

WOMEN'S CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND MISSION

Venice, 24 - 30 June, 1979

RACISM AND ITS EFFECTS IN BRAZILIAN SOCIETY

by
Lélia Gonzalez
Pontificia Universidade Catolica/RJ
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro
Movimento Negro Unificado Contra a
Discriminacao Racial

In this paper I assume the proposition of Ken Jordan: "the ideology of racism is the product of modern industrial capitalism in its imperialistic phase (...) systematically elaborated as a justifying philosophy of the exploitation of non-white populations" (1979, p.401). Its most evident effects are felt in those regions where the process of industrialization acquired its highest levels of development. And it is felt precisely by those who are subjects of its exclusion. In Brazil the situation is not different.

In terms of the economic structure and social participation, Brazil could be viewed from different perspectives: from the developed and from the underdeveloped points of view. A large majority of the black population is concentrated in the underdeveloped Brazil. The latter is constituted by those regions where the plantation and mining activities occurred and the slavery regime perpetrated its deepest and more disspread action... In these areas we also see the emergence of a free coloured population (blacks and mulattos) even before the extinction of slavery (the highest degrees of miscegenation are found in those regions). However, after 1888 (abolition of the slavery regime), the few slaves that remained and the so-called free coloured population were, in effect, transformed into the great mass of underprivileged people who will eventually be exploited by the South-Eastern capitalism. "Modelled" in the ways of ~~one~~ capitalist production, they became henchmen, paid rural dwellers, mine workers, etc. (Hasenbalg, 1978).

Needless to say that the misery, chronic hunger, diseases and illiteracy are constant companions of this population. Cast aside, on their own, they find cultural resistance a way to cope with racialism or with the racism to which they are subjected. And it is from these plantation and mining regions that the greatest expressions of the Afro-Brazilian culture had their origins (the religions, the dances, the songs, the games, the festivals of junino and natalino cycles, the stories of the people's imagery, etc.) In all of these expressions, the unconscious presence of distant Africa is frequently felt. In these terms, the Brazilian culture as a whole is deeply influenced by the blacks' contributions.

Developed Brazil is constituted by those States which reached high levels of industrialization and urbanization, such as Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Parana, Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina (the south-south east of Brazil). There the Afro-Brazilian population is in a minority, since this region was the last to utilize slave labour. After the emancipation (May 13, 1888), an abrupt social, economic and political marginalization of the former slaves occurred. Already from the middle of the 19th century the Brazilian government had

publicity, press, contacts and finances.

From the date of the demonstration in Sao Paulo to the general assembly of Rio de Janeiro (September 1978), the movement spread to other states such as Minas Gerais, Bahia and Elspirito Santo.

Because Brazil is such a large country, geographically speaking, divided into regions that include several states, it is easy to perceive the extensive task that the MNUCDR has to face. And we are not only dealing with pure geographical difficulties, but also referring to different levels of problems, as we shall now discuss.

The conditions of material existence of the black community relate to psychological conditioning that has to be identified and exposed. The different degrees of domination of the different forms of economic production in Brazil seem to coincide on one point: the reinterpretation of Aristotles theory of "natural place". From the colonial period until the present time we perceive a gross separation insofar as the physical space occupied by the dominator and the dominated is concerned. The natural places for the white dominant group are healthy living conditions, spacious homes, situated in the most picturesque points of the cities or the countryside, which are adequately protected by different forms of policing (foremen, bush captains, "capangas" etc. and even by official policemen). From the time of the "Big House" and the "Sobrados" to the big residential buildings (condominiums etc.) of today, the criteria have always been the same. Now obviously the natural place for the blacks is at the exact opposite: from the "senzalas" to the slums, "cortiços", in various swamps and "housing projects" (whose model in terms of architecture is the ghettos of "developed" countries) of today, the criteria have also continued to be symetrically the same - the racial division of space.

In the case of dominated groups, what is prevalent are families piled up together in cubicles whose conditions of health and hygiene are of the poorest nature. In addition to all this we also have policing as a constant presence, except that in this case they are not here to protect but to repress, violate and intimidate. From this you can understand why the other natural places for blacks are the prisons and mental institutions. The systematic police repression in view of its racist character, has as second objective the spreading of psychological submission through fear. In the long term what is visualised is the prevention of any form of unity in the dominated group, by using every measure to perpetuate internal division. Thus, the dominant discourse justified the action of this repressive apparatus as they talk about law and order.

Following the same line, the system is benefited by maintaining such conditions: the cheapest labour possible remains at its disposition, since the black community is nothing but a deprived mas to be used as needed by the system. In other words, in addition to aspects discussed above, the strategy is carried out also in a way by which the bosses will benefit, by police repression (demanding I.D. cards from blacks). Under police pressure on the one hand and in the worst possible living conditions on the other, this mass of people gives its labour force at any price in the job market.