

Racism and anti-racism in Brazil: the case of indigenous peoples

Aims and Objectives

The objective of this Research Network is to bring together indigenous leaders, indigenous and non-indigenous intellectuals, and academics from the Humanities and Social Sciences working in Brazil and the UK, with a view to discuss the rise in racism and violence against indigenous peoples in Brazil, as well as strategies to resist it and contain it. Led by a Cultural Studies scholar with experience in the analysis of indigenous narratives and native intellectual history, this project has a strong grounding on the Humanities. Its co-investigator is a young scholar with a formation on environmental science and publications on the history of violence in the Amazon. Both investigators will be working closely with indigenous leader and intellectual Ailton Krenak. The combined approach from this multi-disciplinary team will guarantee that the PI's focus on cultural producers and textual and cultural analysis of racism is complemented by the Co-I focus on environmental and development issues, and by the political experience and historical knowledge of the non-academic partner.

Guided by recent theoretical debates on racism (including environmental and cultural racism) and environmental violence, as well as by the natives' own views, as discussed in loco and expressed in political documents and artistic works, this project will ask questions such as: Why is racism against native populations growing so dramatically in contemporary Brazil in contradiction with politics of social-economic inclusion? Is racism a useful category to analyse current attacks against the native populations? How do cultural and environmental racism relate to racism more broadly? How is racism against native peoples propagated in the media and creative arts? How can the media and creative arts (including native media and arts) help to contain and revert the current increase in racism against native peoples? In which ways do the current economic and ecological pressures on the Amazon fuel (and are fuelled by) racism? How are indigenous leaders and their communities seeing the current rise in prejudice against them? How are they resisting it? What tools can traditional native knowledge bring to the debate about racism and the environment? What tools can current theories about race and ethnicity/indigeneity in Latin America bring to discussions about racism and prejudice against native peoples in Brazil? Can changes in the education system and school curricula help contain or revert the current rise in racism against native peoples? How does racism against native people relate to racism against Black rural communities and maroon communities?

Social-political context

The Amazon forest and other Brazilian natural environments are being destroyed at a rate not seen since the dictatorship of the 1970s. The turn to the left represented by the election of PT president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (2002-2010), followed by his ally Dilma Rousseff, brought clear improvements in the quality of life for the poorest sectors of the population (measured as access to basic needs such as food, health care, education, and leisure). At the same time, PT's economic model, based on un-reconstructed notions of 'progress' and 'development', and its alliance with big land owners and civil construction companies, generated an unprecedented number of attacks on the environment and on the rights and lives of traditional populations, particularly native Indians. Data from 2013 indicate that assassinations of native Indians grew 168% in the Lula and Rousseff governments in comparison to the previous government, a rate that in turn increased by 40% in 2014¹, a year that also saw the number of suicides by native Indians go up to 135, the highest number in 29 years. The situation has worsened after the replacement of Dilma Rousseff by a right-leaning interim government in 2016. Indigenous parks and reservations are constantly being invaded and encroached upon by cattle ranchers, miners, loggers and the building of giant hydro-electric plants and highways. FUNAI (the bureau for the protection of indigenous peoples) has

¹ <http://www.portalguaira.com/numero-de-indios-assassinados-aumenta-168-aponta-jornal/>; <http://www.cimi.org.br/site/pt-br/?system=news&action=read&id=8174>

been systematically de-funded and some of its loyal workers were replaced, in parts of the country, by agents of ranchers and land grabbers. Whilst it always existed, racism against indigenous peoples has in the past few years become more open, and it seems now to be an accepted practice in many parts of the country, with numerous cases of indigenous men and women being publicly abused, refused service at shops, restaurants, and hospitals, or even being expelled from buses. Politicians in the new interim government have made disparaging comments about indigenous communities and individuals in the mainstream press.

At the same time, indigenous activism is stronger than it has ever been. Besides running for official elected positions such as mayors or councillors and organising themselves in larger political groups, Brazilian Amerindians are using traditional and non-traditional media to further links with other indigenous groups and to educate the Brazilian population as a whole about indigenous world views and ways of living. For the first time, indigenous authors are publishing their own books covering a wide range of genre and topics, from traditional myths, to literature, history, biography, and environmentalism. There has been a well documented surge of indigenous cinema production, as well as an increasing number of visual artists and musicians who are making use of Western media and venues to express themselves. Studies in the fields of biology, human ecology, archaeology, anthropology, and literature/cultural studies are also bringing to light new knowledge about the region, confirming the importance of native practices, histories and ways of thinking for the conservation of populations and natural environments. Much of these cultural practices can shed light on how Amerindians view racism, and above all, on their ways of resisting it.

Theoretical Context

Racism is a notoriously thorny subject in Brazil. It is a well known fact that until the 1950s Brazil was often described as a 'racial democracy' due to lack of openly segregationist policies and to high rates of inter-racial marriages. Although the myth of 'racial democracy' has been debunked by both Brazilian and foreign scholars since at least the 1960s, it has survived in popular discourse and, albeit residually, in some academic spheres². The implementation of university quotas for descendants of African slaves and indigenous peoples has recently brought the debate of whether or not Brazil is a racist country to the forefront of the national scene, with ever more polarised views being witnessed in the press and in social networks. However, most discussion about racism in Brazil has centred on Afro-descendants. Native populations are either seen as part of a more general category of non-whites, or are completely ignored. In fact, in line with practices in other parts of Latin America, 'race' and 'racism' are categories rarely used to discuss the indigenous peoples' plight in face of European and (later) Brazilian attacks against them. Instead, the relationship between the original people's of Latin America and European colonisers (and their descendants) tends to be discussed with reference to 'ethnicity' and/or 'culture'. Yet, as Wade has argued, the tendency to separate 'race' (to refer to Blacks and their descendants) from 'ethnicity' or 'culture' (to refer to Indians) in Latin American studies has not always been very productive³. First, because most recent debates on race have moved away from phenotypes towards ideas of race as construct or as a process, which bear strong affinities with concepts within the realm of 'culture' and 'ethnicity'. Second, because this separation not only ignores the fact that African slaves came, like American Indians, from widely different cultures, but also that native peoples are, and have always been, victims of racism. Racism, as Wade explains, is a complex phenomenon that often involves more than one element: phenotype, social class, culture, and ethnicity, as well as actors that identify themselves or others in more than one way, depending on context and circumstances. By using the term racism to refer to recent (and historical) attacks on indigenous peoples, we do not wish to imply that all forms of racism are the same. Neither do we wish to underplay the importance of culture, and of understanding the cultural specificities of native groups. Different from other forms of racism, racism against indigenous peoples is grounded on a paradox: indigenous Brazilians are simultaneously accused of being barbarians (not civilised) and/or of not being native enough (i.e.

² See for example Fry et al, *Divisões Perigosas*. Rio: Civilização Brasileira, 2007; and Kamel, *Não Somos Racistas*. Rio: Ediouro, 2006.

³ Wade, Peter. *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. London: Pluto Press, 1997.

too civilised) and therefore not 'real indians'. This paradox could be seen as being closer to issues related to ethnicity and culture (what is meant by 'being indian' in a specific time/place) than to 'race'. Yet, as recent physical and verbal/written attacks on Amerindians have demonstrated, the predominant discourse against indigenous peoples is based not on cultural specificity but on very general divisions between modernity versus barbarism, and superiority versus inferiority, that are in line with modern racism as it manifests itself anywhere in the world, and which has roots in Brazil's colonial past. And although it is obviously important to understand the economic interests that lie behind such discourse (in other words, the interests that motivate the desire to usurp native land in order to carry out activities such as logging, cattle ranching, mining, export-based agriculture and land speculation), it is also important to understand the discourse itself and how it mobilises racist tropes and general ideas about race, indigeneity, and culture that lead, in practice, to racist acts. By calling racism by its name and, at the same time, examining its causes and the peculiarities of racist attacks against native peoples, we will be able contribute to a better understanding of the nuances of racism in Brazil and the reasons for openly racist discourse against native indians having become more mainstream in the last decade.

The Network will also focus on anti-racist tactics used by indigenous leaders, writers, artists and educators. Given the slippery nature of race definitions and the problematics of discussing racism in Brazil, how do indigenous leaders, artists and educators resist racism? Is racism being discussed amongst different indigenous groups? In which ways? What strategies are being used by indigenous peoples in order to fight racism? Can indigenous leaders, artists and educators learn from afro-descendants' experiences in their fight against racism?

Activities

The Research Network will include the following activities:

- A. Three day meeting in Recôncavo, Bahia, bringing together the PI, the CI, and Ailton Krenak, along with invited academic researchers from the UK and Brazil, indigenous leaders, including members from the various local groups, and indigenous writers, film-makers and artists. The meeting will focused on the research questions and personal/group experiences of indigenous participants and members of local afro-descendant groups.
- B. A two day meeting in Brasilia led by Ailton Krenak and other indigenous leaders. Whilst the meeting in Bahia will be focused on the project's questions and on discussions about the participants' experiences with racism and ways to fight it, the Brasília meeting will have a clear political purpose, namely the writing of a document which will signed by indigenous leaders, academics (including the PI and the CoI), indigenous intellectuals and students. The document will be delivered to representatives of the legislative and judicial powers.
- C. Two day meeting at the University of Manchester, discussing the theoretical implications of the Network's activities with scholars working on racism and indigeneity in the UK and Europe. The meeting will also include one or more public sessions to inform British academics and non-academics (including the press) about the current situation of native communities in Brazil.