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Author(s): Paul Henley

Source: *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, Autumn 1978, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Autumn 1978), pp. 88-111

Published by: Berghahn Books

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23816287>

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"Os índios e a civilização" : A Critical Appreciation

Paul Henley

Darcy Ribeiro, the author of Os índios e a civilização is one of the most remarkable of contemporary South American anthropologists. Born in 1922, he was trained at the Escola de Sociologia e Política in São Paulo.¹ During the first ten years of his professional life, he carried out fieldwork amongst a large number of Brazilian indigenous groups, including the Kaduveo, Terena, Kaywá, Ofaiá, Bororo, Karajá, Urubú, Kaingang, Xokleng and various Xingú groups. During this period he was responsible for a two-year acculturation study conducted under the auspices of UNESCO and for the organization of the Museu do Índio in Rio. In 1956 he became Professor of Anthropology at the Universidade do Brasil in Rio and in 1961, the first Rector of the newly-created Universidade de Brasília. Between 1958 and 1961 he was in charge of an investigation conducted by the Ministry of Education into the significance of regional variation in Brazil for government urbanization, industrialization and educational programmes. In 1962 he became the Minister of Education and Culture and in the following two years carried out programmes to combat illiteracy and a reorganization of the secondary school system. Shortly before the coup in 1964, President Goulart named him head of the so-called Casa Civil, a uniquely Brazilian body that acts in an advisory capacity to the President. After the coup, he was forced into exile and over the next decade or so, held academic or quasi-academic posts in Uruguay, Venezuela and Peru. During this period, he was a leading member of the group of anthropologists which produced the Declaration of Barbados and which has been pressing for radical changes in South American indigenist policies. But last year Ribeiro returned to Brazil, suffering from a very serious and potentially mortal illness. Fortunately he appears to have recovered from this illness and has recently returned to public life, taking a prominent part in the denunciation by leading Brazilian anthropologists and others of the government's proposal to "emancipate" certain indigenous groups from the Indian Statute.²

Os índios e a civilização is a study of the relations between the indigenous groups of Brazil and the national society in the period 1900 - 1960. It was published in 1970 though parts of it are no more

than slightly modified versions of articles published independently over the previous fifteen years. Although some of these earlier publications have been translated into English, the book itself never has been.³ This is to be regretted because Ribeiro is one of only two authors who have made a systematic attempt to sketch a general theory of relations between national societies and indigenous groups in lowland South America. The only other author to do so, Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, also Brazilian, has acknowledged that his own theory rests on foundations laid by Ribeiro⁴. My principal purpose in writing this review of Os Índios is to bring Ribeiro's work to the attention of anthropologists who have not had the opportunity to become acquainted with it because they do not read Portuguese. As such the article will be primarily dedicated to summarizing the main ideas set forth in the book, but as I do so, I will offer certain critical commentaries on them.

Ribeiro describes Os Índios as a "study of ethnic transfigurations which, for the purposes of this work can be defined as the process by which tribal populations confronting the national society develop the necessary bases for their persistence as ethnic groups through a series of changes in their biological substratum, in their culture and in the form of the relations they maintain with the society that surrounds them" (p.13).⁵ Although he confines himself to studying the process of ethnic transfigurations in Brazil during the period 1900 - 1960, his theoretical objectives are more general. The purpose of the book, he explains, is

"to provide classificatory criteria and to formulate explanatory principles that will serve as working hypotheses for future studies of the relations between tribal and national societies in other areas and over longer periods of time" (p.12)

This declaration of purpose provides me with two convenient headings under which to present Ribeiro's ideas: "explanatory principles" and "classificatory criteria". Under a third heading, "the interpretation of the data", I will consider the conclusions that Ribeiro draws from his study.

Explanatory principles : the priority of the contact situation

Ribeiro classifies the factors determining the effects of contact with the national society on indigenous groups into three "superimposed and cumulative levels". At the most fundamental level lie "bio-ecological" determinants. These are of several different types. Firstly, the radical transformation of the natural environment that the members of the national society often effect when they colonize a region can make the traditional form of social and economic life practised by local indigenous groups inoperable. Secondly, although unions between non-Indian men and Indian women are comparatively frequent in twentieth century Brazil, unions between Indian men and non-Indian women are extremely rare. This pattern of miscegenation, Ribeiro argues, "contributes towards the reduction of the human substratum that is indispensable to the survival of the indigenous group." Thirdly, the diseases that non-Indian settlers bring with them have often devastated indigenous groups who, being virgin populations for these diseases, have no biological resistance to them. "In fact, many indigenous groups never came to experience relations (with the members of the national society) that might be properly called cultural since they underwent such a radical demographic decline following the first contacts that they were virtually exterminated before the process of acculturation could begin" (pp. 219, 441).

Next in order of importance in determining the effects of contact on indigenous societies are "socio-economic" factors. Within this category of determinants, Ribeiro includes not only the effects of the introduction of industrial tools and other goods but also the compulsory recruitment of the members of indigenous groups into "a system of production... which by making possible the private appropriation of their lands and the conscription of individuals into the regional labour force annuls their cultural autonomy and provokes a profound disequilibrium in the social life of an indigenous group" (p.442).

Although socio-economic determinants are less fundamental than bio-ecological determinants, they play a more critical role than cultural factors. When an indigenous group establishes contact with a contingent of the national society a "demoralization of the tribal ethos" generally follows which requires "a gradual re-definition of the corpus of beliefs and values and of individual consciousnesses in accordance with the altered conditions of existence (of the group)" (p.442). But this process

of cultural re-definition is always constrained by the nature of the socio-economic relations that indigenous society maintains with the national society.

Ribeiro distinguishes his approach from that of the classic "acculturation" studies on the basis of the priority that he attributes to socio-economic factors in determining the effects of contact on indigenous groups:

"The majority of acculturation studies are confined to the analysis of the diffusion and selective adoption by indigenous groups of alien cultural traits, the consequences of the integration of these traits into the traditional context being given special emphasis. Yet this is only one side of the problem... and certainly does not constitute the most fundamental aspect... In reality, these cultural traits pass from one context to another by means of relations between people. And these relations operate between people situated within specific economic systems. It is the study of the relationship between the tribal and the national economic structures that is therefore the most important for the understanding of this process. More relevant than the analysis of the specific qualities of a cultural trait is the study of the economic mechanism whereby this trait is introduced into tribal life and the effect of this mechanism on social relations within the tribe and on relations between the tribe and the national society" (pp.337-338).

Yet despite the priority that Ribeiro attributes to socio-economic factors in determining the outcome of contact, he recognizes that the understanding of any particular example of contact requires reference to the "specific circumstances that derive from the indigenous cultural context prior to contact". But these "specific (cultural) circumstances" can serve only to accelerate or retard the rhythms of the processes of ethnic transfiguration and integration into the national society. They cannot prevent these processes nor guarantee the survival of an indigenous

group that is inflicted with epidemics or a particularly aggressive contingent of the national society(pp.225-226).

Even if an indigenous group is not completely overwhelmed by the physical presence of the national society, the process whereby its members adopt, adapt or reject new ideas and patterns of behaviour cannot be dissociated from the social relations of the contact situation itself:

"The Indians, obliged to re-define their beliefs do not do so after careful consideration of the sermon of the missionary who seeks to convert them or the reasoning of the government functionary who in seeking to protect them wants to impose his ideas on them; the same goes for the ideas of the neo-Brazilian population with whom they have come to live. These diverse ways of looking at the world are not offered to the Indian as rational alternatives between which he should or could choose by means of a critical examination of his previous ideas and the subsequent adoption of what he considers to be the most valid or adequate" (pp.373-374).

In seeking to impose his cultural preconceptions, the non-Indian is also seeking to impose his social domination. The Indian receives these alien ideas and modifies them by compounding them with ideas derived from his own cultural tradition. In doing so, he is not seeking merely to preserve the traditions of his society but is also working out a system of beliefs and values that expresses his new condition as a member of a particular stratum of the national society. Even so, he continues to be identified as an Indian both by himself and by the members of the national society with whom he maintains contact. Thus by means of this process of ideological re-definition and synthesis, the members of an indigenous society can retain a sense of their ethnic identity whilst at the same time abandoning traditional cultural patterns (pp. 374-375).

But, Ribeiro claims, this process of externally-induced cultural change does not lend itself to a general analysis. The number of cultural variables that influence this particular aspect of the process of ethnic transfiguration is "almost as great as the number of indigenous ethnic groups and this makes any attempt to describe regularities on the basis of these variables fruitless" (p.227). In his own work therefore, Ribeiro

confines himself to giving a few case histories in order to show how cultural factors articulate with other aspects of the contact situation (p.377 ff.).

In short, Ribeiro's argument is that in contact situations where indigenous groups survive the "bio-ecological" consequences of contact, the effects of that contact are to be explained in terms of the social and economic relations that the local contingent of the national society seeks to impose on the indigenous population rather than in terms of the selective adoption of alien cultural patterns by the members of the indigenous population in accordance with criteria derived from their own cultural traditions. This ranking of the various types of determinants that come into play in the contact situation seems to be generally applicable to Brazil and lowland South America as a whole where contact between indigenous groups and representatives of the national society usually involves an attempt by the latter to subjugate and dispossess the former by force. But in contact situations where the national society is not interested in or not capable of subjugating indigenous societies, the Indians have greater freedom to choose which features of the national society they will adopt, if any, and which they will reject. In contact situations of this kind, one would anticipate that indigenous cultural traditions would play a greater part in determining the outcome of contact than Ribeiro attributes to them. Although contact situations of this latter kind are exceptions to the general rule, they have been recorded both in lowland South America and in other parts of the world. In other words, although Ribeiro's emphasis on the primacy of the social relations of the contact situation in determining the effects of contact is generally appropriate to the conditions of twentieth century Brazil, it may not be equally appropriate to conditions in other areas and at other times.

Classificatory criteria : the fronts of national expansion

Ribeiro terms a contingent of the national society that is in contact with an indigenous group a "front" or a "frontier" of national expansion. These terms, used more or less interchangeably, refer to any contingent of the national society in contact with an indigenous group, irrespective of whether it is newly settled in a particular region, has been established in that region for centuries or has followed on historically from an antecedent and distinct type of front.

Ribeiro argues that the form of the social relations that the members of a front seek to impose on the indigenous groups they come into contact with varies according to the interests underlying the front. He defines three types of front based primarily on economic interests : agricultural fronts, pastoral fronts and extractive fronts. Although he gives most systematic attention to these three types of front, he also defines two types of front that are not motivated primarily by economic interests : fronts composed of government functionaries and fronts of missionaries. Ribeiro refers to these latter two types of front as "protectionist" and distinguishes them from fronts motivated primarily by economic interests which he calls "direct" or "spontaneous" fronts (p.15). When they are translated directly into English, I find the latter two terms somewhat confusing and will therefore use the term "economic fronts" instead.

About a quarter of the entire length of Os Índios is dedicated to an assessment of the activities of the government body formerly responsible for indigenous affairs in Brazil, the Serviço de Proteção aos Índios or SPI (pp. 127-214). Ribeiro concludes that the SPI had certain positive effects. Firstly, by acting as a buffer between the indigenous societies and the economic fronts, in some regions the SPI was able to minimize the destructive effects of the latter and to allow the indigenous peoples of Brazil more time to adapt to the diverse pressures that contact brought on them. Secondly, in securing the land rights of certain indigenous groups, the SPI was able to consolidate one of the material bases for indigenous life within the context of integration into the national society. Ribeiro argues that the beneficial effects of the SPI's activities is indicated by the fact that in the areas where it did not maintain posts, there was a higher rate of extinction amongst indigenous groups (p.440). But he also acknowledges that the SPI was always subject to pressures from vested political and economic interests that prevented it from fulfilling its role effectively and he records that in some regions SPI functionaries connived at or even collaborated in attempts to liquidate indigenous groups.⁷

Ribeiro argues that the effect of the other "protectionist" front, the missions, has also been ambiguous. Although he recognizes that in certain cases, the presence of a mission has prevented the extermination

of local indigenous groups (p.395), he concludes that the missions have had more negative effect overall than the SPI. He enumerates the following aspects of missionary activity as particularly baneful influences on indigenous societies : "intolerance ... towards indigenous culture,... lack of concern to guarantee the Indians' right to their lands... the practice of dismembering indigenous families by taking their children off to missionary boarding schools in order to give them an education designed to de-tribalize them. In all spheres of mission activity, the competition between Catholic and Protestant missionaries has provoked ruptures in the internal solidarity of indigenous groups" (pp. 440-441).

In Os Índios Ribeiro gives only a few detailed examples of the effects of mission activity on indigenous groups. This sparse treatment is probably a reflection of Ribeiro's identification with the SPI who in many regions of Brazil sought to wrest control over the indigenous population from the missions. Whatever the reasons for this omission, one is struck by the absence of any systematic discussion of the manner in which differences of religious doctrine, evangelizing techniques, personnel and economic infrastructure between the various Catholic and Protestant orders have influenced the effect they have had on indigenous societies. This is one of the most evident deficiencies in Ribeiro's analysis of the fronts of national expansion.

Furthermore, the generally negative account that Ribeiro gives of missionary activity has been dated to some extent by recent events. Although many missions in Brazil continue to practise the policies that Ribeiro criticizes, others are beginning to re-assess their policies and to show some respect for indigenous culture and values. Furthermore Roman Catholic missionaries have been one of the few elements in Brazilian society who have come out in open support of the campaign to secure indigenous land rights. Indeed some missionaries working in the field have been murdered by local landowners for supporting this cause and denouncing cases of usurpation of Indian lands.

Ribeiro's treatment of economic fronts is more elaborate than his treatment of protectionist fronts. He argues that although the various types of economic front affect indigenous groups in different ways, they share certain common characteristics. Even though the disparity in the

technological capacity of the societies in contact may be the most obvious reason why the national society is able to impose itself on indigenous groups, Ribeiro argues that this is not the fundamental difference between the two. The essential difference lies rather in "the form of production and distribution... in the participation of labourers in their product". In the case of twentieth century Brazil, one is dealing with

"the integration of tribal groups into a certain stratum of the national economic system as consumers and hence as specialized producers and a reserve labour force as well.... In these circumstances, the determinant factors become: the nature of the economic relations by means of which cultural elements pass from one society to another; the institution of private property which permits the legal appropriation of indigenous lands and the form of recruitment of the indigenous population into the labour force, be it as slaves, as servants without rights or as wage labourers of the most basic type" (p.339).

But although all economic fronts may share certain characteristics, the pattern of recruitment of indigenous labour and the appropriation of indigenous lands varies according to the type of economy on which a given front is based. It is Ribeiro's aim in Os índios to show how this variation in the features of the three types of economic front that he defines affects their respective relations with indigenous groups.

Although Ribeiro claims to be describing general types of front, he illustrates each type by reference to one particular case. He bases his description of the extractive type of front on the fronts that operated in Amazonia in the early years of the present century and whose economy was based on the collection of raw forest materials such as rubber, chicle, timber and Brazil nuts. He argues that although the members of an extractive front usually have need of indigenous labour, they rarely remain in one area long enough for it to become important to them to acquire legal title to indigenous lands. In early twentieth century Amazonia, Indians were engaged as labourers in the collection of raw

materials and as oarsmen and pilots on the rivers. The knowledge that the Indians had of the local natural environment made them far more competent at these tasks than the immigrants from the other parts of Brazil who had come to the front hoping to get rich.

But although extractive fronts have need of indigenous labour, they frequently have a devastating effect on the local indigenous population, an effect which derives from the fact that they often represent the vanguard of European colonization. The members of the front bring diseases against which the Indians have no physical resistance with the result that many indigenous groups are literally decimated in the first few years of contact. In these new frontier situations, the forces of law and order are weak if not entirely absent and violence, murder and gross economic exploitation are common. In addition, extractive fronts are usually composed of solitary males who look to the indigenous population to provide them with sexual partners, often taking them by force. Of the indigenous groups that existed in 1900 in the areas of Brazil where extractive fronts have operated, Ribeiro calculates that approximately 45% had become extinct by 1957 (pp. 21-29).

Another characteristic of extractive fronts is that they are extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in the world market for raw materials. Indeed it is a cruel irony of the history of contact in Brazil that extractive fronts which have involved the conjunction of the most marginal contingents of the national society and the most isolated indigenous societies have been more susceptible to international market fluctuations than the pastoral and agricultural fronts whose product is destined for more stable local markets within Brazil. As Ribeiro observes:

"The price of rubber and chestnut wood and other products on the New York stock exchange, or the prospect of peace or war between the world powers are the factors that cause the waves of raw forest material collectors to ebb and flow, permitting the last autonomous tribes to survive or condemning them to extermination" (p.248).

Yet this instability in the world market for raw materials can work in favour of indigenous groups. When the market price falls for a given product, the front that extracts it suddenly disperses or moves on to

another area to exploit a new resource. This is what happened in Amazonia in the years following 1910 when the world market for wild rubber collapsed as the British plantations in Malaysia started to come into production. Despite the havoc that the heyday of rubber collection had wrought amongst the indigenous population, in the years following 1910 the indigenous inhabitants of Amazonia were able to re-constitute their previous way of life to some extent and to return to the areas from which they had been dislodged.

Ribeiro's model of the pastoral front is based on his description of the front of cattle ranchers operating in the Northeast, central Brazil and the south of the Mato Grosso, all basically savanna areas (pp. 49-90). Ribeiro points out that a cattle economy requires extensive areas of pasture but has a limited need for labour. The members of a pastoral front are not therefore usually concerned to harness the labour power of the local indigenous population. Instead all they are interested in is clearing the land of its indigenous inhabitants and gaining legal title to it. Both these features serve to distinguish a pastoral front from an extractive front. They are further distinguished by the fact that the pastoral front is more permanent, brings about a more radical transformation in the natural environment, has a higher level of internal social organization and usually consists of both men and women. This last feature of the pastoral type of front means that there is less genetic interchange between the members of the front and the local indigenous population than there is in the case of the extractive type of front.

Although they are generally not as violent as extractive fronts, the pastoral fronts of Brazil have also had a very destructive effect on the indigenous populations with which they have come into contact. The principal source of conflict between the members of a pastoral front and the local indigenous inhabitants is the effect that the presence of cattle has on the wild animal population. Cattle causes the game on which the indigenous inhabitants depend to take flight. Deprived of their source of protein, the indigenous inhabitants prey upon the cattle instead. In order to safeguard their herds, the members of Brazilian pastoral fronts have resorted to the most ruthless physical elimination of indigenous groups.

Ribeiro estimates that approximately 30% of the indigenous groups that existed in pastoral front regions in 1900 had become extinct by 1957.

Ribeiro's model of the agricultural front is based on his account of the front that has operated in the Atlantic Forest region of Southern Brazil since the latter half of the nineteenth century (pp. 91-110). A front of expansion based on an agricultural economy generally involves a more intensive use of land than a pastoral economy and has a greater need for labour. In the specific case of the front that operated in the Atlantic Forest region however, the settlers, many of them from Central Europe, provided their own labour force. Having no need for the indigenous population and equipped with a highly racist and pseudo-scientific ideology that justified their behaviour, the settlers sought to exterminate the local population. To do so they employed bugreiros, professional Indian-killers.

In common with the pastoral fronts but in contradistinction to the extractive fronts, agricultural fronts tend to be permanent, to be well-organized internally and to be self-sufficient in sexual partners. Of all the types of front, the agricultural type brings about the most radical transformation of the natural environment. In the regions where agricultural fronts have operated in the twentieth century, the rate of extinction amongst the indigenous population has been highest of all. Of the groups that existed in these regions in 1900, Ribeiro calculates that 60% have become extinct. But he argues that this high figure is only in part a reflection of the effect of agricultural fronts themselves. Agricultural fronts have rarely operated in new frontier situations; by the time they arrive, the indigenous population has often already been devastated by an antecedent extractive front. In contrast the regions where a pastoral front operates have generally always been so since the savanna environment to which a ranching economy is suited is rarely suitable for an extractive or agricultural economy as well. (p. 244).

Even if one confines one's attention to the history of contact in Brazil in the period that Ribeiro deals with (1900 - 1960), one encounters a number of shortcomings to Ribeiro's model of the effects of the fronts of national expansion when one attempts to apply it generally. Perhaps the most obvious shortcoming of the model is that it is not always the case that an indigenous group is in contact with one type of front only. Due to local variations in regional ecology and/or to historical contingencies, different subgroups of the same indigenous society have

found themselves confronted with different types of front. Ribeiro himself mentions the case of the Kayapo, some groups of which were confronted with extractive fronts and others with a pastoral front. Others again were subject to protectionist fronts either of a governmental or missionary character (pp. 247-248). In cases such as this, where both diachronic and synchronic variation in the type of front have to be taken into account, the study of the effects of contact on a given indigenous group can be extremely complex. Ribeiro's technique of presenting each of his various types of front in isolation serves to highlight the distinctive characteristics of each and may therefore be justified at a theoretical level but it tends to inhibit consideration of how these different types of front articulate or conflict with one another with subsequent repercussions on their respective relations with local indigenous groups⁸.

Another shortcoming of Ribeiro's model of the effects of economic fronts is that the descriptive account he gives of each type is very heavily marked by the particular examples he deals with in detail. The literature on contact situations in twentieth century Brazil provides one with several examples that do not conform entirely to these descriptions. For example, Murphy's well-known study of the Mundurucu shows that although a century of contact with a rubber collecting front has resulted in the disintegration of the traditional form of Mundurucu society, it has not involved the physical extermination of a large proportion of the indigenous population as was the case in other parts of Amazonia (see Murphy 1960). More recently, Da Matta has argued that Ribeiro's model of the effects of extractive fronts is too simplistic because it does not take into account that there is considerable variation in the market value of the forest products that extractive fronts exploit. This variation affects not only the relations of production between the patron and indigenous collectors working for him but also the social composition of an extractive front. Da Matta proposes a general correlation between the value of a raw forest product and the social composition of the front that exploits it : the higher the value of the product, the more unstable the front. He then goes on to show with specific examples how the social stability of extractive fronts affects the social relations of the members of the front with local indigenous groups (Da Matta 1976 : 38 ff.).

Similar examples could be cited of pastoral and agricultural fronts that do not conform entirely with the types that Ribeiro describes. Although neither these examples nor those of extractive fronts to which I have alluded entirely contradict the model that Ribeiro proposes, they do indicate that a more elaborate theoretical scheme is necessary if it is to be applied across the board to contact situations in twentieth century Brazil, let alone to situations in other parts of the world or at other periods of time.

Ribeiro's typology of economic fronts is also deficient in that it is not exhaustive. As Melatti has pointed out, Ribeiro does not consider the effects of a front based on a mining economy (Melatti 1970 : 166). Nor can his typology be readily applied to the fronts that currently play the most active role in the colonization of the interior of Brazil, namely the government's massive road building programme and the penetration of the area by large multinational consortia. Ribeiro cannot of course be criticized for this since these fronts have only assumed their present importance since the coup in 1964 and therefore fall outside the temporal parameters of his study (see Davis 1977 : 32 ff.) Nevertheless if Ribeiro's model of the effects of economic fronts on indigenous groups is to be applied to the contemporary contact situation in Brazil and other parts of lowland South America, it would have to be modified in order to take into account these recent developments.

The interpretation of the data : the survival of indigenous groups

Ribeiro claims that the result of his study contradicts the conventional view of the effects of contact on indigenous societies:

"According to the almost unanimous view of the Brazilian historians and even of the anthropologists who have studied the problem, the confrontation (between the national society and tribal groups) leads to the disappearance of the tribal groups through absorption into the national society... Our study turned out to show exactly the opposite with regard to the period under consideration, the twentieth century. In fact, none of the indigenous groups about whom we obtained reliable information were assimilated into the national society as indistinguishable parts of it. Contrary to this expectation, the majority of the indigenous tribes

were exterminated and those that survived remained Indian : no longer in their habits and customs, but in their self-identification as peoples different from the Brazilians and as victims of their domination. Thus, the study that we set out to make of the supposed process of assimilation of the indigenous populations in modern Brazil ended up with the conclusion that the impact of civilization on tribal populations gives rise to ethnic transfigurations and not to full assimilation" (p.8).

Ribeiro's statement of his conclusions can be reduced to two basic propositions which it is convenient to consider separately :

- 1) that none of the indigenous groups of Brazil that existed in 1900 has been assimilated. Instead the majority have been exterminated and those that have survived have remained Indian.
- 2) that those that have survived have undergone various degrees of ethnic transfiguration, retaining a sense of their indigenous identity even though they may have abandoned many of their traditional customs.

It is important to point out that these propositions refer only to the period 1900 - 1960. Ribeiro admits the possibility that assimilation may have occurred in earlier periods of European colonization and foresees the assimilation of indigenous groups should certain revolutionary transformations take place in Brazilian society (p. 425, 429). It would appear therefore that Ribeiro believes that there is something peculiar to the social organization of contemporary Brazilian society that inhibits the assimilation of indigenous groups.

In order to consider the first proposition, it is necessary to define the term that Ribeiro is using. I have already quoted his definition of the term "ethnic transfiguration" above. His definition of the term "assimilation" is as follows : "the expectation that new groups will become an indistinguishable part of the general ethnic composition of national societies" (p.14). One should note that Ribeiro refers to assimilation as an "expectation" on the grounds that in twentieth century Brazil, the assimilation of indigenous groups has not in fact occurred. Ribeiro distinguishes the process of assimilation from the process of

"integration" which he defines as a state of "reciprocal accommodation and co-existence between populations that are ethnically distinct from one another, which in the case of indigenous groups, can be measured by the degree of interaction and dependence they maintain with the national society" (pp. 14-15).

Ribeiro's contention that the majority of Brazilian indigenous groups have been exterminated in the course of the twentieth century rests on statistical evidence presented in Chapter VIII (pp. 229-262). Here Ribeiro shows that of the 230 indigenous groups that existed in Brazil in 1900, 87 had become extinct by 1957. The degree to which this statistical evidence supports his contention is questionable. Many of the sources of Ribeiro's data are not very reliable. There are also certain problems involved in classifying the data they contain. Most indigenous populations of contemporary Brazil whom one might consider at one level to be a single entity because their members share a common language and culture are in fact broken up into small residential groups that have very limited social and physical contact with one another. Whether these populations are to be considered single entities or as a number of different entities in a statistical head-count is often difficult to decide. Ribeiro is well aware of these limitations to the available data and he attempts to compensate for them⁹. Yet even if one accepts the validity of his method of classifying and presenting the data, the fact that 87 of the 230 groups existing in 1900 had become extinct by 1957 hardly supports the conclusion that the majority were exterminated. However it is not my primary concern here to dispute exactly what proportion of the indigenous groups of Brazil have been exterminated during the course of the twentieth century. Whatever the exact statistics, there is no doubt that the national society has had a gross and tragic destructive effect on the indigenous population.

Rather my principal concern is to show that Ribeiro's contention that the Brazilian indigenous groups that have disappeared in the course of the twentieth century have been exterminated and not assimilated is only sustained by a series of definitional sleights-of-hand. In the statement of his conclusions quoted above, assimilation is quite clearly distinguished from physical elimination : "contrary to this expectation, the majority of the indigenous tribes were exterminated...". Now in

stating that the majority of Brazilian tribes were exterminated, Ribeiro appears to have in mind the large number of groups that he classifies as "extinct" by 1957, that is, those groups that "have disappeared in this half century as tribal groups that can be distinguished from the Brazilian population" (p.237). Yet not all the groups that he defines as "extinct" were physically exterminated, at least, not in their entirety. For example, he applies the term "extinct" to the Ofaié of the Mato Grosso even though he came across a few isolated individuals dispersed over the region the group had once inhabited who retained a memory of their indigenous traditions and still spoke the Ofaié language. By way of explanation for this classification, Ribeiro adds, in a footnote, that he considers the Ofaié to be "extinct" despite the existence of these individuals because this category "refers essentially, to the disappearance of the group as an ethnic entity" (p.252).

Comparing the two, I fail to see any significant difference between the definition that Ribeiro gives of the category of "extinct" groups and his definition of assimilation. Yet much later in the book, Ribeiro states explicitly that "extinct" groups such as the Ofaié cannot be considered cases of assimilation because they involve the "absorption of stray individuals" and not of ethnic groups (p.424). I find this argument totally spurious since it is very difficult to see how an ethnic group would be assimilated - i.e. in Ribeiro's terms become "an indistinguishable part" of the national society - without breaking up as a group as it did so. A minimal definition of an ethnic group is that it is a social group whose members recognize that they share certain things in common which serve to distinguish them from the members of other social groups. An ethnic group that became an "indistinguishable part" of the local Brazilian population would no longer be identifiable as such. In actual practice, one would not expect an indigenous group to be assimilated as it were en masse, its members remaining in regular social and physical contact with one another even though they were no longer held together by any sense of a common identity. On the contrary, it seems to me that it is only through the "absorption of stray individuals" that the assimilation of an indigenous group could take place.

In claiming that assimilation has never taken place in twentieth

century Brazil, I suspect that Ribeiro was seeking to counter the arguments put forward by certain elements in Brazilian government circles at the time that he was writing in support of an indigenist policy aimed at the total assimilation of indigenous groups. It is as if he wanted to show that such a policy would be doomed to failure since there was not a single precedent for the assimilation of an indigenous group. But I am not at all convinced that Ribeiro's work proves that the assimilation of indigenous groups in twentieth century Brazil is impossible. Ribeiro does not give systematic attention to the circumstances under which the groups he classifies as "extinct" reached that condition: the case of the Ofaié is mentioned in a footnote and other possible cases of assimilation are dealt with only in passing. If one had more information about the fate of these "extinct" groups, I think one would find that many of them have in fact become "indistinguishable parts" of the local Brazilian population, not by means of the "absorption of stray individuals" who leave their group as it begins to break up under the pressures of contact. Although one may sympathize with the motives probably underlying Ribeiro's claim that assimilation has never taken place in twentieth century Brazil, it is clear that in order to combat the assimilationist policies which are still being canvassed in Brazilian government circles (as exemplified by the recent phoney proposition to "emancipate" certain indigenous groups) one has to recur to methods other than academic arguments about historical precedent.

The second proposition contained in Ribeiro's statement of his conclusions, namely that indigenous groups may retain a sense of their distinctive ethnic identity even though they may have undergone a radical ethnic transfiguration is well substantiated by the cases Ribeiro deals with in Os índios... Perhaps the most remarkable of these is the case of groups of the Northeast of Brazil. These groups were among the first to be contacted by the Portuguese settlers and for several centuries have been subject to an extremely aggressive pastoralist front. By the early 1900s, one of these groups, the Potiguara had sustained four centuries of contact which had produced radical changes in the society:

"... no Potiguara spoke the tribal language and taken as a whole, the incidence of indigenous somatic traits was no more marked amongst them than amongst any other population of the frontier in the Northeast... nothing differentiated them from the local frontiersmen, except a conviction that they were Indians and a higher degree of group solidarity.... Even the customs that they treasured as symbols of their indigenous origin were the product of the process of acculturation. Such was the case with the dances and songs accompanied by the zambe and the puita, African instruments which they believed to be typical of the tribe" (p.53)¹⁰.

Ribeiro explains the resistance of the groups of the Northeast to assimilation on the grounds that it offered them no advantages over their condition as Indians whilst the mutual animosity between them and the local non-indigenous population maintained the lines of ethnic demarcation despite the absence of any substantive cultural content to this distinction:

"Despite the conditions of poverty and oppression, and probably on account of them, these residues of the indigenous population of the Northeast continued to consider themselves Indians, even after the tribal languages and the best part of the traditional culture had been lost" (p.56, my emphasis).

The situation of the groups of the Northeast raises a question that has been fiercely debated with reference to the situation of other oppressed ethnic groups: is the attachment of such groups to a distinctive ethnic identity a spontaneous expression of their resistance to assimilation or a symptom of their oppression which merely serves to perpetuate their marginal condition?¹¹ In actual practice, it is often impossible to say since the sense of a distinctive identity and oppression complement and re-inforce one another. But what is clear is that the indigenous group's sense of its distinctive identity changes as the contact situation develops

historically. As contact leads to the reduction of the social and cultural differences between the indigenous population and local national population, the ethnic identity of the indigenous group will progressively become a function of the contact situation itself. Correspondingly, in attempting to explain the survival of indigenous groups, as one passes from the groups that have undergone least to those that have undergone the greatest degree of ethnic transfiguration, the less one should rely on explanations in terms of the indigenous peoples' spontaneous attachment to their ethnic identity and the more on explanations that refer to the features of the contact situation that actively contribute to the maintenance of the lines of ethnic demarcation, even, at times, against the will of the indigenous group.

In Os índios... Ribeiro distinguishes between two polar forms of indigenous identity: the groups that still preserve a high degree of cultural autonomy possess a "tribal" identity whilst those groups which have abandoned almost all of their own social and cultural traditions like those of the Northeast, possess a "generic" identity. Ribeiro recognizes that there is a certain degree of ambivalence in the identity of groups which have undergone radical changes:

"On the one hand, they hope to take advantage of their indigenous condition which can guarantee them in the possession of the lands they occupy or a certain degree of (government) protection; on the other hand, their indigenous identity means that they are treated as inferiors... When one of these poles gains over-riding importance, as in the case of the discrimination against the Indian workers of the rubber-collecting enterprises, they may identify themselves as caboclos (i.e. rural non-Indians)... The opposite also occurs, as in the case of the descendants of the Terena and the Guaikuru ... who emphasize their indigenous identity as it is the principal factor that entitles them to ownership of their lands... (p.423).

But Ribeiro denies that this ambivalence in the self-identity of "generic" Indians is a sign that they are on the point of assimilation.

Irrespective of whether the conditions of contact encourage the members of an indigenous group to stress or to deny their indigenous identity, they cannot escape from it. The "generic" Indian, even though he may have undergone a radical ethnic transfiguration "finds himself before a barrier constructed both within him and without, which condemns him to retain his indigenous identity" (p.429). Ribeiro regards this barrier to be so absolute as to describe the indigenous population as belonging to a "caste" into which they are born and can only leave when they die (p.428)¹².

Ribeiro attributes a very important role to the prejudices of the rural Brazilian population in preventing the "generic" Indian from shrugging off his indigenous identity. Yet the only explanation he offers for these prejudices is a rather weak and tautological historical one:

"The Indians live surrounded by a barrier of prejudices.... the closer one gets to their settlements, the greater this discrimination... We do not know precisely how this barrier came to be erected nor which are the forces that maintain it. It can be assumed however that it is an inevitable consequence of the confrontation between ethnic groups. As such it must have existed from the first years of colonization...."
(p.412).

This weak explanation is one of the most obvious failings of Os Índios since the general argument of the book relies heavily on the assumption that there is a close relationship between the popular prejudices that inhibit the assimilation of indigenous groups and the social organization of twentieth century Brazil. Despite his remark that the prejudicial attitude shown towards Indians can be assumed to be "an inevitable consequence of the confrontation between ethnic groups", it is clear that Ribeiro does not believe it to be immutable:

"... a revolutionary change in the global social structure which radically altered the class structure and the forces that marshal labour power and by this means eliminated the social bases of discrimination and prejudice, could

transform the Brazilians as much as the Indians. In this new order of interethnic relations, the acculturated Indian... could eventually break with his ethnic identity in order to immerse himself in the national society" (p.429).

In this final paragraph of the main body of the book, Ribeiro proposes a clear connection between the class structure of contemporary Brazil and the discrimination against the Indians. But since he does not attempt to show in any detail the basis of this connection, the conclusion that the interests of indigenous groups and the national society could be reconciled following a revolution in Brazilian society remains, in the last analysis, sadly unconvincing.

Although I have offered certain serious criticisms of Os índios, I nevertheless believe it to be a seminal work laying the ground for a more elaborate theoretical model of contact between indigenous groups and national societies in lowland South America. As such, it deserves to be better known not only amongst South American specialists but also amongst those working on the colonization of remote areas by national societies in other parts of the world.

1. These biographical details are taken from the Foreword by Betty Meggers to Ribeiro (1968), pp. viii-ix.
2. See the forthcoming Survival International Review No.23 (1978) for details about the controversy over "emancipation".
3. See Ribeiro 1962, 1967 both of which are in English.
4. Cardoso describes his approach to the study of relations between Brazilian national society and indigenous groups as "the study of interethnic friction" (fricção interétnica). Although he considers his recent work to be an attempt to go beyond Os índios, he has acknowledged that his ideas have been developed "almost in constant dialogue" with those of Ribeiro (Cardoso de Oliveira 1972 : 14).
5. All the passages quoted in this article are my own translations from the original Portuguese text. At certain points I have inserted English phrases in parentheses in order to improve the sense of the quotations.
6. This summary of Ribeiro's method of classifying the determinants of the effects of contact is derived from two distinct passages in the book (p.219 and pp.441-442). There are certain discrepancies between the two passages. In the first passage, Ribeiro classifies the determinants into three (the "bio-ecological", the "socio-economic" and the "cultural") but in the later passage he classifies them into five (the "ecological", the "biotic", the "tecnológico-cultural", the "socio-economic" and the "ideological"). One of the extra

categories in the second passage is merely the result of the sub-division of the "bio-ecological" category of the first passage. The other extra category is the result of the ambiguous use of the term "culture". In the first passage this term is used to cover the ideological aspects of contact, whilst in the later passage it is used in reference to the goods and technology transferred through contact. In the remainder of his book, Ribeiro appears to use the term mostly in the sense that it has in the first passage and I follow this usage here.

7. The denunciation of the part played by the functionaries of the SPI in the destruction of indigenous societies led to the disbandment of this body in 1967 and its replacement by the present body responsible for indigenous affairs in Brazil, the Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI). Ribeiro only mentions this event in the Preface to his book since it falls outside the temporal parameters of his study (1900 - 1960).
8. As an example of how fronts operating in the same frontier area articulate with one another, see Melatti 1967 : 15 - 32.
9. In defining the basic units of his statistical analysis, Ribeiro takes into account the history of the relations of individual groups with the national society : "if it was the same for the whole tribe, we avoided subdividing it unnecessarily; if it varied, we took account of each variant. As a result of this procedure, the 230 cases do not refer to tribes or subtribes homogeneously defined, but to groups of indigenous people who lived through distinct experiences in their relations with civilization. Thus, for example, although one might distinguish a number of subgroups amongst the Guaraní, they were treated as a single entity; whilst the various subgroups of the Timbira, the Kayapo, the Kaingang and other indigenous groups were each dealt with separately" (p.230).
10. Ribeiro does not state explicitly whether or not the Potiguara still exist today but the fact that he refers to them elsewhere as being "integrated" rather than "extinct" suggests that they do (p.236). Certainly other groups of the Northeast who have gone through similarly radical ethnic transfigurations, such as the Fulnio, still do exist (Melatti 1970 : 33-34).
11. See for example the work of Stavenhagen (1965) and Harris (1973) on the situation of the indigenous communities of Highland Central America or the debate between Herskovits and Frazier over the significance of African "residues" in the New World (Bastide 1971 : 1-4).
12. As Ribeiro himself points out, the extreme discrimination he claims is shown towards Indians is remarkable for Brazil, a society where there has been a great mixture of diverse ethnic and racial groups at all levels (p.421).

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