Cynthia MAR

Racism, Culture and Black Identity in Brazil

Michel Agier examines race and culture in the formation of Black identity and its implications on the sociological and anthropological studies of Brazil. In particular, Agier draws on his work in the region of Bahia. Agier questions the evolutionist paradigm which has dominated Brazilian studies of race relations for several years by examining racial, cultural and social dimensions of the construction of black identity. In a first part, he presents an historical analysis of the construction of Brazilian identity, which he then applies to the current institutions of black identity in a modern urban milieu.

There exists a clash at both the collective and individual levels between various modalities of social identification. For example, social-pseudo categories, such as the « poor » or « middle » classes are recreated within ideological cleavages and allude not only to a social condition but to a greater extent, problems of humanity and citizenship. In this situation, poverty is synonymous with family dependency and with political invisibility. The reorganization of urban space in Bahia between the period of 1965-1985, during which the slums or favelas were pushed to the outer limits of the city, is an example of the development of the invisibility of poverty within the framework of modernity. This brings us to the question of identities in modernity ; the implications of feeling oneself, presenting oneself or being identified by others as belonging to the middle class, slum class or even as to affirm oneself as black signifies positions in order of status, a search for legitimizing cultural differences and a definition of true interest groups.

The new « black » practices and discourses should be understood as new civil society movements, a part of these recent economic and political changes in Bahia. The current recomposition of Afro-Bahian identity can be characterized as the symbolic transformation of a group previously defined by the racism of the dominant group. In order to better understand the reinvented identity of Afro-Bahians, Agier defines four cumulative moments in Brazilian history of race relations.

1. **The status of slaves : the primary element of the condition of slave was political invisibility.** In the current category of peoples « excluded » there is a direct historical affiliation with the old category of slave. As the slave held no juridical status, slaves exercised social identity in their relationships with their master. Intimacy, cordiality and master protection remained in place as long as the slave stayed in his « place ». This conditional familiarity is present today in labor relations, for example in domestic employment.

2. **The racialist theory : from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920’s a nationalist form of thought developed from a theory of racial hierarchy.** Promoted by the European powers of the day, Brazilian intelligentsia developed and consolidated the system of domination formed during slavery exchanging official, juridical subjugation for racial theory. At this time, the ‘fable of three races’ associated the indigenous ethnic groups with savagery and marginality, those with black skin and negroid features with social inferiority, those of European appearance with power and rationality.
3. **The systematic policy of whitening:** from the 1880’s to the beginning of the twentieth century, political and intellectual elites imposed a policy of **Aryanization.** The progressive miscegenation of Bahian society is a cultural fact and not a natural occurrence. This is marked by common expressions such as ‘clean up’ or ‘improve the race’ used by black mothers referring to their children born from unions with lighter skinned men.

4. **The ideology of racial democracy:** developed during the 1930’s, racial democracy was a building block of Brazilian nationalism. This ideology was built upon two principal arguments: the appearance of cordiality between all peoples in Brazilian social life and racial intermarriage and interaction. This cordiality, which is not to be mistaken for kindness, attempt to and usually succeed in eliminating the tensions and conflicts of domination within the public domain. The theory of miscegenation was used as a support for the impossibility of true racism. The domestic intimacy of inter-racial relations would supposedly generate a reciprocal habit of living with racial differences. These arguments perpetuated the myth of racial democracy; what Florestam Fernandez called ‘the prejudice of not having prejudice’.

As a pseudo-racial identity, being black became shameful within the social and political order. This necessitated the linking of the pseudo-racial identity with other dimensions of social relations and the building of its own social space.

The author here explores the social place of blacks in their culture, networks and politics. Faced with racial biases in the job market, black workers developed various strategies to overcome economic discrimination. They take political action, form labor unions, identify with and personalize their relationships with their employer, develop behavior which attempts to beat back racial prejudices in terms of physical appearance, dress or competence, or withdraw into the black community.

Bahia, in recent years, has seen a strong upsurge in numbers of civil society groups such as Afro-Brazilian dance and **capoeira** schools, carnival groups, religious organizations etc. This is paralleled by progress of black politicians and a larger black presence in professional associations. Newspapers intermittently publish articles calling for the mobilization of the black community against racism. Agier analyzes the legitimation of these groups from a sociological point of view. In order to produce these politically informed identities, the various movements that institutionalize ‘black’ culture try to control its practices by classifying and hierarchizing new forms as they appear. Three major principles unite cultural practices and serve as the ideological references of the structure and autonomy of black cultural space: genealogy, purity and segmentation. Agier links these principles in this structure:

*genealogy → purity → power

*genealogy → segmentation → institutionalization*

The combination of these elements forms an imaginary model of the ghetto, yet this modern logic of black identity is complicated by the fact that Bahian racism is not a racism of exclusion and segregation, but of integration and domination.

Agier concludes by briefly discussing three theoretical issues:

1. The situation in Bahia today contradicts the traditional opposition between class and race.

2. The Bahian case suggests that a relational and political approach to culture shows how this dimension of life is subjected to sociological challenges.
3. The idea of ethnicity is a problematic solution; it contains the anthropological idea of totality and requires the anthropological tool of integrating the individual self to a collective subject. Thus the attention and responsibility of the anthropologist become even more important to allow development of a non-culturalist analysis of culture.