

Manoel Bomfim: The State and Elites Seen as Parasites of the People-Nation

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Manoel Bomfim's *A América Latina*, published in 1905, presents a provocative reflection on the problems of the origins of the countries of South America. Intellectuals at that time chose to blame inferior racial mixtures and the tropical climate for the backwardness of these countries. In contrast, Bomfim discussed the exploitation of the colonies by the metropolis and the exploitation of the slaves and workers by plantation owners by resorting to a concept derived from biology, namely, parasitism. He criticized the Brazilian State as both tyrannical and exploitative and demonstrated the artificiality of an incomplete democracy that merely served to perpetuate the power of the elites. He believed that the lack of democracy would only be overcome by spreading primary education, given that illiterates were not allowed to vote in the elections at that time, i.e., during the Brazilian First Republic (1889-1930).

Manoel Bomfim (1868-1932) was a politician, historian and educator, and one of Brazil's most original thinkers. He was praised by Darcy Ribeiro as one of the founders of Brazilian anthropology for his investigations into the formation of the Brazilian people. He was also considered by Antonio Candido as the most radical thinker at the start of the century, due to his criticism of the elites. Bomfim proposed, together with other radicals, including the abolitionist leader Joaquim Nabuco, a set of ideas and attitudes which provided a counterpoint to the conservative movement which had always held sway. Stemming from the middle classes and enlightened sections of the dominant classes, the radical is, above all, someone who is indignant, who reflects on problems and proposes solutions for the nation as a whole, going beyond class conflicts as Candido exposed in "Radicalismos" (16).

Bomfim was born in Aracaju, the capital of the state of Sergipe. He studied medicine in Salvador, Bahia, and Rio de Janeiro. While studying psychology in Paris, in 1903, he wrote *A América Latina: Males de Origem*. His book was a reaction to the unfavorable view which the Europeans had of South America. Earlier, in 1897, he had manifested an interest in Latin American affairs. He then became Secretary for Public Education in Rio de Janeiro and offered his services as the expert reader in a contest aimed at choosing a book on the history of the Americas to be used in the schools of the Federal District. He wrote a critique of the only work that was presented, the *História da América* (1899) by Rocha Pombo, in which the problems of the Latin American countries were seen as the result of the evil colonial heritage.

In *A América Latina* Bomfim investigated the evils that afflicted the former Iberian colonies of Latin America, explaining them in terms of a parasitism that had been transmitted from the metropolises. He used the book by Rocha Pombo as a source on Hispanic America. He also based his essay on the calamitous vision of Iberian decadence conveyed in the *História de Portugal* (1879), written by the Portuguese historian Oliveira Martins. He was thus among those interpreters of Latin American society who used as a starting point the colonial heritage, adopting a genetic method as a means of explaining the present in the light of the past. .

Bomfim based his description of the relations among the classes and the countries of Latin America on the biological concept of parasitism, taken from botany and zoology. Given his medical training he was able to consult studies by J. D. Vandervelde and J. Massart, who formulated a theory of parasitism in their book *Parasitisme Biologique et Parasitisme Social*. This theory was applied to both biological relations between living species, as well as the social and economic ties among individuals and groups.

For Bomfim, parasitism is the "cause of causes" or the "primary cause," capable of explaining the appearance or the disappearance of nations and civilizations. For him, the eternal struggle between parasite and prey would be, therefore, the principal factor behind historical transformations. He investigated the historical causes of the backwardness of the former colonies of Portugal and Spain in a manner similar to that of a doctor who needs to know the past of a patient in order to diagnose and establish treatment. "The cure depends, in large part, on the importance of this 'historical background'" (Bomfim, *A América Latina*, henceforth *AAL* 22).

Just as in nature there exist parasites which live from other organisms, there are, in society, the dominant and the dominated, masters and slaves, owners and workers, the metropolis and the colony, foreign capital and the nation, the State and the people. Social parasitism would produce the same characteristics as biological parasitism, which leads to the weakening of the organism being attacked, subject to the violence of the parasite, which milks the energy from that organism. But the parasite itself becomes degenerated when its host organisms atrophy, which, in the end, leads to its decadence and extinction.

The “national character,” as the sum of the hereditary characteristics, leads to biological inheritance as much as to social education, according to Bomfim. The Iberian parasitism, which derived from the war-like spirit and the plundering tendencies of the peninsular peoples, was one of the features transmitted to the Latin American countries by colonization. This led, in turn, to the brutal process of economic exploitation, resulting in the contempt for the work imposed on the slave, the “victim of victims,” who produced the entire wealth absorbed by the metropolis. The idea of hereditary transmission of these psychological traits, however, was contradicted by the proposed pedagogical solution, which advocated a program of popular education, capable of modifying the characteristics of the Brazilian people (Leite 255).

The State was set up as an “oppressive organ” serving the metropolis and had as its function the aim of “taxing, coercing and punishing those who refused to pay the centralized, absolutist and monopolizing government.” The State thus became a “reality apart,” a “dominating, tyrannical, onerous and almost pointless organization.” It was disconnected from the nation and from the interests of the population, organized in order to milk the entire wealth and production of the colony. Alienated from the nation, the State existed solely as a tax collector and organizer of the armed forces, acting as a parasite, feeding on the body it exploited: “it existed solely as an oppressive force to coerce the dominated, the proletarian mass, to produce to the advantage of the dominators” (*AAL* 146).

According to Bomfim, this parasitic role of the State did not change with either the proclamation of Independence, or the introduction of the republican regime. For example, he demonstrated how the 1903 budget included excessive expenses for State institutions and for the armed forces, which had become disproportionate when compared with the miniscule budgets for education and culture. He proposed as a solution the

reorganization of the State, which should abandon its “warrior-police function” and assume a protective role in order “to protect individuals against nature, against the natural causes of weakness and misery, against prejudice and against superstition” (213).

In addition, Bomfim attacked the imperialism of the United States. At that moment, US imperialism was extending its influence over Latin American countries in the guise of Pan-Americanism, expressed through the Monroe Doctrine, which prohibited the intervention of European nations in the Americas. This doctrine was viewed sympathetically by politicians and intellectuals, including the Barão do Rio Branco, Rui Barbosa, Joaquim Nabuco, and even rebels such as Sílvio Romero. Bomfim recognized that Pan-Americanism was an instrument used by the United States to expel the European economic presence and establish its own hegemony (Candido, “Radicalimos” 6).

Bomfim ends *A América Latina* with the proposal for a program of popular education, which he saw as capable of achieving political reform by preparing the majority of the population to be active citizens: “We will carry out a campaign against ignorance; there is no other way of saving this America” (400). This educational solution was criticized by Antonio Candido, for whom the book ended with a “disappointing argumentative strangulation,” presenting teaching as a panacea, rather than defending the transformation of social and political structures (Candido, “Literatura” 147). Bomfim only rejected this illusion in his final book, *O Brasil Nação*, in which he advocated the need for a popular national insurrection against the ruling classes, the State apparatus and the imperialist nations, in order to bring the excluded groups to power.

Parasites and Prey

Using the notion of parasitism as a starting point, Bomfim created a “biological theory of surplus-value,” in which the local elites and the colonial and neo-colonial metropolises are the parasites of the working classes, acquiring for themselves the wealth which the workers produced. By means of this organological conception he attempted to account for the production and appropriation of the value of work, at the internal level of the relations among classes, and in international terms of the links among peripheral countries and imperialist powers. Starting from these biological concepts, Bomfim came to conclusions similar to those formulated by Karl Marx in *Das*

Kapital with regards to the concept of surplus. However, he only came to read the works of the German in the 1920s, while writing *O Brasil Nação*.

The essayist of *A América Latina* destroyed the certainties of the intellectuals of his time by criticizing the use of positivism, evolutionism and racism as models for justifying the dominance of the weak by the powerful. Bomfim also denied progress as a means of giving “definitive guidance” in following predetermined historical stages. He demonstrated how racist theories and the belief in the superiority of the so-called “white races” were linked to the neo-colonial interests of European countries: “science alleged by the philosophers of massacre is science adapted for exploitation.” These theories were no more than a “private ethnology for the powerful plundering nations,” and the “abject sophism of human egoism, hypocritically masked by cheap science” (*AAL* 278-398).

Before 1910 only a small number of intellectuals, including the literary critic Araripe Júnior and Machado de Assis, attacked the hierarchy among races. Araripe Júnior attributed the racism of European science to the expansionism of the dominant nations, who condemned the non-white and mixed races as a means of “authorizing expansion and justifying the expropriation of poor peoples.” For him the racist theories were “packaged sociologies” which “unsuccessfully camouflaged the deeper intentions of the ruling classes and the governments on the opposite side of the Atlantic” (Araripe Júnior, “Sílvia Romero Polemista” 327).

Bomfim also demonstrated the mistakes of the evolutionists who would justify free competition without State interference by means of the idea of natural selection, which the English naturalist Charles Darwin had formulated only for living species. In Bomfim’s view, the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer was no more than an apology for economic liberalism, condemning the benefits of the intervention of the State in the economy. Spencer argued that this intervention would disturb the natural selection and evolution of the human species. In contrast, Bomfim condemned the application to society of biological concepts and Darwinian categories, including the fight for survival and the law of the survival of the fittest: “It is somewhat discredited, within sociology, this tendency to assimilate societies, in every way, and for everything, in terms of biological organisms” (*AAL* 20).

Bomfim attempted to reestablish the original meaning which Darwin himself had attributed to the expression “struggle for existence” in *The Origin of Species*. “I should premise—wrote Darwin—that I use the term struggle for

existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another" (Darwin 1859, 69). Bomfim therefore concluded that the praise of free competition accredited to evolutionists, in addition to the assertion of innate differences among ethnic groups by the followers of racial theories, were in flagrant contradiction of the naturalist's original ideas: "Darwin never intended that the law of natural selection be applied to the human species, as claimed by the theorists of egoism and plundering" (*AAL* 288).

According to Bomfim, liberal ideology and evolutionary methodology were based on the unacceptable transposition of Darwin's concept of the struggle among species to the social field, which led to the apology for free competition among individuals. In contrast to these arguments of the evolutionists, the struggle between the species would be substituted in society for competition and solidarity between peoples, and could only be applied to society in the figurative sense because of the relations of dependency and cooperation. The author of *A América Latina* thus came close to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who considered the struggle for existence valid solely for other, non-human species. For Marx and Engels, human history is not ruled by Darwin's law, but, rather, by the class struggle, taken as a universal law (Engels, "Discurso" 213).

Although Bomfim conceived of society as an organism, he attempted to investigate non-biological laws, specific to social facts, which he saw as more complex than the biological. He questioned the concept of parasitism by establishing the differences between *organic* parasitism, which brought irreversible modifications in organisms, and *social* parasitism, which could be eliminated by the parasited, e.g., the slaves, the workers, the proletariat, the nation, by means of popular education or rebellion against the various forms of exploitation: "The population could reform their social education, correcting the vices inherent in the parasitic tradition, and thus lead to progress; it is a question of reeducation" (*AAL* 276). By criticizing the identity between nature and society Bomfim avoided the pessimism and the determinism of the environmental, racial and national character theories and pointed to educational or revolutionary solutions to overcome the backwardness in Brazil.

From education to revolution

Manoel Bomfim was the target of a smear campaign following the publication of *A América Latina*. Sílvio Romero attacked him in a series of

twenty-five articles in the weekly *Os Anais*, later published in a single volume in 1906 entitled *A América Latina: Análise do Livro de Igual Título do Dr. Manoel Bomfim*. Romero indignantly observed that Bomfim had moved from the field of science into that of personal passions when attacking the racist theories of Gustave Le Bon. Romero believed, in contrast to Bomfim, that the theory of ethnic inequalities was the unbiased result of scientific investigations, and he used this theory in his own literary and folklore studies, found in *História da Literatura Brasileira* (1888) and in *Estudos sobre a Poesia Popular no Brasil* (1888). For Romero, the notion of parasitism was a generic idea, or an unproven metaphor without conceptual rigor that could not serve as the basis for an explanation of political, economic or historical life: "In a certain sense the entire enormous category of existence is no more than an immense chain of parasitism". Romero even called his opponent, Bomfim, "an Iberian-American mestizo," a member of a "band of evildoers of good sense and good taste" (Romero, *A América Latina* 46). This at a time when racial mixture was taken to be synonymous with degeneration.

After the publication of *A América Latina*, Bomfim spent the following two decades teaching, and left aside the historical themes of his pioneering work. He was Secretary of Education for the Federal District, and Director of the Experimental Psychology Institute, in Rio de Janeiro, as well as Editor and Director of the pedagogical journal *Educação e Ensino*. He was elected as a representative of the State of Sergipe. During the second and third decades of the twentieth century he published several works on pedagogy and psychology, including *Lições de Pedagogia* (1915), *Noções de Psicologia* (1916) and *Pensar e Dizer* (1923), in addition to textbooks for primary schools, as for instance *Através do Brasil* (1910), together with the poet Olavo Bilac.

He only returned to writing historical works at the end of the 1920s, when he was already ill. In 1926 he discovered he had prostate cancer and went through a series of operations until his death in 1932. In a little more than six years he wrote and published three other historical works: *O Brasil na América*, *O Brasil na História* and *O Brasil Nação*. In *O Brasil na América* (1929) he returned to those concepts outlined in *A América Latina*, as a means of characterizing the Brazilian historical process. He used as a starting point those conditions that led to colonialism in Latin America.

In *O Brasil na História* (1930) he dealt with works on Brazilian history, written by both Brazilian and foreign authors. He criticized the depreciation of national traditions made by these historians, including Francisco Adolfo

de Varnhagen, author of *História Geral do Brasil* (1855), whose work aimed at describing “a history for the throne,” thus defending the dominant interests of the Portuguese court. For Bomfim history was no longer a means of “orienting and stimulating social progress,” as this was biased towards the benefit of the elites and the State, ignoring the defeated and excluded (Bomfim, *O Brasil na História* 22). The so-called “universal history” had been developed by the powerful nations aimed at stressing their own greatness to the detriment of the dominated peoples, on whom the same version of history was imposed.

Bomfim ended his historical studies with *O Brasil Nação* (1931), in which he radicalized his proposals to solve the national problems: “It was no longer possible to devise the destinies of this homeland within parameters of normality” (Vol. 1, 7-9). He considered that the Republic (1889) had brought about the “degradation of political habits” and had been converted into a “totally rotten world” by creating “a democracy without people or even citizens,” in which no more than a tiny proportion of the population participated in the political and electoral process. He also criticized the 1930 Revolution in which groups from the Southern State of Rio Grande do Sul contested the political hegemony of the States of São Paulo and Minas Gerais. He believed that these incidents failed to change political programs and rulers. Instead of being a revolution, the 1930 movement was no more than a “fermentation of the ruling classes,” encouraged by politicians.

In this last work, he abandoned the proposal, presented in *A América Latina*, in which popular education was seen as the salvation of the masses. In *O Brasil Nação*, he wrote: “The remedy for the Brazilian problem is to be found in revolution.” Thus distancing himself from his earlier positions, he believed it would be improbable that the ruling classes would lead the popular masses to achieve political sovereignty by means of education. He advocated a socialist revolution by which excluded groups would occupy power, heralding a “holy chaos,” capable of transforming Brazil’s political structure and redefining its place in the world. According to Bomfim a “true revolution ought to lead to the conquest of power by a class which had never occupied this space, and through this establish a new standard of values” (Vol. 2, 337-71). But his revolutionary program did not move beyond the opposition of people and nation, on the one hand, and the State and the exploiting nations, on the other, and failed to provide concrete proposals for political and economic reorganization.

Bomfim in History

Manoel Bomfim was a precursor of sociologists and historians, including Gilberto Freyre in *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (1933), Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in *Raízes do Brasil* (1936) and Caio Prado Junior in *História Econômica do Brasil* (1945). All these authors emphasized social and cultural rather than racial factors in the interpretation of history and society. Their interpretations were no longer shaped by concepts such as race and nature, but by culture and character (Ventura 66-68). In the preface to *Casa-Grande & Senzala* Freyre observed that his study was based on the difference between culture and race as a means of separating genetic factors from social and cultural influences (Freyre 77-78).

Bomfim's ideas did not have a noticeable impact in his own time, because he disturbed the intellectual and political elites, to whom he attributed the responsibility for Brazil's backwardness, and because of his criticism of the thinking of the then ruling classes regarding racism, evolutionism and positivism. Due to his anger regarding social injustices, his language is full of verve and passion, which he admits in the introduction to *A América Latina*. There he reveals his preference for passion rather than "the varnish of impassiveness." "The passion of the language, which has not been diluted here, reflects the sincerity about which these topics were thought and written" (xii).

This tone of vehemence and passion gave a picturesque quality to his writing, in which Brazil's colonial past and its political independence are seen through an ironic and satirical standpoint. This can be illustrated by his argument that the production system in colonial Brazil can be best described as "a few hundred slaves and a whip." However, his indignation and revolt at social injustices meant that his books, above all, *O Brasil na América*, *O Brasil na História* and *O Brasil Nação*, written at the end of his life, were emphatic and repetitive. *A América Latina*, his first lengthy work, remained his most outstanding contribution.

Despite the pioneering character of his ideas, Bomfim remained forgotten for many years after his death. His books were not reedited, with the exception of an anthology edited by Carlos Maul in 1935, and a second edition of *A América Latina*. His work was not rediscovered until 1984 through an essay by Darcy Ribeiro, who raised him to the category of the most original thinker of Latin America, and with the anthology edited by Flora Süssekind and myself entitled *História e Dependência: Cultura e*

Sociedade em Manoel Bomfim. Bomfim was read again after 1993 when *A América Latina* was republished, followed by his other books.

But the doctor and educator contributed in his own way to the silence towards his work. He had adapted biological notions, including parasitism, which fell into disuse in the human sciences from the 1930s onward, due to the predominance of anthropological, sociological and economic models. Although he pointed out the failure of biological analogies, Bomfim was unable to create a new conceptual system or a new interpretative language capable of moving beyond an organological approach. He based his work, in contrast, on biological categories, including the notion of parasitism, which was used metaphorically. His historic-social stance is thus profoundly ambiguous because of its simultaneous criticism and use of a biological and organological approach as a starting point from which an historical theory of the appropriation of the value of work is proposed.

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