine between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among the foreign

periodicals, it was the one which occupied the list of the most celebrated intellectuals from the period in Brazil, especially during the Imperial Times (MARTINS, 2001, p.75-77).

Founded in 1829 by Prosper Mauroy and Ségur-Dupeyron (CAMARGO, 2007, p. 37), the *Revue* was created to summon foreign collaborators from all over the globe). The *Revue* team usually met them in order to publish in France what was best-known in foreign lands, thus, contributing to a better organization and development of the French society itself. As Katia Aily Franco de Camargo says, "we need to know each other to be able to adopt him what is desirable and /or appropriate to France, so that this can better organize their society" (CAMARGO, 2005, p. 83).

A number of French travelers, when working for *Revue*, printed many images, showing prejudice to the Tropics and its population all over the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They left their impressions about the nature of politics, the people, institutions, and everything they thought was worthy of reporting to France. However, there were many who wrote about Brazil, but visions were very divergent among authors. They kept a lot of images spread around Europe for a long time. As seen above, this can portray how the black Brazilian is shown in *Revue*.

The image of people formed by several different races scared the European eyes, and it produced visions that portrayed a lot of prejudice to the miscegenation from those times<sup>5</sup>. In this world where whites, blacks and Indians lived and reproduced, the black ranked the position of great villain<sup>6</sup> and evil of society. Seen as inferior, uneducated, and unable to civilize, the black race appears mostly through the prism of negativity. In a vision that put them closer to animals than to humans<sup>7</sup>, the simple contact between Africans and Brazilians

<sup>5</sup> The following excerpt shows some of that vision: La population du Brésil est évaluée approximativement à cinq millions. On y distingue plusieurs races : 1° les Portugais d'Europe naturalisés Brésiliens ; 2° les Portugais créoles nés dans le pays, ou Brésiliens proprement dits ; 3° les métis de blancs et de nègres, ou mulâtres ; 5° les métis de blancs et d'Indiens, ou cabres ; 5° les nègres d'Afrique ; 6° les Indiens, partagés en diverses peuplades. L'état moral de cette société abandonnée à ses mauvaises passions, à ses instincts sauvages, est vraiment affligeant (CHAVAGNES, 1844, p. 92).

<sup>6</sup> The indigenous element was also not viewed favorably in the *Revue des Deux*, despite a few positive reviews about them.

<sup>7</sup> João Manoel me disait en marchant Ce n'est pas tout senhor que de savoir distinguer un nègre d'un cheval ou de toute autre espèce de quadrupède. Avec cela vous n'iriez pas loin il faut encore savoir les choisir. Mais ôtons nos chapeaux j'aperçois une procession là bas Il est plus facile senhor d'acheter une troupe de chevaux de Minas que deux de ces animaux que vous voyez là étendus sur le pavé il ya plus de mauvaise volonté et de sentiments anti chrétiens dans leur tête que chez tous les macaques du Brésil ensemble. (...)Tout est il parfait ici bas. Le ciel même des tropiques est il sans nuages. Passez donc sans y faire attention. Ne me parlez plus au contraire d'une cargaison qui tire à sa fin je n'ai jamais aimé à voir cela. C'est trop triste que ces misérables qui sont là étendus à la porte du magasin rêvassant flétris à démateux sans que personne se soucie de les acheter ( LACORDAIRE, 1832. pp. 647-648).

appalled the French terribly. Though Brazil was not deemed a fully civilized society, it was relatively entrenched in some European civilization. It assured the local blacks better prospects, even as slaves. Except a few who were given a "triple dose of Africanness", and therefore, unable to understand anything, Lacordaire, one of the authors of the magazine, believes that slavery was better than life in Africa, because it put them in contact with civilization:

C'est un plaisir de penser que ces pauvres êtres vont enfin connaître la civilisation qui n'eût garde d'aller les chercher en Afrique (LACORDAIRE, 1832, p. 648).

This vision not only animalized the black people but also placed them as an inferior element within a multiracial society in Brazil. This was not just an opinion by Lacordaire. Many other authors of the magazine expressed it one way or another. Pereira da Silva, for instance, sees the black race as an uneducated element that slows the progress of Brazil because negroes are so ignorant and they cannot explore the riches the Earth offers:

Les bras nécessaires à l'agriculture ne viendront plus au Brésil des arides déserts de l'Afrique et des misérables tribus de Mozambique, de Loanda, de la côte de la Mine et du Zaïre. Il faut les remplacer par des hommes d'une race égale à notre race, comme nous libres, et qui, mieux que les nègres ignorans, puissent donner du développement aux richesses et profiter de la fertilité d'un sol que la nature a magnifiquement doué. La grandeur et l'avenir du pays dépendent de l'agriculture et de l'industrie. Il n'y a pas un territoire, pas un climat, pas une position au monde qui soient comparables au territoire, au climat et à la position du Brésil (SILVA, 1858, p. 818).

Adolphe d'Assier is another traveler who published in the *Revue*, and left his impressions. Assier further reinforces 19<sup>th</sup>-century Frenchmen's viewing black people as an inferior element in society. After comparing Brazilian negroes to animals<sup>8</sup>, D'Assier once more criticized their habits, saying that they wasted the chance to be in contact with a superior culture:

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<sup>8</sup> «Le lendemain eut lieu la fête du senhor. Il serait peut-être plus exact de dire la fête des nègres. Dès le matin, les punitions furent levées et les cachots ouverts. Un padre des environs vint célébrer la messe dans un vaste magasin transformé en chapelle. Une table recouverte d'une nappe servait d'autel. Au dehors se tenaient accroupis plusieurs centaines d'esclaves de tout sexe, de tout âge et de toute nuance. Je contemplais les négrillons demi-nus miaulant comme de jeunes chats sauvages sur les genoux de leurs mères, les singes de la maison fourrageant gravement sur les têtes des jeunes négresses, les perroquets criant à tue-tête : Quer café (voulez-vous du café) ? les chiens courant çà et là au milieu des groupes, lorsqu'à un signal donné par le mulétier-sacristain le chœur des négresses entonna un hymne religieux. C'était un mélange d'exclamations sauvages, de gloussements intraduisibles, d'articulations étranges qui n'avaient rien de l'homme, et qui auraient échappé à l'analyse de l'oreille la mieux exercée.» (D'ASSIER, 1863. p. 771).

Le dimanche, le travail est suspendu. Le Portugais est trop bon catholique pour faire travailler ses nègres le jour du repos ; mais il leur permet ce jour-là de travailler pour leur compte, il leur donne même à chacun un coin de terre où ils cultivent du maïs qu'ils vendent aux marchands de mules. Le prix de la récolte est destiné à renouveler leur vestiaire ; mais le nègre des champs, peu fashionable de sa nature, préfère volontiers une bouteille de cachaça ou une pipe de tabac à une chemise neuve. Il s'en va donc le plus souvent déguenillé, au grand désespoir du senhor (D'ASSIER, 1863, p. 568).

Even when D'Assier seems to soothe his prejudice momentarily by showing that certain black men can be useful to society, he still displays prejudice when thinking of further implications. D'Assier suggests that those (better) blacks, which could be doctors, lawyers, priests and merchants, were actually those closest to the standard Caucasian, therefore whiter. The farther from the European in appearance and personality, the more problematic to civilization they might be. The excerpt below illustrates this premise well:

La race noire se partage au Brésil, comme ailleurs, en diverses souches. Les nègres de la côte de Minas reproduisent, sauf la couleur, le type caucasique : front élevé, nez droit, bouche régulière, figure ovale, formes athlétiques, tout révèle en eux une nature forte et intelligente ; mais il et la lèvre trahissent seuls la sensualité que la constitution anatomique semble imposer atout le groupe éthiopien. Les individus de cette race qui jouissent de la liberté donnent chaque jour des preuves non équivoques de leur aptitude supérieure. J'ai vu des ouvriers, des négocians, des prêtres, des médecins, des avocats nègres qui, de même même des gens du pays, pouvaient hardiment rivaliser dans leur œuvre avec les blancs (D'ASSIER, 1863, p.571).

Thus, we can notice that blacks are a doubly disqualified element in such depiction. First, they came from the Tropics, being naturally weak and unable to generate a successful civilization. Secondly, they were naturally inferior to white man, being the latter a scientifically-proven favored race.

However, despite all the negativity that fell on blacks and Indians at a time the overlap between climate and race was to explain Brazilian civilization, viewing the black as a formative element of Brazil becomes more interesting. Albeit prejudiced, black people were a key element for the white's settlements in tropical lands, which means that civilization depended on them, too.

This is because, although miscegenation was viewed with restrictions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the truth is that the notion about the deleterious action of the tropics over the white race was strong. As we have observed in published writings about Brazil in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, blacks might surrogates to a possible difficulty of acclimation and waste



leading to their extinction or weakening. In such hot and humid places, climate was supposed to cause damage and pestilence. Nevertheless, mixing the sobriety and intelligence of the white races with the strength and hardiness of the two tropical breeds might not be a bad idea. It might be a plausible solution to tropical effects over the civilized population:

On augurerait mal de l'avenir du Brésil, si l'on ne voyait à l'œuvre que l'Indien et le nègre. Celui qui veut connaître tous les éléments de vitalité que renferme la population brésilienne doit observer les hommes de couleur, qui semblent avoir puisé dans le mélange des races la vigueur que réclame, pour être fécondée, cette âpre et torride nature des tropiques (D'ASSIER, 1863, p.572).

The Brazilian climate, mostly tropical, seemed to be an obstacle to European settlement in those lands. The white man suffered, and had difficulty staying and producing on the land. Even the Portuguese, seen as more suitable to the tropical climate than other Europeans, seemed to not be able to handle the effects of the tropics in fiercer areas like Amazon.

In 19<sup>th</sup>-century debates, the black man played the role of degenerator in the formation of Brazilian race. Carrying weaknesses and negative characteristics that helped explain the Brazilian backwardness in comparison to progress in Europe. However, because Brazil was a tropical country far from the European world, there was a need to fix European civilization in Brazil and, thus, to contribute to the success of country.

The African legacy would be prominent in the formation of a Brazilian civilization which was essentially European, but which received contribution from non-whites. Being so, the future of the Brazilian nation would depend on the disappearance of weaker elements, because the story had no mercy to the weak<sup>9</sup>. Blacks, in particular, would be used and then discarded in History and Brazil would become a civilized country, being almost European.

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<sup>9</sup> Here we see the example of Assier about the future of indigenous people, another weak race, destined to disappear with the advance of Europeans: "Ces peuples, qui comptaient plus de cent tribus lorsqu'ils virent arriver les premières voiles latines, sont réduits de nos jours à quelques milliers d'hommes essayant encore de conserver leur sauvage indépendance dans les contrées les plus inaccessibles de l'intérieur. Décimés par la servitude, les armes à feu, la petite vérole et d'autres fléaux importés d'Europe, ils se sont retirés pas à pas devant l'étranger, lui cédant cette terre qu'ils n'avaient su ni défendre ni féconder. L'Indien est donc aujourd'hui pour peu de chose dans les difficultés qui arrêtent le colon (...)" Cf. D'ASSIER, Adolphe. "Le Mato Virgem, scènes et souvenirs d'un Voyage au Brésil". *Revue des Deux Mondes*: Bureau de la Revue des Deux Mondes, 1864. p. 565.

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