

## "A Portrait of Brazil" in the Postmodern Context

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*Retrato do Brasil's* title (*A Portrait of Brazil*) clearly presents the book as one of several attempts to represent a culture whose history of colonization has introduced into its intellectual tradition a major concern about questions of origin and national identity. However the reappearance of *Retrato do Brasil* in 1998 is a cultural fact that requires a consideration of the singular history of the book during the seventy years since its first publication in 1928.

Printed four times during its author's lifetime, *Retrato do Brasil* can be considered a publishing phenomenon. There were two editions in 1929 and a revised one in 1931. Ten years later, Paulo Prado refused to authorize the book's translation into Spanish, arguing that it had been written for his country, and that he had already decided not to publish *Retrato do Brasil* again. Only in 1944 did the fifth edition come out, following Prado's death in 1943. Further editions were published in the next decades: 1962, 1971 and 1981.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is possible to explain the intervals between the successive printings of the book by means of the unstable character of the Brazilian economy, I would like to suggest that these intervals concern both the polemical character of the work and the very process of Brazilian modernist canon formation. In other words, my approach to *Retrato do Brasil* aims at presenting the 1998 printing from within the frame of contemporary Brazilian culture in its relation to its own major modernist artifacts.

Paulo Prado utilized material collected from travelers' and Jesuits' accounts, through which he reconstructs a Brazilian history in which both

the seductive appeal of sensual pleasure and the land's material resources determine the characteristic features of the racially mixed population that emerged from the encounter of the Portuguese colonizers with the Native and African peoples.

*Retrato do Brasil* consists of chapters that work as entries through which Paulo Prado constructs his thesis about the country. "Lust," "Greed," "Sadness," and "Romanticism" are the four key themes that allow the narrating of four centuries of Brazilian cultural foundation, from the discovery of the New World in the sixteenth century to the national identification with romantic ideals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The first century of colonization is for Paulo Prado determined by the process of degeneration that characterized the Portuguese world in the sixteenth century. During this period, Portugal experienced a political crisis and a weakening of power that culminated in its domination by Spain in 1580. Far from the heroic conquerors of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese colonizers who came to Brazil were single young males predisposed to experience all sorts of pleasures that the tropics could offer. This predisposition led to immediate miscegenation with the Native women: from the contact of this sensuality with the disruption and dissolution of the European colonizer there appeared our mixed primitive population.<sup>2</sup>

This colonizer was also a wretched adventurer who was prone to take on any type of risk and even to commit crimes in order to find material resources such as silver, gold and precious stones. This ambition resonated with the attitude that Portugal sustained in relation to its colony as it received the results of the exploratory expeditions, for which people would abandon the steady cultivation of the land in search of immediate profit.

Sadness was therefore a main outcome of the conjunction of racial miscegenation and the historical constraints of the first centuries: "Popular poetry, legends, music and dances reveal the melancholic obsession that only disappears with the absorption in love or lust" (144). Due to this very melancholic tendency, the country was ready to receive in the eighteenth century the influence of Romanticism, which Paulo Prado describes with reference to a broad trajectory from Rousseau to romantic nationalism and literary expression.

Edited and introduced by Carlos Augusto Calil, the 1998 edition includes paratexts that are crucial for the reader in order to understand the

book's original context and its critical reception. In addition to an introduction and chronology, the editor organized an appendix that includes letters, reviews and some portraits of the author from the period. Through these paratexts it is possible to contextualize a work whose subtitle—"Essay on Brazilian Sadness"—promises a representation of the country that seems to contradict that which had been dominant through the centuries, namely, the image of a tropical landscape characterized by vibrant rhythms and colorful festivals.

The contemporary reader of Paulo Prado's text may recognize that the author relies both on biological and geographical determinations as well as on concepts of race that have been problematized by a complex set of debates on cultural issues that have emerged in the humanities and social sciences in the last decades. However, it is the 1998 edition itself, in the relations it establishes between Paulo Prado's text and its paratexts, which allows the reader to take the necessary distance from the book's thesis in order to enjoy the piece as a cultural artifact that is emblematic of the specificity of Brazilian modernism.

In the appendix, the reviews demonstrate the tendency of critics to oscillate between fascination by the book's style and rejection of certain aspects of its thesis. João Ribeiro reacts against the idea of sadness: "The land of holidays, of tomorrow, of the 'be patient,' of rhetoric, and of Carnival cannot be the dwelling place of melancholia" (223-224). Oswald de Andrade reacts against Paulo Prado's interpretation of "Lust" in the meeting of the colonizer with Native and African people: "Notice that *Retrato do Brasil* is in this chapter the repetition of all the monstrous judgments that the Western world has made about the discovered America" (229). In 1928, Oswald de Andrade published his "Manifesto Antropófago" ("Cannibalist Manifest") in which the idea of anthropophagy works as an ironic metaphor that neutralizes the notion of cultural dependency through positing the infinite capacity of incorporation as the main feature of Brazilian culture.

Although it seems clear that *Retrato do Brasil's* thesis was capable of giving rise to a polemical debate on the intellectual scene, it is important to notice that this challenging character of Paulo Prado's book is connected with an intellectual context in which both the identification of the work as an historiographic text and the author's social position are relevant.

On the one hand, *Retrato do Brasil* is a text that is clearly recognizable as an example of the practice defined as "history of mentalities." On the other

hand, the book is produced by one of the participants in “The Week of Modern Art” that took place in São Paulo in February 1922, an event that has been represented by literary history as the origin of modernism in Brazil.<sup>3</sup>

Part of a traditional and wealthy family of coffee exporters, Paulo Prado was one of the organizers and sponsors of the “Week of Modern Art,” which was planned by a group of artists and intellectuals who were in dialogue with the European avant-garde. Dissatisfied with the Brazilian importation of literary trends, they decided to react through a movement that would update Brazilian art in the modern world and, at the same time, liberate Brazilian artistic expression from its colonized tradition. The result of this challenging enterprise is a set of heterogeneous and contradictory trends that originates in “The Week of 22” and is expressed in various manners throughout this century.

The fact that a director of a trade company produced an important work of historiography makes manifest the traditional relations between intellectual debate and the economically dominant classes in Brazil. Paulo Prado (1869–1943) attended university in Rio de Janeiro, where his father was a deputy at the time, and obtained an undergraduate degree in Law in 1889. Afterwards, he traveled to Paris, where he lived until 1897, when his father asked him to return to Brazil in order to take care of the family’s business. Parallel to his main occupation as a businessman, Prado was active as a journalist since 1892, when he had started writing the column “News from Europe” for the *Jornal do Comércio*. In Brazil, he wrote newspaper articles and directed, along with Monteiro Lobato, the *Revista do Brasil*. He also published, in 1925, a volume called *Paulística*, which brought together articles previously published in *O Estado de São Paulo*. Prado’s interest in history was influenced by the historian Capistrano de Abreu, who had been Prado’s mentor since 1918 and with whom he organized and edited some volumes of Brazilian history.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most characteristic features of Brazilian modernism is reflected in Paulo Prado’s decision to write an historical work, for it illustrates an ambivalent relation to the past. Although modernist aesthetics tends to be related to the search for originality and innovation, in the Brazilian case this search is connected with the recovery and rewriting of Brazilian past. For example, the legacies of oral traditions—from Native and African myths, rituals and folklore—are strongly present in the work of Mário de Andrade, especially in *Macunaíma* (1928). Oswald de Andrade also exhibited this

trend in his allusions to the primitive world that are present both in the “Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil” (1924) and in the “Manifesto Antropófago” (1928).<sup>5</sup>

In the work of Pablo Picasso, for example, it is clear that such a theme can be associated with avant-garde aesthetics. But it is important to notice that the primitive image is for Picasso something similar to what the Orient is for Ezra Pound’s poetry: the allusion to a radically discontinuous idea of time and space which establishes a sense of rupture in history. The Brazilian modernist enterprise therefore seems to incorporate this aesthetic conception but finds as its main challenge the fact that the primitive world is an essential part of the country’s own colonized history.

If this problematic ambivalence is resolved aesthetically in the case of Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade, Paulo Prado is confronted with the challenge of constructing an historical narrative that could cover the period between the repressed primitive world and modernity. In his words, the portrait “was made as an impressionist picture... the dates disappear almost entirely. There remain only the aspects, the emotions, and the mental representation of events that result more from speculative deduction than from a coherent sequence of facts” (185-186). Paulo Prado’s task is to construct a representation through which Brazilian cultural complexities at the beginning of the century could find their own explanations and causalities in light of modernity’s demands and promises, a task that seems to be stimulated by the desire to organize the past in the interest of Brazilian self-legitimization in the twentieth century. *Retrato do Brasil* proved to be a polemical book precisely because of Paulo Prado’s decision to present the country as a set of problems that originates in the process of colonization instead of inverting and subverting the history of dependency as does Oswald through the notion of anthropophagy. In the wake of modern revolutions, Brazil lies for Paulo Prado “in a colonial slumber” in which, “despite the appearance of civilization, we live isolated, blind and immobile, within the very mediocrity that pleases both governors and governed” (210-211).

*Retrato do Brasil* is in the contemporary context a sort of precious appendix to the Brazilian modernist canon. If literary critics have consecrated Oswald’s anthropophagy as the explanatory image that was able to embrace an entire cultural formation, *Retrato do Brasil* is one of those texts that challenges criticism to denaturalize its own representational frames. The portrait that its own author tried to erase from history certainly does not offer

an answer as ready to be appropriated as Oswald's anthropophagy. But in its own problematic thesis appears the expression of a desire for representation whose questions are incredibly vivid at the end of the millennium.

It is important to observe that Paulo Prado's thesis is explicitly presented in 1928 as a claim for "modernity," a word that worked as a magical passport to infinite development and freedom. Seventy years later, globalization and the failure of emancipatory discourses have brought to Western society and to the Brazilian context determinations that have completely transfigured the value and definition of "modernity."

In the last decades, intellectual debate has been utilizing the idea of the postmodern as a key term for the problematization of modernity. In 1985, Jean-François Lyotard presented an analogy between the postmodern and the psychoanalytic process by means of which modern neurosis could be "worked through," in the Freudian sense of *Durcharbeitung*: "the 'post-' of 'postmodern' does not signify a movement of *comeback*, *flashback*, or *feedback*, that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in 'ana': a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis that elaborates an 'initial forgetting.'"<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, it is possible to understand that, if the postmodern debate fails to resolve itself into a new paradigm that could promote a satisfying set of characteristics for defining a postmodern aesthetics, it is exactly because its main assumptions challenge the idea of the coherent whole inherent in periodization.

If one takes Lyotard's proposal as a clue in order to approach a book such as *Retrato do Brasil* in the postmodern context, Paulo Prado's very commitments to modern utopias crystallize into a "modern neurosis" determined by the urge for totalizing frames and representations typical of modern thought. However, the reader can enjoy the book apart from its compromised quest for a stable and coherent representation of the country and can see that through stylistic features and vivid metaphors the book fulfills what its narrative fails to explain, stabilize or resolve. At the end of the millennium, in its failure to offer a major representation of Brazil through the remaking of previous representations, *Retrato do Brasil* makes explicit its discursive nature and challenges the very idea of nation that led to its production seventy years ago.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first posthumous edition was authorized by Paulo Prado's son, Paulo Caio Prado, and was published by Editora Brasiliense. José Olympio Editora published the book in 1962 and republished it in 1972 in a volume entitled *Província e Nação*, which contains two books: *Retrato do Brasil* and *Paulística*.

<sup>2</sup> Prado 76.

<sup>3</sup> For information in English about the event, see K. David Jackson, *Literature of the São Paulo Week of Modern Art* (Austin: Institute of Latin American Studies, U of Texas P, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Capistrano de Abreu (1853-1927) is the author of *Capítulos de História Colonial* (1907) which was translated into English by Arthur Brackel as *Chapters of Colonial History, 1500—1800* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> *Macunaíma* was translated into English by E. A. Goodland: Mário de Andrade, *Macunaíma* (New York: Random House, 1984). Both of Oswald de Andrade's "Manifestos" were translated into English and published in the *Latin American Literary Review*. "Manifesto of Pau-Brasil Poetry", translated by Stella M. de Sá Rego, appears in volume 14.27 (1986): 184-187; "Cannibalist Manifesto," translated by Leslie Bary, appears in volume 19.38 (1991): 35-47.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard 77.

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