

Brazilian Non-anti-Semite Sociability and Jewish Identity

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Introduction

Brazilian society does not discriminate against immigrants; it welcomes them. Brazil absorbed the largest contingent of Japanese immigrants outside of Japan; it has taken in millions of Arabs and a smaller number of Jews producing a society without ethnic conflict or discriminatory practices. It is an admirable accomplishment, possibly without equal in contemporary history. A large proportion of these immigrants, arriving in a country which experienced high rates of economic growth and social mobility, were rapidly able to rise through society and occupy important positions in the middle class and in the elite thanks to the values and skills and knowledge they brought from their countries of origin. The social ascension of immigrants, rather than generating racist ideologies or anti-ethnic resentment, is perceived as a positive factor and a mark of personal accomplishment. This is so because, as we will see, Brazilian culture, collective identity and its myth of origin favors innovation and openness.

It would seem that the study of the Jewish community in Brazil is of no great sociological interest. A small group, amounting to less than 0.1% of the population, primarily middle-class and without much institutional weight in national affairs, the Jewish community appears to be yet another component of the successful and modern side of contemporary Brazil. We believe, however, that the analysis of the dynamics of integration of Jews in Brazil can be particularly instructive for the purpose of understanding not only Brazilian culture but modern Judaism and anti-Semitism as well.

This article seeks to develop three themes in the form of an essay rather than substantiated empirically-based article. First, we shall attempt to grasp the particular phenomenon of the limited impact of anti-Semitism in contemporary Brazil. Judaic historiography and sociology in the 20th century have been especially sensitive to anti-Semitic phenomena in the numerous societies where Jews live. However, they have shown very little concern in understanding why, in certain societies, anti-Semitism is slight or nearly non-existent. Second, we shall try to indicate certain characteristics of Brazilian Judaism generated by integration in local culture and society. Finally, we shall attempt to indicate certain dominant patterns in the studies—sparse as they are—of contemporary Brazilian Judaism in a comparative perspective with the Argentine case.

No culture can be explained or reduced to its myths of origin but it constitutes an important explanatory factor when considering the way Brazilian society deals with the foreigner. An understanding of Brazilian society demands that we take into account other cultural phenomena in addition to economic and socio-political. Among these, it is worth drawing attention to the Brazilians' ludic and gregarious approach to life, the

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special intimacy with the body, the syncretistic religious style, and the noteworthy lack of symbolic hierarchies combined with very pronounced social inequalities

Racism and Jews in Brazil

Our starting point is the assumption that Brazil is a society with low levels of anti-Semitic discourses or practices. This assumption is based on day-to-day information disseminated through the media, on reports by immigrants and on the empirical experience of the author. This assessment is confirmed by the Anti-Semitism World Report. In its 1995 edition it concludes that, "There is no indication of state-sponsored antisemitism since the end of Vargas regime (1945, B.S.)" (p.10-11). "Brazil has little popular antisemitism". (p. 13) (The Institute of Jewish affairs and the American Jewish Committee, 1995). In the two major cities where the broad majority of Jews are concentrated — Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo — anti-Semitic discourses and practices affecting quality of life and social co-existence or which influence effective opportunities for social mobility are on the whole exceptional. In this regard, and we shall return to this point later, the situation of Judaism in Brazil differs from that of the rest of Latin America.

The basic explanation for the absence of anti-Semitism in Brazil can be sought in Brazil's ideology of "whitening." According to this ideology, whiteness is the ideal to be attained, and therefore non-whites — blacks in particular — can be "improved" through miscegenation until they achieve whiteness. To the extent that Jews are accepted as whites — a premise questioned only by Brazilian intellectuals with fascist leanings during the 1920s and 30s — they are perceived to be a part of the solution rather than a problem. In this case, although Brazilian society include anti-black prejudices, its racism doesn't target other ethnic groups, such as the Jews.

The style of racism particular to Brazil would thus consist of the ideology of whitening, whereby blacks, through racial mixing, become a part of the white world. This ideology, dominant in Brazil, would gain expression in the greater value placed upon the "whiter" offspring of Afro-Brazilian families, and would be a specific development of modern European racism of the late 19th century. As Skidmore (1974) has demonstrated, Brazilian elites influenced by racist ideologies imparted to them their own particular interpretations. Whereas European racists believed that miscegenation in Brazil would lead to the deterioration and racial degeneration of society as a whole, the Brazilian ideology of whitening supposes that racial mixing would entail not the loss of white qualities but rather their acquisition by blacks, who would take on the features of the virtuous race and lose those of the vicious one.

This hypothesis largely explains our motives for characterizing Brazil as a society which is not anti-Semitic, but it does not sufficiently account for specific forms of socio-cultural integration, and begs greater elaboration of the debate surrounding the ideology of whitening and its implications in relation to different forms of racism, including anti-black racism.

The work of Roberto da Matta (1979, 1989) is among those which most creatively pursue this issue. His thesis is that, in Brazil, behind an ideology of universal co-

optation, affability, syncretism, and liberal legal structures, there remains hidden a hierarchical power structure which is profoundly unequal and racist. Da Matta argues that what predominates in Brazil is a fable that presents whites, blacks and Indians as equivalent components in which these three races provide the foundations for a country predisposed to miscegenation and racial tolerance. He attempts to show that Portuguese society, whose social structures were transferred to Brazil, was shaped by strongly defined hierarchies; it was Catholic, dominated by legal formalism, mercantile, and its dominant strata were linked together in relations of personal dependence. The fable of Brazil's three constitutive races would serve the purpose of ideally integrating the population, in the aftermath of abolition, within a common framework and which, through whitening, someday would achieve homogeneity and harmony. Whether in the field of sexuality, music, or carnival, the ideology of racial integration served to mask the realities of profound disparities in power. Furthermore, the very assumption of integration through whitening implies that the society remains racist in its denial of blackness.

Da Matta juxtaposes the ideology of racial democracy and the legal apparatus of equality among citizens with the and social practices where profound inequalities predominate, and where the hierarchical thrust of "*você sabe com quem está falando*"—"do you know whom you're addressing"—replaces the notion of citizens invested with equal rights.

And so, according to Da Matta, Brazilian society is deeply hierarchical, based as it is in inequality among individuals, where ties of dependence covering the differentiated positions throughout the social hierarchy at once permit a sociability grounded in intimacy, trust and personal consideration, and disallow individualistic and egalitarian values. In such a society there is no need for segregation because hierarchies assure white superiority and the identification of the dominated with the dominant. In contrast, modern Anglo-Saxon racism, arising from a context of egalitarian and individualistic values, would remain a way of signaling difference, for what dominates is the belief that we are all equal to one another. Modern segregation at least recognizes the alterity of the other, whereas in hierarchical systems everyone is part of a whole, with his or her own specific and unequal place, and difference relates to the position each one occupies. This system allows for all manner of gradations and numerous degrees of "blackness" instead of a system of polar opposites.²

Hierarchical societies such as Brazil would integrate everyone while maintaining inequality, whereas in egalitarian and individualistic systems difference is sustainable only by means of segregation. The Brazilian hierarchical society would be made up of *mestizos* where the most varied skin colors exist instead of races in opposition. It is the realm of the phenotype rather than of the originating gene, of gradations in pigmentation rather than of purity of blood. Brazil's hierarchical society, albeit unequal, allows for the conciliation and co-optation of the different strata marching down the road of whitening. Social division according to infinite nuances of skin color allows one to escape confrontation, for it neutralizes the formation of clear identities. Brazil would thus constitute a society whose racism is shaped not by individualism but by hierarchy.

² However USA experience of absorption and "whitening" of American Jews (Biale, 1988), indicates that the Brazilian and American experiences cannot be reduced to simple oppositions.

I shall not discuss Da Matta's argument in detail; nevertheless, it is of interest to point out the extent to what it contains both in terms of insight and of its problematic character in regard to an understanding of Brazil's interethnic dynamics, in particular in recent times. We are especially interested in questioning those aspects which Da Matta opposes to Brazil's hierarchical model, the individualistic and egalitarian Anglo-Saxon model, its tendency to crystallize cultural patterns while losing sight of social change linked in particular to historical processes of modernization, and its inability to account for the contradictory nature of Brazil's cultural mythology, in which anti-egalitarian elements coexist alongside a shared collective utopian future, as well as its syncretic and ecumenical practices.

Da Matta's presentation of the "Anglo-Saxon" world as a coherent whole fails to sustain itself. In fact, contradictory elements in the relationship between the political and socio-cultural practices are a typical feature in all modern societies. To this end, it is sufficient to recall the several studies that shows how liberal Western societies are nourished by values of an antecedent tradition (see for instance Bell, 1979).

Rather than viewing the contradiction between Brazil's liberal political and legal ideology and its hierarchical socio-cultural practices as a sheer case of mystification whereby the former conceals the realities of the latter, it would be more fruitful to analyze the interaction between these two realms, since both produce real effects on the social process. Social change in contemporary Brazil has generated a society with very high rates of social mobility, and has led to significant turnover in the composition the political and economic elite. In a society moved by consumerism, racial prejudice increasingly becomes subordinated to the acquisitive capabilities of the social agent. The definition of who is white increasingly is correlated with the individual's economic position. New social processes, such as the economic and cultural impoverishment of the poor (which strongly affects Afro-Brazilians and Northeasterners) and the rise of urban violence in turn generate new foci for racism.

Da Matta is mistaken when he states that Brazilian society is "cordial" because it is hierarchical. The latter does not presuppose the former. Hierarchical societies in general are indifferent to if not contemptuous of the lower strata, with whom they entertain little if any communication. Brazilian society is at once hierarchical and open, intensely unequal and yet amenable to social mobility and co-optation; it is insensitive to the public realm but supportive of its reference group. Traditional hierarchical societies have always had a powerful component of fatalism and strong beliefs in the inevitability and permanence of difference. In Brazil, on the contrary, hierarchies are temporary and depend on social mobility and of a different future. The very pattern of Brazilian sociability--gregarious, playful and weakly individualized--as well as its religious syncretism are expressions of the strong absorption of African cultural elements. Brazilian recognizes explicitly Africa as one of the sources of the national culture.

However, what appears most important in this context is that the account of Brazilian national mythology seems incomplete in Da Matta's exposition. If on the one hand it assumes a clear racist component in the notion of whitening, on the other it posits an expectation of future homogenization, which has little to do with an effectively hierarchical society. In other words, within the national myth the idea of original sin--the black, the Indian and the outcast Portuguese who made up the colonial population--coexists alongside the hope that, over time, its infinite natural riches and edenic beauty

will prove sufficiently powerful to attract new populational contingents who, through miscegenation, will blur the stains in the national fabric and recreate an integrated and homogeneous society.³ This vision of the future limits and qualifies the racist components of Brazilian culture. If the idea of “racial democracy” is still a myth, it has real consequences and functions as an ideal to which society should orient itself.

The image of a society which is sustained through the possibility of a shared ideal future — rather than a shared ideal past — amounts to a Copernican revolution in the face of modern mythologies of the nation-state. This vision explains the near non-existence of anti-Semitism, or the fragility of anti-imperialist ideologies, features which distinguish Brazil from the rest of Latin America.

A society oriented toward the future attaches importance to the new and is not afraid of innovation. Brazil’s myth of origin, which situates the source of its problems in the past—in slavery, in colonization by Portugal — and which believes that paradise has not been lost but can in future be attained, generates a totally distinct perception of social change and of what is foreign. To the extent that all myths of national origin posit a golden age in a distant past which nourishes national values based on the “roots”, such myths create a problematic relationship with the new, almost always identified with external influences and the foreign. The typical “purest” image of nationality is that which is most profoundly connected to the past. The more tenuous the connection to such roots, the further one becomes from “national values.” In the Brazilian myth of origin, however, the past is devalued and that which stands in close relation to it acquires negative valences. That blacks and the Portuguese are, although increasingly less, the main butt of jokes in Brazil is no accident; they are the expression of a past which must be rejected. In a context where change, the future and the new are perceived as desirable, the foreigner, rather than the bearer of values alien to nationality, becomes instead the chief agent for its construction.

Whereas in myths of national origin based on the past the enemy is always external, and personified in “foreign influences,” in the original myth for Brazil — the “land of the future” — the enemy is internal. It is the past, personified in those human groupings associated with it. In order for the nation to achieve its potential, it must eradicate its past. Third world anti-imperialist ideologies set out to overcome and negate aspects of the past associated with a foreign legacy, which was oppressive and exploitative, in the effort to achieve a national potential hitherto repressed by history. However, in Brazil the more prevalent view holds that the past itself, perceived as the source of vice, must be forgotten and overcome so that the country’s virtues and promise can be realized, a potential contained in its vast natural riches, awaiting the moment when they can be tapped rationally and so generate prosperity for all.

National cultures and mythologies are sustained through historical experience and through political and social processes which reinforce or transform them. The fragility of romantic and nostalgic movements in Brazil is associated with the fluidity and lack of direct or violent confrontation among its elite, and social mobility which prevented crystallizing resentment and frustration amongst declining social sectors. In this century, Brazil’s ruling class did not make an issue of its social origins to distinguish itself from the rest of the population, whether native-born or immigrant. The negative relationship

³ For Brazilians’ perception of nature, see Carvalho, 1997.

to the past limited the formation of “traditional” elite, whose prestige might have drawn on its “deep” roots and its presumed embodiment of nationality itself. Likewise, the leading economic role played by Sao Paulo, a city led by immigrants, the cosmopolitanism of Rio de Janeiro, the absence of warfare or relevant external enemies, the high rates of economic growth and the social and geographical mobility of the population all converged to eliminate or weaken xenophobic and romantic proclivities.

The ideology of “Brazil — land of the future” became current during the 1950s as a result of the development of new middle classes generated by industrialization and modernization. The new sectors that emerged during this period were sustained by economic growth which had attained levels not often experienced in other countries. Confident in the powers of industry, science and technology to assure social progress, these sectors not only drew away from racial ideology but also valorized and absorbed through the arts popular forms that were in broad measure associated with Afro-Brazilians. The emergent ideologies sought to explain Brazil’s ills exclusively in terms of economic and political processes, to the complete exclusion of racial issues. If the practice of ascribing value to whitening persisted, the discourse through which it sought ideological support ceased to be legitimate.

Brazil, as Brazilians themselves constantly recall, is a country without memory. (This feature, incidentally, is the only widely held recollection). As a result it can nourish impunity — for instance neither memory nor law condemn acts of the past of politicians. But the “absence of memory” does not express the absence of a mechanism which *ought* to exist: it is an active, positive technique of a society which rejects the past as wrongful and regrettable baggage. The rejection of the past on the other hand produces perverse results: one cannot build a future in ignorance of one’s past. It would almost appear to be an inversion of the state in which societies chained to the past deny themselves the creation of a novel future. In both cases the results are similar.

Whereas myths of origin based on the idealization of the past generate romantic, conservative, anti-modern and anti-market ideologies (the market is always seen as an entryway for the new and for the corruption of tradition) the valorization of the future casts Brazil as a place largely impermeable to these kinds of ideologies, and they are exceedingly shorn of expressive power in contemporary Brazil. Thus foreigners in Brazil more often than not symbolize progress rather than danger; they are the bearers of new ideas and practices that can assist society in fulfilling its destiny as the land of the future.

In the specific case of the Jews, another factor that might support anti-Semitic feeling — the anti-Judaism that the Catholic Church until recently had encouraged — is also diluted in the midst of a society in which religious syncretism predominates. Religious syncretism and diversity, traits which bear witness to the effective interpenetration of cultures in Brazil and the weak performance of ruling class ideological apparatuses, together have acted in favor of the absorption of the new, against the discrimination of the different and in the direction of not developing prejudice against other forms of religion. Syncretic practices in Brazil likewise express a universe where the integration of the other does not entail its elimination but rather its absorption.

The Price of Brazilian Integration

With the disintegration of traditional Jewish communities' autonomous barriers in law and organization, modern Judaism has interpenetrated with local society. Jewish identity, whether in personal or collective terms, has become an integral part of the national culture. As so many historians have already shown, Judaism has always developed through contact with, reaction to and appropriation of influences in the Gentile milieu. What is new in contemporary society is the dilution of institutional barriers which hitherto filtered and restricted the impact of external influence. Thus, although there had always existed a plurality of local Judaic identities in the diaspora, the latter had at no point achieved an intensity which would have implied integration in the modern world. Modernity, for the Jewish people, has implied a negotiation in which equal rights were received in return for abandoning their own particular legal institutions and communal way of life. For Jews, citizenship and its attendant rights meant the acquisition of a new identity, and through which they became parts of a new and greater whole: national society. Modernity implied the existential and political separation between the Jewish individual and his community, rupturing mechanisms of "natural" reproduction and socialization and thus giving rise to the permanently open question as to the continuity of Judaic life and the meaning of Jewish identity.

The integration of Jews in Brazil naturally resembled processes occurring elsewhere in the modern world, however the specificity of Brazilian culture and society impart a particular shape to the institutions and identity of the Brazilian Jew.

For the Jewish immigrant who had arrived from a land where discrimination and persecution were rife, Brazil was in many senses a promised land. He became integrated in national life and more often than not would join a middle class which took pride in being Brazilian. His rapid assimilation in society, on the other hand, occasioned the countervailing erosion of his own differentiating boundaries and traditions. A society which embraces gregarious sociability centered on casual conviviality, which upholds playfulness over discursiveness, or the artistic over studied reflection is not an especially conducive place for the constitution, in modernity, of ethnically differentiated identities.

Modern Jewish identity, which was born of self-reflexive search for Judaism meaning and in a response to anti-Semitism, would not find in Brazil conditions propitious to its development, or at least, very different from the European or USA cases. In a society where social integration occurs at the level of intense personal relationships, the distinction between the public and the private is virtually non-existent. Nevertheless, it is in this distinction, which in Brazil is so tenuous, that the development of new forms of Judaism is sustained in modernity. In a society where "privacy" is not a consolidated value, there is little room for the development neither of strong individually differentiated awareness — or individual anguish — nor for the search for identity and its roots. To be Brazilian is to enjoy life, to seek in the company of one's friends a release for one's existential dramas, and to remain open — or at any rate to exercise tolerance — in the face of all kinds of religious traditions and mystical experiences. It is not an easy task to fit this into the Judaic tradition of rigid monotheism, an extreme ritual differentiation between Jewish and non-Jewish worlds, and a mythology which is nourished in an appreciation of the past, of collective suffering and in existential flexibility and anguish.

While Brazilian culture cultivates forgetting, Judaic culture is sustained through remembrance. Jewish culture is a culture of anguish. Anguish implies dissatisfaction with the present and thus the desire to change it, while Brazilian popular culture stresses *deixa prá lá* — literally, “leave it aside” — in the headlong effort to live for the present and hope that better days will come. While Judaism embraces an attitude of “pessimistic willfulness,” Brazilian culture is marked by “optimistic fatalism,” an excellent antidote for depression, however insidiously it might reinforce social unaccountability and acceptance of the status quo. Brazilian culture, in no small measure due to its African influences, has enshrined in its artistic expressions and in the living human body its principal codes of communication, whereas in Judaism what prevails is the concept of abstraction and intellectual communication.

A culture that trusts in rather than fears the future and that believes in tomorrow is a culture of optimistic fatalism and is centered in the present; the future is no more worrisome than the past is oppressive. In Jewish tradition, on the other hand, the past — whether in mythological rendition or in the still-present memories of history — has cast the future as a place to be feared, a source of uncertainty and anguish. The present becomes the antechamber for future calamities and the place of recollection for those past, and is thus evacuated of its own content or reality. If the coexistence of Judaic and Brazilian mythologies is nonetheless highly therapeutic for Jews, to work out the middle ground between the two can be a trying challenge.

Although most Brazilian Jews didn't have experiences of anti-Semitism this issue remains a basic component of their identity. Images of anti-Semitism were nourished by the personal stories of parents and grandparents, by the teaching of Jewish history in Jewish schools, by the media's constant transmission of images of the holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is seen as the ongoing struggle of the Jewish people for its survival. All this produced in Brazilian Jews a much more complex meaning of being Jewish, in which anti-Semitism still plays a central role.

Brazilian Judaism has benefited from syncretism and also participates in it. Although there are no quantitative studies on the subject, the absorption of Kardecist Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian practices and beliefs — as well as the willingness to resort to them — is fairly well disseminated among members of the community.

Brazilian Judaism, notwithstanding its sparse numbers, might possess the potential to produce revolutionary forms for the recovery of Judaic mythology and traditions in a context of dialog and fraternization in the absence of anti-Semitism. This potential, however, is unlikely to be fulfilled. A number of restrictive pressures converge upon this, as well as Brazilian society with its integrative force.

From the standpoint of creation of crystallization of its own cultural expressions, Brazilian Judaism is atrociously poor. This poverty of collective expression results from the success of individual integration. Also Jewish communities' economic elites tend to reflect prevailing ruling class attitudes. The result is the lack of public spirit, a negligible willingness to undertake philanthropic projects or to underwrite foundations or institutions of culture or learning. Brazil's fragile Jewish community remains completely exposed to colonization by ideological and institutional tendencies originating in the United States and Israel. Finally, the tendency toward middle-class

cultural globalization — a trend in which Jews more often than not are strongly integrated and take advantage of — even further diminishes the opportunities for developing a Jewish Brazilian cultural tradition. Thus, although a Judeo-Brazilian national identity clearly exists, which is to say that Jews identify with the national culture and possess a Jewish way of being Brazilian and a Brazilian way of being Jewish, so far did not crystallize major cultural or institutional expressions of a collective nature.

The confirmation of this hypothesis can be found in the very fact that the Jewish community in Rio Grande do Sul, although much smaller than that of Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo (20,000 people) has a lively Jewish life (it is the home state for the only important Jewish Brazilian novelist — Moacyr Scliar — to have explored Jewish themes in his writings). This is so because Rio Grande do Sul's ethnic composition is predominantly European, and possesses a marked regionalist tradition which prizes the traditions of its "gaúcho" past, embraces ethnic reflection, and where anti-Semitism appears to be, relatively, most forceful.⁴

A society where even in academic life cordiality and mutual patron-client relations prevail, and which is marked therefore by the avoidance of confrontation and individualization in intellectual debate is not favorable to the development of a rational and discursive Judaism. It is along the artistic and mystical lines of Brazilian culture that Judaism might encounter greater opportunities for emergence and interaction with society at large. In this regard it is telling that rabbi Nilton Bonder, perhaps the sole Brazilian author whose works is read by a wide readership — Jewish as well as non-Jewish — should explore the tradition of Jewish mysticism.⁵

Obviously these remarks do not imply that the Jewish community has blended imperceptibly into Brazil's characteristic institutional shapelessness. It has established and consolidated an institutional system which maintains its traditional sponsorship for Judaic schooling, for communal solidarity, and its support for the state of Israel.

Judaic Studies in Brazil

During recent decades the agenda for the social sciences in Brazil has attached little weight to the study of racism or to the ethnicity of immigrants who comprise Brazilian society. The explanation for this state of affairs is to be found, in no small measure, in the aforementioned attributes of a national culture with little inclination to embrace difference and which rejects explicit forms of racism.

⁴ One should not lose sight of the nuances that differentiate Jewries in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, for they are associated with the different levels of intensity of the dominance of Brazil's national myths. Rio, capital of Brazil until 1960, is the city which most fully embodied Brazilian national mythology. Sao Paulo, which received much of its populational contingent in the 20th century, maintains more clearly differentiated ethnic identities.

⁵ The other factor that brings Bonder into close contact with Brazilian society is his evident penchant for writing self-help books. In Brazil, as in the United States, these are the most widely sold variety of non-fiction.

Other factors have contributed to consolidate this lack of concern. In academic life, worldwide, Jewish studies by and large are sponsored through donations by members of the ethnicities in question or by official agencies concerned with ethnic conflict. As we have seen, in the Brazilian context differentiating self-reflection is not particularly cultivated nor are “ethnic” elites especially inclined toward acts of generosity that might encourage this kind of exercise. Until recently, the state showed no preoccupation whatsoever with ethnic issues or racism. Social scientists, themselves of varied ethnic backgrounds, were primarily engaged in a research agenda that stressed social problems associated with class — more recently, with gender — and have foregone the opportunity to pursue other approaches.

Generally speaking, the social sciences in Brazil have displayed very little sensitivity to the ethnic dimensions of social life. As in the rest of Latin America, the theoretical concerns of social science in Brazil have been guided to a large extent by a Marxist framework poorly equipped to tackle what Benedict Anderson (1991) has dubbed “imagined communities”. The normative framework itself, centered on the issues of domination and exploitation and intent on developing national projects, valorized analyses focused on social class and on national unification around a common project. Culture and identity have thus become subsidiary themes that emerge only in connection with a concern with “popular culture” and the establishment of a national project.

Studies on Jews in contemporary Brazil are few. There are no research centers, institutions or publications that might be considered intellectual points of reference or vehicles for debate or producing new lines of reflection. Nevertheless, it is possible to comment on the extant bibliography on Judaism in Brazil.⁶

First, autochthonous efforts to conceptualize the Jewish condition in Brazil are rare. Although numerous scholars engaged in the social sciences in Brazil happen to be Jewish, studies that deal specifically with Jews or Judaism are practically non-existent. This is perhaps an indicator of the success of assimilation in Brazilian society, which generates among Jewish intellectuals little particular anguish.

⁶ Howard Sachar's book on modern Jewish history (1990) is one of the few works on the subject which, to my knowledge, gives due space to Brazilian Jewry, although does not make any effort to understand the peculiarities of Brazilian culture and Brazilian Jewish identities. But this is also true for the bibliography produced by most American and Israeli “Latin-Americanists,” whose writings on Latin-American Jewry concentrate mainly on the Argentinean case and display a lack of sensibility for the particular cultural characteristics of Brazilian society and its relations to foreigners. In general the participation of Marranos in the colonisation of Brazil and the Getulio Vargas dictatorship period (1937-1945) are the principal objects of their attention. These subjects allow one to reinstate Brazilian Jewry within the traditional issues of persecution and anti-Semitism. Undoubtedly they were not helped by Brazilian bibliography on the subject. Although there is a relatively vast bibliography with memories of emigrants and literature based in historical experience (Cf. Igel, 1997) few social scientists produced relevant work on contemporary Brazilian Jewry. Besides the pioneer sociological study of Sao Paulo Jewry by H. Rattner (1978), we can mention more recent studies on social patterns of the Jews in Rio Grande do Sul (Brumer, A., 1994), an uneven collection of short articles and memories (Lewin, H., 1997), and a collection of sociological papers on Jewish identity in Brazil (Sorj, Bila, 1997).

Second, there is a lack of reflection on the part the community itself in regard to the specificities of Judaism in Brazil. By and large abandoned by Jewish intellectuals, in broad majority secular and with scant participation in the collective life, community leaders have adopted a defensive stance, and appeal to outdated rhetoric and educational materials “imported” from Israel and, to a lesser extent, the United States. Their discourse, which is centered on the theme of anti-Semitism and the memory of persecutions endured by the Jewish people, pays little heed to the real experience of the young Brazilian Jew.

Third, studies conducted in the United States and Israel which attempt to generalize Latin-American Judaism are fairly insensitive to the specificity of cultural differences between Brazil and other Latin American countries. Thus, for example, the wide gulf that exists between Jewish life in Argentina, where anti-Semitism is a day-to-day experience, and the everyday world of Brazilian Jews is not sufficiently analyzed.

Among the features in the historical background of the national identity of Brazil’s elite, features which distinguish them from their Latin American counterparts, is the fact that the nation-state was not created through outright confrontation with and dismemberment from the seat of colonial empire. In fact it was the son of Portugal emperor that decided to stay in Brazil and declare its independence instead to return to Portugal to be crowned. In Brazil therefore there were no independence wars and from the outset its chosen shape was that of an extension of Europe in the New World. The formation of an ideology for the nation-state in Brazil thus occurred through a slow process of affirmation of its own characteristics, without no major civil wars. For the rest of Latin America, wars of independence against Spain from the outset compelled the emerging nations to forge an ideology of affirmation through negation against the colonial metropolis or against neighboring countries against whom arbitrary boundaries had to be erected and asserted.

And so while in Brazil the Portuguese root had always been acknowledged, in Hispano-American societies the formation of national identity arose through a break with the colonial metropolis and the assertion of state centered national symbols. Thus, while national ideology in Brazil does not cast a problematic light on “foreign” roots and accepts its continuities over historical time, in the rest of Latin America assertion *against* the foreign became an integral component of the national identity.

The absence, in the Brazilian case, of a nation-state invested with a strong civic and nationalist ideology, imparted to the experience that what it was at stake was not the choice between identification with the new homeland or with the Jewish community. Aside from the experience of Communist Party members, for whom identification with the party required the sundering of competing ties of collective loyalty, the assimilation of Jews in Brazil did not imply an active effort of self-denial. The situation in Argentina, on the other hand, was wholly different. Argentina’s ruling classes were nostalgic for their European roots and poorly integrated with national popular culture; its subaltern classes inclined toward proto-fascist mobilization; the Catholic Church extremely conservative if not reactionary and nationalism was encoded under the auspices of a strong “patriotic” component. Together, these ingredients generated a society thoroughly suffused with anti-Semitism and which unrelentingly did continue to raise the question of “divided loyalties.” In Argentina the forces of rejection, xenophobia and anti-Semitism would yield a more active and self-reflexive community,

characterized by a stronger degree of integration between the Jewish intellectual elite and the community at large, notwithstanding the latter's ever diminishing demographic and cultural density.

Each culture balances in its own way the weight and meaning it attaches to past, present and future. In certain cases, such as in Europe, Argentina and Uruguay, the appreciation of the past as a period of bygone splendor unlikely to return imparts to the present an air of decadence and to casts the future as a harbinger of new uncertainties. In the United States culture, the past, which is not so distant, serves up a system of values and images of self-confidence that turns the present into a launch pad for a future laden with opportunity and dreams of self-fulfillment. In Brazil, confidence in the present is founded in the negation of the past and the capacity to remove oneself from it.

The few studies of Judaism in Brazil, generally carried out by historians, have stressed episodes in Brazilian history associated with expressions of anti-Semitism. Jeffrey Lesser's book (1995) is a paradigmatic example of this. Notwithstanding its numerous merits, Lesser's study packs a normative charge that leads him to emphasize the problematics of judaeophobia and anti-Semitism and that distort the findings of his own research. Lesser's focus is on Brazil in the 1930s and 1940s under the fascist-inspired dictatorship of Getulio Vargas. During this period certain intellectuals in government positions appealed to European anti-Semitic ideologies to justify policies opposed to Jewish migration. Lesser's work, which possesses the virtue of recognizing the specificity of the forms whereby Jews became integrated within Brazil, fails however to apply his own advice in a consistent fashion.

First, Lesser does not sufficiently distinguish between the discourse of certain components of Brazil's government and its socio-cultural reality. (The distance between state and society in Brazil remains, incidentally, an ever present topic in Brazilian social sciences.) Although anti-Semitism reached a peak during the Vargas dictatorship, it did not have major impact on social relations.

The absence of anti-Semitism in Brazil — or elsewhere — is not to be explained, as Lesser erroneously presents matters, as a result of limited real contacts with real Jews. According to Lesser, when Jews indeed arrived in Brazil they were seen to be "neither very rich nor very poor, were rarely active politically, and rapidly acculturated to Brazilian society..." (p.3). That the Jews didn't constitute a relevant social actor doesn't explain the existence or inexistence of anti-Semitism in Brazil or anywhere else. And in any case, at that times there was in Brazil a small but influential number of Jews who supported the Communist Party, just as there were other Jews who quickly were able to prosper economically. A society predisposed to anti-Semitism easily could have mustered these facts to consolidate anti-Jewish attitudes.

Second, Lesser is not sufficiently attuned to Brazilian political culture, so strongly permeated by pragmatism, by compromise, and by the inclination to treat each individual matter as a unique case, and to do so in a spirit removed from that of the universality of bureaucratic procedures. This gives rise to the paradox upon which Lesser so forthrightly recognizes: that in spite of anti-Semitic elements in Vargas' pronouncements on immigration, the number of Jewish immigrants arriving in Brazil between 1933 and 1942 was greater than that for the preceding decade, or for those Latin American countries with democratic and non-anti-Semitic governments.

The central dichotomies of Brazilian society escape the categories of analysis Lesser employs. The binary philo/anti-Semitism cannot be said to constitute an organizing parameter for the social perception of otherness in Brazil. As Bauman (1995) has observed, it is this perception of Judaism as something different, whether good or bad that determines the particular fate of the Jew in Western culture.

Lesser's stress on anti-Semitism and on the discourse of the intellectual elite thus distorts the perception of political and social dynamics in Brazilian life and that of Jews in Brazil. For in the end how can one explain that a semi-fascist government, acting on the advice of a seemingly anti-Semitic news mogul — Assis Chateaubriand — handed over to a Jew an industrial sector of such political and strategic importance as the production of newsprint (Morais, 1995).

Conclusions

Anti-Semitism has been one of the main obsessions in Judaic studies this century. However, little headway has been made in grasping the contexts in which anti-Semitism is limited or nearly non-existent. This kind of study can contribute greatly to the eradication of racial prejudice. Moreover, for those concerned with the continuity of Judaism across the generations, the effort to understand and recognize the existence of non-anti-Semitic contexts is one of the conditions for overcoming a discourse that stresses the traumas which a new generation has not experienced.

The struggle against anti-Semitism fundamentally has recognized the importance of democratic structures as a barrier against intolerance and as a main counterpoint for racist discourse. The Brazilian case, without denying or diminishing the importance of democratic regimes in protecting human rights, shows that the struggle against racial or ethnic prejudice can also find sustenance in the culture and mythology of a given society. One of the contradictions in many advanced democratic countries is the support for styles of civic education still informed by xenophobic national ideologies.

Identities always sustain, implicit or explicit, image of otherness. The myths of national origin in the European tradition were built upon the juxtaposition and at times upon the negation of the other. In Brazilian culture the other is necessary to constitute oneself. The alien brings progress rather than degeneration. This national mythology has been built, at least at its beginning, at the extreme expense of the diminishment of Afro-Brazilians and Amerindians. Nevertheless, on the basis of Brazil's past, this construction was not the only possible outcome. The originality of Brazilian national culture was to have produced a sociability so many of whose aspects possess an idyllic dimension, at least when viewed from the standpoint of Europe's individualistic and disciplined cultures, where social contact and co-existence are perennial sources of anguish, where pleasure is problematic and where the present is inaccessible. Brazilian culture, on the other hand, dilutes otherness and so limits the affirmation of identities and of discursive reflection in an appreciation of primary relations, indifferent to the more abstract collective.

In Brazil there would appear to be a conflict between the values present in its sociability and democratic values. Cronyism, insensitivity in the face of the requirements for the

common good, the power of clientelism which almost always manages to prevail over universal standards of need or of merit; in the context of a society rooted in slavery and misery, these are the practices of indifference before social inequality and of encouragement for impunity. The cordiality and informality of Brazilian society, in its context of social inequality and ill-distributed rights of citizenship, can function as a mechanism for domination, reducing confrontational claims and avoiding social conflict. The great challenge that lies before Brazil is to transform its society without destroying the salutary aspects of its sociability. It needs to create a public space without reproducing cultures that repress spontaneity, that are based on the affirmation of individuality through conflict

Conflicts between non-individualistic values (hierarchical, collective values) and the construction of a democratic nation pervade a wide variety of societies, from Japan to Israel. In societies with strong communal components — whether based on nationalism or religious fundamentalism — the challenge consists of tolerance in the face of difference and the creation of a public space open to the recognition of the individual as the ultimate source of moral choice. The challenge for Brazilian society is to construct an abstract notion of citizenship individual rights and of a common public good.

Brazilian society must struggle to overcome racism without engaging in the sort of racist regulation aiming to policies of affirmative action which organize society under racial lines. The increasing influence of USA in supporting and “Afro-Brazilian” discourse among black Brazilian militants, although still very limited to a few NGO’s based on state or foreign foundations support, may produce increasing tension and an unexpected source of anti-Semitism. The fashion of race based identities, based on public policies and legal frameworks, can destroy positive elements in Brazilian sociability and that run the risk of being ineffective in practice.

Myths of origin and national culture offer no guarantees for the future. Just as the perpetuity of democracies is a risky business, so too are those of national values. Although the latter are long-term phenomena, they too are the products of history and as such are susceptible to change under the impact of new societal contexts. As Poliakov (1971) has observed, during the 16th and 17th centuries Sweden cultivated a myth of national origin which justified imperial expansion. Faced eventually with changes in demography and politics, the Swedes refitted their national myth in tune with their new circumstances. The dominant myth of origin for Brazil may yet change, too. The impact of globalization, of individualization in modern urban life, of poverty, of frustrated expectations may yet wear down the dominant beliefs and create breaches to be exploited by new political movements and charismatic leaders. The future of the land of the future is an open book with new pages yet to be written.

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