

## Brazilian Culture: Nationalism by Elimination

We Brazilians and other Latin Americans constantly experience the artificial, inauthentic and imitative nature of our cultural life. An essential element in our critical thought since independence, it has been variously interpreted from romantic, naturalist, modernist, right-wing, left-wing, cosmopolitan and nationalist points of view, so we may suppose that the problem is enduring and deeply rooted. Before attempting another explanation, let us assume that this malaise is a fact. Its everyday manifestations range from the inoffensive to the horrifying. Examples of inappropriateness include Father Christmas sporting an eskimo outfit in a tropical climate and, for traditionalists, the electric guitar in the land of samba. Representatives of the 1964 dictatorship often used to say that Brazil was not ready for democracy, that it would be out place here. In the nineteenth century people spoke of the gulf between the empire's liberal façade, copied from the British parliamentary system, and the actual reality of the system of labour, which was slavery. In his 'Lundi do Escritor Dificil' Mario de Andrade<sup>1</sup> ridiculed his fellow

countryman whose knowledge spanned only foreign matters. Recently, when the São Paulo state government extended its human rights policy to the prisons, there were demonstrations of popular discontent at the idea that such guarantees should be introduced inside prisons when so many people did not enjoy them outside. In this perspective even human rights seem spurious in Brazil. These examples, taken from unrelated spheres and presupposing incompatible points of view, show how widespread the problem is. They all involve the same sense of contradiction between the real Brazil and the ideological prestige of the countries used as models.<sup>2</sup>

Let us examine the problem from a literary point of view. In twenty years of teaching the subject I have witnessed a transition in literary criticism from impressionism, through positivist historiography, American New Criticism, stylistics, Marxism, phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, and now Reception theories. The list is impressive and demonstrates our university's efforts to overcome provincialism. But it is easy to see that the change from one school of thought to another rarely arises from the exhaustion of a particular project; usually it expresses the high regard that Brazilians feel for the newest doctrine from America or Europe. A deceptive impression of change is therefore created, a development with no inner necessity and therefore no value. The thirst for terminological and doctrinal novelty prevails over the labour of extending knowledge and is another illustration of the imitative nature of our cultural life. We shall see that the problem has not been correctly posed, although we may start by accepting its relative validity.

### Starting from Scratch

In Brazil intellectual life seems to start from scratch with each generation.<sup>3</sup> The hankering for the advanced countries' latest products nearly always has as its reverse side a lack of interest in the work of the previous generation of Brazilian writers, and results in a lack of intellectual continuity. As Machado de Assis noted in 1879: 'A foreign impetus determines the direction of movement.' What is the meaning of this passing over of the internal impulse which is much less inevitable than it was then? You do not have to be a traditionalist or believe in an impossible intellectual autarchy to recognize the difficulties. There is a lack of conviction, both in the constantly changing theories and in their relationship to the movement of society as a whole. As a result little importance is attached to work itself or to the object of investigation. Outstanding analyses and research on the country's culture are periodically cut short and problems that have been identified and tackled with great difficulty are not developed as they deserve. This bias is negatively confirmed by the stature of such few outstanding writers as Machado

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<sup>1</sup> *Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis* (1839–1908) is regarded as the greatest of all Portuguese-language novelists. He wrote nine novels and two hundred short stories, including *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (1880), *Dom Casmurro* (1900) and *Esau and Jacob* (1904), which are considered to be far ahead of their time. [Trs. note].

<sup>2</sup> For a balanced and considered opinion on the subject, see Antonio Candido, 'Literatura e subdesenvolvimento', *Argumento* No. 1, São Paulo, October 1973.

<sup>3</sup> This observation was made by Vinicius Dantas.

de Assis, Mário de Andrade<sup>4</sup> and now Antonio Candido. None of them lacked information or an openness to contemporary trends, but they all knew how to make broad and critical use of their predecessors' work, which they regarded not as dead weight but as a dynamic and unfinished element underlying present-day contradictions.

It is not a question of continuity for the sake of it. We have to identify a set of real, specific problems—with their own historical insertion and duration—which can draw together existing forces and allow fresh advances to be made. With all due respect to the theoreticians we study in our faculty, I believe we would do better to devote ourselves to a critical assessment of the ideas put forward by Silvio Romera,<sup>5</sup> Oswald and Mário de Andrade, Antonio Candido, the concretists and the CPCs.<sup>6</sup> A certain degree of cultural density arises out of alliances or disagreements between scientific disciplines, artistic, social and political groups, without which the idea of breaking away in pursuit of the new becomes meaningless. We should bear in mind that to many Latin Americans Brazil's intellectual life appears to have an enviably organic character, and however incredible it may seem, there may be some relative truth in this view.

Little remains of the conceptions and methods that we have passed under review, since the rhythm of change has not allowed them to attain a mature expression. There is a real problem here, part of that feeling of inappropriateness from which we started out. Nothing seems more reasonable, for those who are aware of the damage, than to steer in the opposite direction and think it is enough to avoid copying metropolitan trends in order to achieve an intellectual life with greater substance. This conclusion is illusory, as we shall see, but has strong intuitive support. For a time it was taken up by both right and left nationalists, in a convergence that boded ill for the left and, through its wide diffusion, contributed to a low intellectual level and a high estimation of ideological crudities.

The search for genuine (i.e., unadulterated) national roots leads us to ask: What would popular culture be like if it were possible to isolate it from commercial interests and particularly from the mass media? What would a national economy be like if there were no admixture? Since 1964 the internationalization of capital, the commodification of social relations, and the presence of the mass media have developed so rapidly that these very questions have come to seem implausible. Yet barely

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<sup>4</sup> *Mário de Andrade* (1893–1945), novelist, poet and critic, was the acknowledged leader of the modernist movement in Brazil and bore the brunt of the initial scandal that it caused. The language of his *Macunaíma: the Hero without Any Character* (1928) synthesizes idioms and dialects from all the regions of Brazil. [Trs. note].

<sup>5</sup> *Silvio Romero* (1851–1914) wrote the first modern history of Brazilian literature, a work which is still of interest today, despite the scientific language of the period. [Trs. note].

<sup>6</sup> The *Centro Popular de Cultura* (CPC) was established in 1961 at the start of the social ferment that ended with the military coup in 1964. The movement was created under the auspices of the National Union of Students, which wanted to fuse together artistic irreverence, political teaching and the people. It produced surprisingly inventive cinema, theatre and other stage performances. Several of its members became major artistic figures: Glauber Rocha, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade and Ferreira Gullar among others. The convergence of the student and popular movements gave rise to completely new artistic possibilities. [Note supplied by Ana MacMac].

twenty years ago they still excited intellectuals and figured on their agenda. A combative frame of mind still prevailed—for which progress would result from a kind of *reconquista*, or rather from the expulsion of the invaders. Once imperialism had been pushed back, its commercial and industrial forms of culture neutralized, and its allied, anti-national section of the bourgeoisie isolated, the way would be clear for the flowering of national culture, which had been *distorted by these elements as by an alien body*. This correct emphasis on the mechanisms of US domination served to mythologize the Brazilian community as object of patriotic fervour, whereas a class analysis would have made this much more problematic. Here a qualification is necessary: such ideas reached their height in the period of the Goulart government, when extraordinary events, which brought about experimentation and democratic realignments on a large scale, were taking place. The period cannot be reduced to the inconsistencies of its self-image—indicative though they are of the illusion inherent in populist nationalism that the outside world is the source of all evil.

In 1964 the right-wing nationalists branded Marxism as an alien influence, perhaps imagining that fascism was a Brazilian invention. But over and above their differences, the two nationalist tendencies were alike in hoping to find their goal by eliminating anything that was not indigenous. The residue would be the essence of Brazil. The same illusion was popular in the last century, but at that time the new national culture owed more to diversification of the European models than to exclusion of the Portuguese. Opponents of the romantic-liberal distortion of Brazilian society did not arrive at the authentic country, since once French and English imports had been rooted out, the colonial order was restored. And that was a Portuguese creation. The paradox of this kind of purism is apparent in the person of Policarpo Quaresma, whose quest for authenticity led him to write in Tupi, a language foreign to him. The same goes for Antonio Callado's, *Quarup*, in which the real Brazil is found not in the colonial past—as suggested by Lima Barreto's hero—but in the heart of the interior, far from the Atlantic coast with its overseas contacts. A group of characters mark the centre of the country on a map and go off in search of it. After innumerable adventures they reach their destination, where they find . . . an ants' nest.

### The New Anti-Nationalism

The standard US models that arrived with the new communications networks were regarded by the nationalists as an unwelcome foreign presence. The next generation, however, already breathing naturally in this air, considered nationalism to be archaic and provincial. For the first time, as far as I know, the idea spread that it was a worthless enterprise to defend national characteristics against imperialist uniformity. The culture industry would cure the sickness of Brazilian culture—at least for those who were willing to delude themselves.

In the 1960s nationalism also came under fire from those who thought of themselves as politically and artistically more advanced. Their views are now being taken up in the context of international mass media, only

this time without the elements of class struggle and anti-imperialism. In this 'world' environment of uniform mythology, the struggle to establish an 'authentic' culture appears as a relic from the past. Its illusory nature becomes evident, and it seems a provincial phenomenon associated with archaic forms of oppression. The argument is irrefutable, but it must be said that in the new context an emphasis on the international dimension of culture becomes no more than a legitimization of the existing mass media. Just as nationalists used to condemn imperialism and hush up bourgeois oppression, so the anti-nationalists invoke the authoritarianism and backwardness of their opponents, with good reason, while suggesting that the reign of mass communication is either emancipatory or aesthetically acceptable. A modern, critical position, perhaps, but fundamentally conformist. There is another imaginary reversal of roles: although the 'globalists' operate within the dominant ideology of our time, they defend their positions as if they were being hunted down, or as if they were part of the heroic vanguard, aesthetic or libertarian, of the early twentieth century; they line up with the authorities in the manner of one who is starting a revolution.

In the same order of paradox, we can see that the imposition of foreign ideology and the cultural expropriation of the people are realities which do not cease to exist just because there is mystification in the nationalists' theories about them. Whether they are right or wrong, the nationalists become involved in actual conflicts, imparting to them a certain degree of visibility. The mass-media modernists, though right in their criticisms, imagine a universalist world which does not exist. It is a question of choosing between the old and the new error, both upheld in the name of progress. The sight of the Avenida Paulista is a fine example: ugly mansions, once used by the rich to flaunt their wealth, now seem perversely tolerable at the foot of modern skyscrapers, both for reasons of proportion and because of that poetry which emanates from any historically superseded power.

Recent French philosophy has been another factor in the discrediting of cultural nationalism. Its anti-totalizing tendency, its preference for levels of historicity alien to the national milieu, its dismantling of conventional literary frameworks such as authorship, 'the work', influence, originality, etc.—all these destroy, or at least discredit, that romantic correspondence between individual heroism, masterly execution and collective redemption which imbues the nationalist schemas with their undeniable knowledge-value and potential for mystification. To attack these coordinates can be exciting and partially convincing, besides appeasing national sensibility in an area where it was least expected.

A commonplace idea suggests that the copy is secondary with regard to the original, depends upon it, is worth less, and so on. Such a view attaches a negative sign to the totality of cultural forces in Latin America and is at the root of the intellectual malaise that we are discussing. Now, contemporary French philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida have made it their speciality to show that such hierarchies have no basis. Why should the prior be worth more than the posterior, the model more than the imitation, the central more than the peripheral, the

economic infrastructure more than cultural life, and so forth? According to the French philosophers, it is a question of conditioning processes (but are they all of the same order?)—prejudices which do not express the life of the spirit in its real movement but reflect the orientation inherent in the traditional human sciences. In their view, it would be more accurate and unbiased to think in terms of an infinite sequence of transformations, with no beginning or end, no first or last, no worse or better. One can easily appreciate how this would enhance the self-esteem and relieve the anxiety of the underdeveloped world, which is seen as tributary to the central countries. We would pass from being a backward to an advanced part of the world, from a deviation to a paradigm, from inferior to superior lands (although the analysis set out to suppress just such superiority). All this because countries which live in the humiliation of having to imitate are more willing than the metropolitan countries to give up the illusion of an original source, even though the theory originated there and not here. Above all, the problem of mirror-culture would no longer be ours alone, and instead of setting our sights on the Europeanization or Americanization of Latin America we would, in a certain sense, be participating in the Latin Americanization of the central cultures.<sup>7</sup>

### The Inevitability of Cultural Imitation

It remains to be seen whether this conceptual break with the primacy of origins would enable us to balance out or combat relations of actual subordination. Would the innovations of the advanced world suddenly become dispensable once they had lost the distinction of originality? In order to use them in a free and non-imitative manner, it is not enough simply to divest them of their sacred aura. Contrary to what the above analysis might lead us to believe, the breaking down of cultural dazzlement in the underdeveloped countries does not go to the heart of a problem which is essentially practical in character. Solutions are reproduced from the advanced world in response to cultural, economic and political needs, and the notion of copying, with its psychologistic connotations, throws no light whatsoever on this reality. If theory remains at this level, it will continue to suffer from the same limitations, and the radicalism of an analysis that passes over efficient causes will become in its turn largely delusive. The inevitability of cultural imitation is bound up with a specific set of historical imperatives over which abstract philosophical critiques can exercise no power. Even here nationalism is the weak part of the argument, and its supersession at the level of philosophy has no purchase on the realities to which it owes its strength. It should be noted that while nationalism has recently been almost absent from serious intellectual debate, it has a growing presence in the administration of culture, where, for better or worse, it is impossible to escape from the national dimension. Now that economic, though not political, space has become international—which is not the same as homogeneous—this return of nationalism by the back door reflects the insuperable paradox of the present day.

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<sup>7</sup> See Silvio Santiago, 'O Entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano', in *Uma literatura nos trópicos*, São Paulo 1978; and Haroldo de Campos, 'Da razão antropofágica: diálogo e diferença na cultura brasileira', *Boletim Bibliográfico Biblioteca Mário de Andrade*, vol. 44, January–December 1983.

In the 1920s Oswald de Andrade's 'anthropophagous' Pau-Brazil programme also tried to give a triumphalist interpretation of our backwardness.<sup>8</sup> The disharmony between bourgeois models and the realities of rural patriarchy is at the very heart of his poetry—the first of these two elements appearing in the role of absurd caprice ('Rui Barbosa: A Top Hat in Senegambia'). Its true novelty lies in the fact that the lack of accord is a source not of distress but of optimism, evidence of the country's innocence and the possibility of an alternative, non-bourgeois historical development. This *sui generis* cult of progress is rounded out with a technological wager: Brazil's innocence (the result of Christianization and *embourgeoisement* barely scraping the surface) plus technology equals utopia; modern material progress will make possible a direct leap from pre-bourgeois society to paradise. Marx himself, in his famous letter of 1881 to Vera Zasulich, came up with a similar hypothesis that the Russian peasant commune would achieve socialism without a capitalist interregnum, thanks to the means made available by progress in the West. Similarly, albeit in a register combining jokes, provocation, philosophy of history and prophecy (as, later, in the films of Glauber Rocha), Anthropophagy set itself the aim of leaping a whole stage.

Returning once more to the idea that Western culture has been inappropriately copied in Brazil, we can see that Oswald's programme introduced a change of tone. Local primitivism would give back a modern sense to tired European culture, liberating it from Christian mortification and capitalist utilitarianism. Brazil's experience would be a differentiated cornerstone, with utopian powers, on the map of contemporary history. (The poems of Mário de Andrade and Raúl Bopp<sup>9</sup> on Amazonian slothfulness contain a similar idea.) Modernism therefore brought about a profound change in values: for the first time the processes under way in Brazil were weighed in the context of the present-day world, as having something to offer in substance. Oswald de Andrade advocated cultural irreverence in place of subaltern obfuscation, using the metaphor of 'swallowing up' the alien: a copy, to be sure, but with regenerative effect. Historical distance allows us to see the ingenuousness and conceit contained in these propositions.

The new vogue for Oswald's manifestoes in the 1960s and particularly the 1970s appeared in the very different context of a military dictatorship which, for all its belief in technological progress and its alliance with big capital both national and international, was less repressive than expected in regard to popular customs. In the other camp, the attempt to overthrow capitalism through revolutionary war also changed the accepted view of what could be termed 'radical'. This now had no connection with the provincial narrowness of the 1920s, when the Antropofago rebellion assumed a highly libertarian and enlightening role. In the new circumstances technological optimism no longer held

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<sup>8</sup> Oswald de Andrade introduced European avant-garde ideas into Brazil. He espoused extreme primitivism (anthropophagy) and his *Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil* (1924) and *Manifesto Antropofágico* (1928) are the most daring writings of the 'modern movement' which emerged in 1922, attacking academic values and respectability and seeking poetry written in the Brazilian vernacular. [Trs. note].

<sup>9</sup> The greatest achievement of Raúl Bopp (b. 1898) was his 'cannibalist' poem 'Cobra Novato' (1921), an exploration of the Amazon jungle. [Trs. note].

water, while the brazen cultural irreverence of Oswald's 'swallowing up' acquired a sense of exasperation close to the mentality of direct action (although often with good artistic results). Oswald's clarity of construction, penetrating vision and sense of discovery all suffered as greater value was attached to his primal, 'de-moralizing' literary practices. One example of this evolution is the guiltlessness of the act of swallowing up. What was then freedom against Catholicism, the bourgeoisie and the glare of Europe has become in the eighties an awkward excuse to handle uncritically those ambiguities of mass culture that stand in need of elucidation. How can one fail to notice that the *Antropofagos*—like the nationalists—take as their subject the abstract Brazilian, with no class specification; or that the analogy with the digestive process throws absolutely no light on the politics and aesthetics of contemporary cultural life?

### 'Tupi or Not Tupi'

Since the last century educated Brazilians—the concept is not meant as a compliment but refers to a social category—have had the sense of living among ideas and institutions copied from abroad that do not reflect local reality. It is not sufficient, however, to give up loans in order to think and live more authentically. Besides, one cannot so much as conceive of giving them up. Nor is the problem eliminated by a philosophical deconstruction of the concept of copy. The programmatic innocence of the *Antropofagos*, which allows them to ignore the malaise, does not prevent it from emerging anew. 'Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question!'—Oswald's famous saying, with its contradictory use of the English language, a classical line and a play on words to pursue the search for national identity, itself says a great deal about the nature of the impasse.

The problem may appear simpler in historical perspective. Silvio Romero, despite many absurdities, made a number of excellent remarks on the matter. The following extract is taken from a work on Machado de Assis, written in 1897 to prove that this greatest Brazilian writer produced nothing but a literature of Anglomania, incompetent, unattuned, slavish, etcetera.

Meanwhile a kind of absurdity developed . . . a tiny intellectual elite separated itself off from the mass of the population, and while the majority remained almost entirely uneducated, this elite, being particularly gifted in the art of learning and copying, threw itself into political and literary imitation of everything it found in the Old World. So now we have an exotic literature and politics, which live and procreate in a hothouse that has no relationship to the outside temperature and environment. This is the bad side of our feeble, illusory skill of mestizo southerners, passionate, given to fantasy, capable of imitation but organically unsuited to create, invent or produce things of our own that spring from the immediate or remote depths of our life and history.

In colonial times, a skilful policy of segregation cut us off from foreigners and kept within us a certain sense of cohesion. This is what gave us Basilio, Durão, Gonzaga, Alvarenga Peixoto, Claudio and Silva Alvarenga, who all worked in a milieu of exclusively Portuguese and Brazilian ideas.



With the first emperor and the Regency, the first breach [opened] in our wall of isolation by Dom João VI grew wider, and we began to copy the political and literary romanticism of the French.

We aped the Charter of 1814 and transplanted the fantasies of Benjamin Constant; we mimicked the parliamentism and constitutional politics of the author of *Adolphe*, intermingled with the poetry and dreams of the author of *René* and *Atala*.

The people . . . was, remained illiterate.

The Second Empire, whose policy was for fifty years vacillating, uncertain and incompetent, gradually opened all the gates in a chaotic manner lacking any criteria or sense of discrimination. Imitation, mimicking of everything—customs, laws, codes, verse, theatre, novel—was the general rule.

Regular sailings assured direct communication with the old continent and swelled the inflow of imitation and servile copying. [. . .]

This is why, in terms of copying, mimicry and pastiches to impress the gringos, no people has a better Constitution on paper [. . .], everything is better . . . on paper. The reality is appalling.<sup>10</sup>

Silvio Romero's account and analysis are uneven, sometimes incompatible. In some instances it is the argument that is interesting, in others the ideology, so that the modern reader will want to examine them separately. The basic schema is as follows: a tiny elite devotes itself to copying Old World culture, separating itself off from the mass of the population, which remains uneducated. As a result, literature and politics come to occupy an exotic position, and we become incapable of *creating things of our own that spring from the depths of our life and history*. Implicit in this demand is the norm of an organic, reasonably homogeneous national culture with popular roots—a norm that cannot be reduced to a mere illusion of literary history or of romanticism, since in some measure it expresses the conditions of modern citizenship. It is in its opposition to this norm that the Brazilian configuration—Europeanized minority, uneducated majority—constitutes an *absurdity*. On the other hand, in order to make the picture more realistic, we should remember that the organic requirement arose at the same time as the expansion of imperialism and organized science—two tendencies which rendered obsolete the idea of a harmonious and auto-centred national culture.

### Original Sin

The original sin, responsible for the severing of connections, was the copy. Its negative effects already made themselves felt in the social fissure between *culture* (unrelated to its surroundings) and *production* (not springing from the depths of our life). However, the disproportion between cause and effects is such that it raises some doubts about the cause itself, and Silvio Romero's own remarks are an invitation to follow a different line of argument from the one he pursues. Let us also note in passing that it is in the nature of an absurdity to be avoidable, and that Romero's argument and invective actually suggest that the elite had an obligation to correct the error that had separated it from the people. His critique was seeking to make the class gulf intolerable for *educated people*, since in a country recently emancipated from slavery

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<sup>10</sup> Silvio Romero, *Machado de Assis*, Rio de Janeiro 1897, pp. 121–23.

the weakness of the popular camp inhibited the emergence of other solutions.

It would seem, then, that the origins of our cultural absurdity are to be found in the imitative talent of mestizo southerners who have few creative capacities. The *petitio principii* is quite transparent: imitativeness is explained by a (racial) tendency to that very imitativeness which is supposed to be explained. (The author's argument, we should note, itself imitated the scientific naturalism then in vogue in Europe.) Today such explanations can hardly be taken seriously, although it is worth examining them as an ideological mechanism and an expression of their times. If the Brazilians' propensity for copying is racial in origin, why should the elite have been alone in indulging it? If everyone had copied, all the effects of 'exoticism' (lack of relation to the environment) and 'absurdity' (separation between elite and people) would have vanished as if by magic, and with them the whole problem. It is not copying in general but *the copying of one class* that constitutes the problem. The explanation must lie not in race but in class.

Silvio Romero goes on to sketch how the vice of imitation developed in Brazil. Absolute zero was in the colonial period, when writers 'worked in a milieu of exclusively Portuguese and Brazilian ideas.' Could it be that the distance between elite and people was smaller in that epoch? Or the fondness for copying less strong? Surely not—and anyway that is not what the text says. The 'cohesion' to which it refers is of a different order, the result of a 'skilful policy of segregation' (!) that separated Brazil from everything non-Portuguese. In other words, the comparison between stages lacks an object: the demand for homogeneity points, in one case, to a social structure remarkable for its inequality, and in the other case to the banning of foreign ideas. Still, if the explanation does not convince us, the observation that it seeks to clarify is accurate enough. Before the nineteenth century, the copying of the European model and the distance between educated people and the mass did not constitute an 'absurdity'. In highly schematic terms, we could say that educated people, in the colonial period, felt solidarity towards the metropolis, Western tradition and their own colleagues, but not towards the local population. To base oneself on a foreign model, in cultural estrangement from the local surroundings, did not appear as a defect—quite the contrary! We should not forget that neo-classical aesthetics was itself universalist and greatly appreciated respect for canonical forms, while the theory of art current at that time set a positive value on imitation. As Antonio Candido acutely observed, the Arcadian poet who placed a nymph in the waters of the Carmo was not lacking in originality; he incorporated Minas Gerais into the traditions of the West and, quite laudibly, cultivated those traditions in a remote corner of the earth.<sup>11</sup>

The act of copying, then, did not begin with independence and regular shipping, as Silvio Romero would have it. But it is true that only then did it become the insoluble problem which is still discussed today, and

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<sup>11</sup> Antonio Candido, *Formação da literatura brasileira*, São Paulo 1969, vol. 1, p. 74.

which calls forth such terms as 'mimickry', 'apeing' or 'pastiche'. How did imitation acquire these pejorative connotations?

It is well known that Brazil's gaining of independence did not involve a revolution. Apart from changes in external relations and a reorganization of the top administration, the socio-economic structure created by colonial exploitation remained intact, though now for the benefit of local dominant classes. It was thus inevitable that modern forms of civilization entailing freedom and citizenship, which arrived together with the wave of political emancipation, should have appeared foreign and artificial, 'anti-national', 'borrowed', 'absurd' or however else critics cared to describe them. The strength of the epithets indicates the damage to the self-esteem of the Brazilian elite, which faced the depressing alternative of deprecating the bases of its social pre-eminence in the name of progress, or deprecating progress in the name of its social pre-eminence. On the one hand, there were the slave trade, the latifundia and 'Mandonism'—that is to say, a set of relations with their own rules, consolidated in colonial times and impervious to the universalism of bourgeois civilization; on the other hand, held in check by these relations, but also holding them in check, there was the Law before which everyone was equal, the separation between public and private, civil liberties, parliament, romantic patriotism, and so on. To ensure the stable coexistence of these two conceptions, in principle so incompatible, was at the centre of ideological and moral preoccupations in Brazil in the nineteenth century. For some, the colonial heritage was a relic to be superseded in the march of progress; for others, it was the real Brazil, to be preserved against absurd imitations. Some wanted to harmonize progress and slave labour, so as not to have to give up either, while still others believed that such a reconciliation already existed, with deleterious moral results. Silvio Romero, for his part, used conservative arguments with a progressive intent, focusing on the 'real' Brazil as the continuation of colonial authoritarianism, but doing so in order to attack its foundations. He scorned as ineffectual the 'illusory' country of laws, lawyers and imported culture: 'No people has a better Constitution on paper [. . .]; the reality is appalling.'

### The Spread of New Ideas

Silvio Romero's list of 'imitations', not to be allowed through customs, included fashions, patterns of behaviour, laws, codes, poetry, drama and novels. Judged separately against the social reality of Brazil, these articles were indeed superfluous imports which would serve to obscure the real state of impoverishment and create an illusion of progress. In their combination, however, they entered into the formation and equipping of the new nation-state, as well as laying the ground for the participation of new elites in contemporary culture. This modernizing force—whatever its imitative appearance and its distance from the daily course of things—became more inseparably bound up with the reality of Brazil than the institution of slave labour, which was later replaced by other forms of forced labour equally incompatible with the aspiration to enlightenment. As time passed, the ubiquitous stamp of 'inauthenticity' came to be seen as the most authentic part of the national drama, its very mark of identity. Grafted from nineteenth-century Europe onto

a colonial social being, the various perfections of civilization began to follow different rules from those operating in the hegemonic countries. This led to a widespread sense of the indigenous pastiche. Only a great figure like Machado de Assis had the impartiality to see a peculiar mode of ideological functioning where other critics could distinguish no more than a lack of consistency. Sergio Buarque de Hollanda remarked: "The speed at which the "new ideas" spread in the old colony, and the fervour with which they were adopted in many circles on the eve of independence, show quite unequivocally that they had the potential to satisfy an impatient desire for change and that the people was ripe for such change. But it is also clear that the social order expressed in these ideas was far from having an exact equivalent in Brazil, particularly outside the cities. The articulation of society, the basic criteria of economic exploitation and the distribution of privileges were so different here that the "new ideas" could not have the same meaning that was attached to them in parts of Europe or ex-English America."<sup>12</sup>

When Brazil became an independent state, a permanent collaboration was established between the forms of life characteristic of colonial oppression and the innovations of bourgeois progress. The new stage of capitalism broke up the exclusive relationship with the metropolis, converting local property-owners and administrators into a national ruling class (effectively part of the emergent world bourgeoisie), and yet retained the old forms of labour exploitation which have not been fully modernized up to the present day. In other words, the discrepancy between the 'two Brazils' was not due to an imitative tendency, as Silvio Romero and many others thought; nor did it correspond to a brief period of transition. It was the lasting result of the creation of a nation-state on the basis of slave labour—which, if the reader will forgive the shorthand, arose in turn out of the English industrial revolution and the consequent crisis of the old colonial system. That is to say, *it arose out of contemporary history*.<sup>13</sup> Thus Brazil's backward deformation belongs to the same order of things as the progress of the advanced countries. Silvio Romero's 'absurdities'—in reality, the Cyclopean discords of world capitalism—are not a historical deviation. They are linked to the finality of a single process which, in the case of Brazil, requires the continuation of forced or semi-forced labour and a corresponding cultural separation of the poor. With certain modifications, much of it has survived to this day. The panorama now seems to be changing, thanks to the desegregationist impulse of mass consumption and mass communications. These new terms of cultural oppression and expropriation have not yet been much studied. The thesis of cultural copying thus involves an ideology in the Marxist sense of the term—that is, an illusion supported by appearances. The well-known coexistence of bourgeois principles with those of the ancien régime is here explained in accordance with a plausible and wide-

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<sup>12</sup> Sergio Buarque de Hollanda, *Do império à república*, II, São Paulo 1977, pp. 77–78.

<sup>13</sup> Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Da monarquia à república: Momentos decisivos*, São Paulo 1977, chapter one; Luis Felipe de Alencastro, 'La traite négrière et l'unité nationale brésilienne', *Revue Française de l'Histoire de l'Outre-Mer*, vol. 46, 1979; Fernando Novais, 'Passagens para o Novo Mundo', *Novos Estudos Cebrap* 9, July 1984.

ranging schema, essentially individualist in nature, in which effects and causes are systematically inverted.

For Silvio Romero imitation results in the lack of a common denominator between popular and elite culture, and in the elite's low level of permeation by the national. But why not reverse the argument? Why should the imitative character of our life not stem from forms of inequality so brutal that they lack the minimal reciprocity ('common denominator') without which modern society can only appear artificial and 'imported'? At a time when the idea of the nation had become the norm, the dominant class's *unpatriotic* disregard for the lives it exploited gave it the feeling of being alien. The origins of this situation in colonialism and slavery are immediately apparent.

### Causes and Effects

The defects normally associated with imitation can be explained in the same way. We can agree with its detractors that the copy is at the opposite pole from originality, from national creativity, from independent and well-adapted judgements, and so on. Absolute domination entails that culture expresses nothing of the conditions that gave it life, except for that intrinsic sense of futility on which a number of writers have been able to work artistically. Hence the 'exotic' literature and politics unrelated to the 'immediate or remote depths of our life and history'; hence, too, the lack of 'discrimination' or 'criteria' and, above all, the intense conviction that all is mere paper. In other words, the painfulness of an imitative civilization is produced not by imitation—which is present at any event—but by the social structure of the country. It is this which places the culture in an untenable position, contradicting its very concept of itself, and which nevertheless was not as sterile, at that time, as Silvio Romero would have us believe. Nor did the segregated section of society remain unproductive. Its modes of expression would later acquire, for educated intellectuals, the value of a non-bourgeois component of national life, an element serving to fix Brazilian identity (with all the evident ambiguities).

The exposure of cultural transplantation has become the axis of a naive yet widespread critical perspective. Let us conclude by summarizing some of its defects.

1. It suggests that imitation is avoidable, thereby locking the reader into a false problem.
2. It presents as a national characteristic what is actually a malaise of the dominant class, bound up with the difficulty of morally reconciling the advantages of progress with those of slavery or its surrogates.
3. It implies that the elites could conduct themselves in some other way—which is tantamount to claiming that the beneficiary of a given situation will put an end to it.
4. The argument obscures the essential point, since it concentrates its

fire on the relationship between elite and model whereas the real crux is the exclusion of the poor from the universe of contemporary culture.

5. Its implicit solution is that the dominant class should reform itself and give up imitation. We have argued, on the contrary, that the answer lies in the workers gaining access to the terms of contemporary life, so that they can re-define them through their own initiative. This, indeed, would be a concrete definition of democracy in Brazil.

6. A copy refers to a prior original existing elsewhere, of which it is an inferior reflection. Such deprecation often corresponds to the self-consciousness of Latin American elites, who attach mythical solidity—in the form of regional intellectual specialization—to the economic, technological and political inequalities of the international order. The authentic and the creative are to the imitative what the advanced countries are to the backward. But one cannot solve the problem by going to the opposite extreme. As we have seen, philosophical objections to the concept of originality tend to regard as non-existent a real problem that it is absurd to dismiss. Cultural history has to be set in the world perspective of the economics and culture of the left, which attempt to explain our 'backwardness' as part of the contemporary history of capital and *its advances*.<sup>14</sup> Seen in terms of the copy, the anachronistic juxtaposition of forms of modern civilization and realities originating in the colonial period is a mode of non-being or even a humiliatingly imperfect realization of a model situated elsewhere. Dialectical criticism, on the other hand, investigates the same anachronism and seeks to draw out a figure of the modern world, set on a course that is either full of promise, grotesque or catastrophic.

7. The idea of the copy that we have been discussing counterposes national and foreign, original and imitative. These are unreal oppositions which do not allow us to see the share of the foreign in the nationally specific, of the imitative in the original and of the original in the imitative. (In a key study, Paulo Emilio Salles Gomez refers to our 'creative lack of competence in copying'.<sup>15</sup>) If we are not mistaken, the theory presupposes three elements—a Brazilian subject, reality of the country, civilization of the advanced nations—such that the third helps the first to forget the second. This schema is also unreal, and it obscures the organized, cumulative nature of the process, the potent strength even of bad tradition, and the power relations, both national and international, that are in play. Whatever its unacceptable aspects—unacceptable for whom?—Brazilian cultural life has elements of dynamism which display both originality and lack of originality. Copying is not a false problem, so long as we treat it pragmatically, from an aesthetic and political point of view freed from the mythical requirement of creation *ex nihilo*.

*Translated by Linda Briggs*

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<sup>14</sup> See Celso Furtado, *A Pre-Revolução Brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro 1962, and Fernando H. Cardoso, *Empresário industrial e desenvolvimento econômico no Brasil*, São Paulo 1964.

<sup>15</sup> Paulo Emilio Salles Gomez, 'Cinema: trajetória no subdesenvolvimento', *Argumento* No. 1, October 1973.