Chapter 11

Undoing Brazil: Hybridity versus Multiculturalism

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Introduction

This chapter addresses the issue of the supposed specificity of the Portuguese speaking world by examining recent changes in the way parts of the Brazilian government, certain NGOs, and intellectuals, especially anthropologists, imagine Brazil. While the idea(l)s of a biologically and culturally hybrid nation consolidated during the twentieth century continue to hold sway, recent events suggest that a rival paradigm gains strength: that of Brazil as a multiethnic and multicultural society.

Over the past few years I have been trying to come to grips with the post-colonial sequels of British and Portuguese colonialism. As a British-born and trained anthropologist who has lived and worked in England, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Brazil, I have been more or less forced into trying to look back critically at Britain and its imperialism at the same time that I have been forced to try to come to terms with a colonial tradition that lies behind modern-day Brazil and Mozambique.

When David Lehmann invited me to give the Smuts Lectures in Cambridge in 1998, I organized my ideas around what I saw as a continued tension throughout the colonial enterprise between ideals of “assimilation” and “segregation” (Fry 2000). Classically, Portuguese colonial dogma favored the former, while British dogma tended toward the latter. To a large extent the identities of the two colonial powers were defined by this contrast. Wary of confusing international rhetorical contrasts with the internal situation of the colonies themselves, I noted that the tension between these two dogmas marked the internal experience of both colonial enterprises and continues to characterize the contemporary postcolonial situation not just in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, but in the modern world as a whole as tensions mount between the celebration of “ethnic” difference and the universality of the human experience. This same tension is, of course, at the basis of social anthropology itself, at once concerned with the unity of humankind and the diversity of language, meaning, and identity that has in no way succumbed to the increasing pace of globalization.
As the colonial enterprise reached its zenith at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, Portuguese and British administrators-cum-intellectuals spelled out their rival theories. Jan Christiaan Smuts spelt out his own theory on the subject:

First we looked upon the African as essentially inferior or sub-human, as having no soul, and as being only fit to be a slave. . . . Then we changed to the opposite extreme. The African now became a man and a brother. Religion and politics combined to shape this new African policy. The principles of the French Revolution which had emancipated Europe were applied to Africa; liberty, equality and fraternity could turn based Africans into good Europeans. (Smuts 1929: 76–78 quoted in Mamdani 1996: 5)

The political system of the natives was ruthlessly destroyed in order to incorporate them as equals into the white system. The African was good as a potential European; his social and political culture was bad, barbarous, and only deserving to be stamped out root and branch. In some of the British possessions in Africa the native just emerged from barbarism was accepted as an equal citizen with full political rights along with the whites. But his native institutions were ruthlessly proscribed and destroyed. The principle of equal rights was applied in its crudest form, and while it gave the native a semblance of equality with whites, which was little good to him, it destroyed the basis of his African system which was his highest good. These are the two extreme native policies which have prevailed in the past, and the second has been only less harmful than the first. (Smuts 1929: 92)

“If Africa has to be redeemed,” he continued, so as “to make her own contribution to the world,” then “we shall have to proceed on different lines and evolve a policy which will not force her institutions into an alien European mould” but “will preserve her unity with her own past” and “build her future progress and civilization on specifically African foundations.” “The British Empire does not stand for the assimilation of its peoples into a common type; it does not stand for standardization, but for the fullest freest development of its peoples along their own specific lines.” To achieve this end, “institutional segregation” and in consequence “territorial segregation” would be necessary.

Proud of developments in South Africa, Smuts concluded that

[T]he situation in South Africa is therefore a lesson to all the younger British communities farther north to prevent as much as possible the detachment of the native from his tribal connection, and to enforce from the very start the system of segregation with its conservation of separate native institutions.

Smuts’ advice was, of course, taken. Southern Rhodesia, for example, followed this policy to the letter while in South Africa itself the ideas enunciated by Smuts finally resulted in what Coetzee has called the “madness” of apartheid. Indeed, as Mahmood Mamdani has so cogently argued, far from representing an exception to the rest of English-speaking Africa,