JEWS, BLACKS, AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF MULTICULTURALISM IN BRAZIL

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According to Paul Gilroy, the impact of Modernity on European Jews and on the ‘black Diaspora’ did not create any systematic dialogue between these two groups. Gilroy sees this dialogue as being of crucial importance in understanding the tragic dimension of modernity for both groups, because of “the similar patterns of social remembrance found among Jews and blacks; and the effects of the prolonged familiarity with ineffable terror” (Gilroy, 2000: 401, 402).

The history of interaction between blacks and Jews in Brazil has not resulted in any systematic political dialogue; neither has it created any significant conflict. As a result of the ongoing transformation of Brazilian institutional and political dynamics, contacts between blacks and Jews have become more frequent. What has been the basis of interaction between Jews and blacks in contemporary Brazil? What do these groups have in common that encourages plural and ambivalent individuals, historically marked by racial prejudice and anti-Semitism, to enter into dialogue with each other?

The possibility of political approximation between Jews and blacks is quite a recent phenomenon in Brazil that coincides with the democratization process following more than two decades of military rule that culminated with the 1988 Constitution. The new constitution—called the ‘citizen constitution’—strengthened and expanded civil, political and social rights, as well as opening a space for collective rights (particularly for indigenous peoples and blacks) that had never previously existed in Brazil. As part of this process, racism—as stipulated in the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil enacted on 5 October 1988—was transformed into a “crime […] subject to the penalty of reclusion in terms of the law”.

1 This article would not have been possible without the stimulating exchange of ideas with Marcos Chor Maio at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation. A great intellectual debt is owed him.
Brazil has undergone a significant transformation in the ways that the racial question is dealt with, especially over the last ten years. Much of this transformation has been due to the pressure of black movements, international organisations and the attraction of new values of cultural recognition and racial differentiation associated with the multiculturalism that is currently in vogue. In this context ‘race’ has been rehabilitated as an ontological concept, and is now a subject of rights, especially in relation to public policies. Furthermore, it has exerted a strong political, and most especially a moral appeal to overcome social inequalities (Grin, 2004). A new ‘racialised’ vision of Brazil, a country widely seen as being characterised by significant miscegenation, has underpinned the present government’s policies which change the basic units on which rights are based. Since these units are no longer ‘individuals’ but rather ‘racial groups’, policies aimed at these new subjects of rights need to be debated.

However, little attention has been given to the return of ‘race’, which until a short time ago enjoyed a rarefied legitimacy in Brazilian common sense. The growing influence of the multicultural paradigm through the actions of NGOs and international foundations has formed the basis of the demands of ethno-racial groups, especially black groups, for the recognition of their particular needs and ways of allowing Afro-descendent culture to flourish. The socialization of multicultural values in Brazil, which has an Anglo-Saxon imprint (Taylor and Gutman, 1994), is still controversial. The multicultural paradigm, most often in its American version, is now regularly evoked in Brazil as the model of society that actors in arenas marked by ethnic differentiation should aim at. The most obvious consequence of this adoption of multiculturalism is a divided vision of the society that should be constructed in Brazil. On one side are those who see miscegenation, intermixing and hybridisation as genuinely national values, something

2 In 2002 Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva became president of Brazil, taking office after the eight year mandate of his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The racial equality policies that are currently being implemented in Brazil began under Fernando Henrique, first as part of the National Programme of Human Rights and afterwards with decisions arising out of the Durban Meeting in South Africa, 2001, an occasion when the government decided to adopt positive discrimination policies, such as racial quotas in public universities. In Lula’s government this approach was maintained and even expanded through the creation of SEPPIR (Secretaria de Política de Promoção da Igualdade Racial—the Secretariat of Racial Equality), which had the status of a ministry and the responsibility for defending the black movement as well its demands.