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and Silent Racism in Peru**

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The Racial Politics of Culture and Silent Racism in Peru

Marisol de la Cadena

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In this talk *mestizaje* is both the topic and a pretext. Treating it the topic of the paper, I want to explain why, in contrast with other Latin American countries such as Mexico, Bolivia, and Ecuador *mestizaje*--or the project of racial mixing--never became an official national ideology in Peru. But I also want to use *mestizaje* as a pretext to analyse the historical production of the Peruvian culturalist scientific definition of race, which is partially similar to what analysts of contemporary European forms of discrimination have called 'racism without race' or "new racism." I call it silent racism, because in the case of Peru, as we shall see, culturalist forms of discrimination are neither new, nor without race. The debate about racial mixture (or *mestizaje*) that took place in Peru in the first half of the 20th century, is a good window to explore the reasons that Peruvian intellectuals might have had in developing this presumably peculiar definition of race which eventually allowed for the current denial of racist practices in Peru. Illustrative of these denials Jorge Basadre, one of Peru's most eminent historians declared in the mid 1960s.

Historically, racism as it is understood in South Africa or in parts of the Southern United States has not existed in Peru. (...) This is not to say that there do not exist *prejudices* against Indians, cholos, and blacks, however these prejudices have not been sanctioned by the law and more than a profound racial feeling, they have an economic, social, and cultural character. Colour does not prevent an aborigine, mestizo, or Negroid from occupying high positions if they can accumulate wealth or achieve political success. (If there exists a distance between them and us) it is not racial, (...) rather it corresponds to what can be termed an historical state of things

Basadre acknowledges the existence of *prejudices*, but acquits those prejudices of the charge of racism because they do not derive from biological race. This acquittal, which continues to characterize the Peruvian racial formation, is not a whimsical national peculiarity. Rather, I argue that it is historically rooted in the scientific definition of race that Peruvian intellectuals coined at the turn of the century. Then they used it to contest European and North American racial determinisms which positioned intellectuals from my country (and Latin Americans in general) as hybrids and thus potentially--if not actually--degenerates. During this period Peruvian intellectuals delved into the scientific interconnection of "culture" and 'race," and produced a notion of "race" through which --borrowing Robert Young's words-- "culture" was racially defined and thus historically enabled to mark differences. When, roughly in mid-century, the international community rejected *race as biology*, it did not question the discriminatory potential of culture, nor its power to naturalize differences. Then Peruvian intellectuals--like Basadre-- dropped race from their vocabulary and criticized racism, while preserving culturalist interpretations of difference to reify social hierarchies, and to legitimate discrimination and exclusion.

To tell you how this happened, I will start with two quotes, which were produced at the turn of the century. The first one belongs to Gustav Le Bon, a detractor of cross-breeding among what he saw as "distant races," and one of the most popular and controversial European racial thinkers among Peruvians. He opined:

A Negro or a Japanese may easily take a university degree or become a lawyer; *the sort of varnish he thus acquires is however quite superficial and has no influence in his mental constitution.* What no education can give him, *because they are created by heredity alone*, are the forms of thought, the logic, and above all the *character* of the Western man. Our *Negro* or our *Japanese* may accumulate all possible certificates without ever attaining to the level of *the average European*. (...) It is only in *appearance* that a people suddenly transforms its language, its constitution, its beliefs or its arts.

To this, Gonzales Prada, a Peruvian radical anarchist, responded:

We are always running into Chinamen who dress, eat, and think like the silk-stocking, suave gentlemen of Lima. We see Indians in the legislatures, town halls, courthouses, universities and academies, where they reveal neither more corruption nor more ignorance than other races.

Le Bon and Gonzales Prada's ideas were part of the discussions that created and enlivened the scientific definition of race in the late 19th century. Then, race was not questioned, and disputes were not aimed at subverting its existence. Thus, notwithstanding his outrageous radicalism, Gonzales Prada did not denounce racism. That came afterwards, and the very first quote that I read, the one that denied the existence of racism in Peru, represents that later historical moment. (Pronounced in the mid-sixties, his denial of racism was informed by the scientific dismissal of biological notions of race that resulted from various political and scientific events, among which the most visible were the Jewish holocaust, the civil rights movement in the US, and the consolidation of the science of genetics.)

Yet, there are differences between Le Bon's and Gonzales Prada's respective quotes, and one of the most obvious ones regards the role each of them assigns to education and culture. For the French thinker racial essences were inalterable, fixed and determined by heredity, and--therefore--education could only polish external appearances. Peruvians could not have disagreed more. "Thanks to education man can today transform the physical milieu and even the race. It is his most glorious triumph," asserted the aristocrat Javier Prado, who was also the leader of Peruvian philosophic positivism and Comtean sociology. And these beliefs could become state policies. The minister of education of the modernizing oligarchic government that ruled the country from 1893 to 1919 declared: "Luckily it has been proved that no race exists that cannot be molded by education: clearly, ours can be so molded, even in the remotest regions of our territory. The myth that the Indian does not want to abandon his miserable condition is rapidly falling into discredit."

Indeed, followers of the Le Bonian type of ideas existed among Limeños, but they were politically marginal, and derided as "racial pessimists." The optimists, however, did not deny the ultimate superiority of Western civilization. Even the radical Gonzales Prada, wrote: "Whenever the Indian receives instruction in schools or becomes educated simply through contact with civilized individuals, he acquires the *same moral and cultural level as the descendants of Spaniards*." If during this period, race was an undeniable fact, civilization was the ultimate goal. Fortunately--from the viewpoint of Peruvian racial optimists-- it could be achieved through education.

Significantly, the racial optimism of elite Peruvians was not only a project to uplift the inferior races. It provided the obviously nonwhite elite of my country with racial sanctuary, inasmuch as from their viewpoint, education and intelligence could replace "whiteness" as the exclusive marker of racial worth. Dismissing European forms of whiteness as marks of racial status, a conservative writer Manuel Atanasio Fuentes reported: "In Lima, even those men who immediately descend from the European race have a *trigueño* color [literally 'like wheat,' light brown] which is pale and yellowed," and the iconoclast Gonzales Prada outrageously denied whiteness as follows: "Nobody deserves qualification as white, not even if they are blue-eyed and have blond hair."

Acknowledgement of widespread racial mixture--and of the non-whiteness of the elites--translated into the Limeño popular saying: *En el Perú , quien no tiene de inga, tiene de mandinga* "In Peru, whoever doesn't have inga [Indian heritage] has mandinga [black heritage]." For Limeño politicians, it meant a nation-building project that celebrated mestizaje, and defined it as achieving Western civilization, while maintaining national peculiarities. The following quote, produced in the 1920s, colorfully depicts this smooth process:

The destiny of Peru is to racially integrate into one and the same blood the reverberations of the Spanish guitar, the melancholy of the indigenous flute of the Andes, and the sadness of the African funerary drum.

The quote, which belongs to an aristocrat gentleman, also illustrates the conflation of race, blood, geography and culture undergirding the Limeño mestizaje project. Referring to the interconnectedness of race and culture, the historian of anthropology George Stocking remarked that U.S. academics, used "race" as "a catchall that could be applied to various human groups whose sensible similarities of appearance, of manner, and of speech persisted over time, and therefore were to them, evidently hereditary." There was, he said "no clear line between cultural and physical elements or between social and biological heredity." Peruvians therefore were not exceptional in conflating race and elements of what we know consider "culture." Neither were they the only ones to postulate the eugenic might of education to improve the races. In fact this was common to other racial projects, who optimistically rejected the dominance of heredity in determining race. What I find peculiar of Peruvian racial thought and racial relations during this period, is that there existed a tendency to subordinate manifest phenotypic markers to allegedly invisible racial characteristics (yet very visible class markers) such as "intelligence" and "morality." When this tendency translated into academic pronouncements, intellectuals downplayed biology as a definer of race and suggested instead the relevance of culture or civilization. Neither of this rejected the existence of race of course. Francisco García Calderón—a Limeño aristocrat who spent most of his life in Paris and had his writings translated from French into Spanish—was very clear in this respect: "Race persists as a synthesis of the diverse elements of a defined *civilization* while biological notions of race, are losing prestige."

The relatively non-phenotypical, and culturalist tendencies peculiar to Peruvian racial thought were reaffirmed and sharpened by Indigenismo. At the turn of the century this was a nationalist doctrine, embraced mostly by provincial intellectuals from the Highlands that anchored the Peruvian nation in its pre-Hispanic past, and most specifically in the Inca legacy. Artists, literary writers, and politicians, Indigenistas are usually identified only after their pro-Indian leanings. Yet they were specially explicit in defining race as culture. Luis Eduardo Valcárcel, a Cuzco resident historian and lawyer, and the undisputed intellectual leader of this nationalist movement was exceptionally clear in this respect:

The universal relationship between human beings and the natural world is resolved through culture. We are the offspring, that is, the heirs, of a being that has been shaped by the interaction of Nature and Culture. We repudiate the idea that spontaneous generation, mutation, or any form of biological life determine history because they lack history" . (*La generación espontánea, la mutación, la vida, sin historia, la biología por si sola no significan nada, ellas repugnan a nuestra mente*) (Valcárcel 1927: 109)

Valcárcel aimed at discrediting the idea, stirred by Social Darwinism, that the progress of human races could be reduced to biological competitions. From an evolutionary perspective, and with civilization as his goal, Valcárcel believed (as did W. E. B. DuBois in his early writings "Souls of Black Folk" and in the "Conservation of Races") that the history of a people determined their essential peculiarities. In his view, culture was the imprecise concept, yet powerful force, that determined races.

He thus claimed: "*Conocemos, pensamos, sentimos según el conocer, el pensar y el sentir de la propia cultura*" (We know, think, and feel in the manner of knowing and feeling proper to our own culture (1927: 109). Although this may represent an early version of today's European "cultural fundamentalism" (a term coined by Verena Stolcke), in the 1920's Valcarcel's ideas had an oppositional thrust. His view questioned the power of biological inheritance to rule human destiny, and in so doing, he dismissed the definition of culture as "varnish," "appearance," or "superficial memory" that undergirded Le Bonian racial pessimism, and instead postulated culture as the essence of human racial differences. In turn-of-the-century Peru, statements like "The Incas were a culture," or "Gentlemen have culture," and "The working classes can be improved by culture" *not only conflated race and culture. They also conveyed the might of culture to shape races*. This conviction inverted the internationally dominant opinion —namely, the belief that race determined culture. Contrasting with Franz Fanon's experience of the irremovable fact of his blackness, Peruvian culturalist racial thought served to soothe the fact of the elites' skin color --and in some cases even exonerate them from it. The personal, intimate convenience of this tolerance, made of culturalist racial determinism a relatively consensual belief among Peruvian racial thinkers.

Yet complete agreement among Peruvian intellectuals regarding the cultural racial destiny of Peru was interrupted by Geography. And I will tell you how. As important as dismissing phenotype, and probably influenced by popular nineteenth century Lamarckianism and environmentalism, the Peruvian racial taxonomy assigned cultures to imaginary geographic 'transects' which ranged from the Coast to the Amazonian tropics. The coast was culturally Spanish, the Highlands was the realm of expansion of Inca culture, and the Jungle, was allegedly peopled by savage tribes (who were not called Indians but *chunchos*)-- and therefore "empty" of culture, devoid of civilization. Significantly, Limeños (from Lima, the coastal capital of the country) evaluated the racialized geography within evolutionary temporal schemes. The modernized and culturally allegedly Hispanicized spaces of the Coast ranked higher than the "Indian" Highlands. This implied that, Limeños considered highland dwellers (contemptuously called *serranos*) were culturally/racially inferior to coastal inhabitants, regardless of social origins. Within this view Limeño elite intellectuals were at the cusp of the Peruvian racial formation.

Competing with coastal gentlemen for national leadership, serrano male intellectuals--and most specifically Cuzqueños--contested Limeños evolutionary geographical scheme with gendered images of the national territory, as in the following quote:

Numbed by the ocean's undulating sensuality, the sky and the tropical climate, the Coast has nurtured only weak individuals and like a Greek Lesbos it has trembled before the stern, masculine vigour of the Sierra. The Coast has been the mistress of every Conquest, midwife of all exotic concoctions, it has deformed the contours of the national self .

The above passage is so disgusting that it called my attention to the role sexuality played in articulating the turn-of-the century dominant racial imagination in Peru. To challenge Limeños legitimacy as leaders of the nation, Cuzqueño politicians emasculated the coastal geography, smothered Limeños in an environmentally determined femininity and, charged them with an alleged consequence: the cowardice that had led them to compromise the purity of the coastal culture/race, by allowing, even promoting its Hispanization. By contrast, Cuzco, and its intellectual/political class--the Indigenistas--emerged in masculine authenticity as leaders of the only Peruvian nationalism, the one that had valiantly preserved the purity of Inca heritage. Listen to another quote:

Lima and Cuzco are, in the nature of things, the two opposing hubs of our nationality. Lima is the yearning for adaptation to European culture; Cuzco represents the millenary cultural heritage of the

Incas; Lima is foreign-inclined, Hispanophile, Europeanized; Cuzco instead is vernacular— its nationalism is pure.

Cultural racial purity--and the nationalism it inspired-- was gendered, sexualized, and imprinted on the geography. To articulate these arguments, Indigenistas borrowed from North Atlantic racial thinkers the idea that races degenerated if they were moved from their proper geographical places. "Every personality, every group is born within a culture and can only live within it," wrote Valcárcel who finished his sentence: "*El mestizaje de las culturas no produce sino deformidades*" ("cultural miscegenation only yields deformities"). From this widespread Indigenista view, Limeños' hispanophilia was a deformed result of early colonial displacements. Similarly, mestizos were ex-Indians who had abandoned their proper natural/cultural environment—the countryside—and migrated to the cities. There, Valcárcel claimed, they degenerated morally. The same author claimed: "The impure Indian woman finds refuge in the city. Flesh of the whorehouse, one day she will die in the hospital."

Thus, while opposing terminal racial hierarchies, the culturalist definition of race had room for discrimination and it was opened and confirmed by images of sexuality. Indigenistas emasculated Limeños to empower themselves and authenticate their project. But they also used sexualized images to create moral racial distance, and thus subordinate commoners and justify discrimination morally. According to cultural/racial purists, the crucial characteristic of female Indians' sexuality was their inherent rejection of "foreigners," a trait that had subtly preserved the "purity of the Indian race." The belief was embodied in a mythical figure, whose Quechua name was Cori Ocllo, which writers translated as Seno de Oro—Golden Breast. About her it was said:

Seno de Oro the most beautiful wife of Manko was the heroine. Don Gonzalo wanted her for himself, and she was faithful to her race. How could she offer her body to the impure assassin of her gods and of her kings? she would die first; so she lay tranquilly, without further vexation; to her cold flesh the white beast would not dare come close. (...) Kori Ojlllo [sic] in order to frighten away from her the Spanish gallant had covered her perfect torso with something repugnant capable of driving away Don Juan himself. But still more virulent was the hatred that her eyes distilled. (...) Kori Ojlllo has revived in the Andes. There where the Indian returns to his Pre-Columbian purity; there where they shook free of the filth of the invader. Kori Ojlllo lives, a fierce female, whom the white man can no longer conquer. The hatred, stronger than ever, inhibits the latent sexuality, conquers the temptations, and the Indian woman of the hostile clans prefers to die than to surrender herself. What disgust if she gives up. She would be exiled from the ayllu. She would return no more to her adored native region. Even the dogs will come out to bite her.

The racial xenophobia imputed to indigenous female sexuality constituted the invisible—very intimate—touchstone that allowed Indigenistas to define mestizaje as immoral, and primarily *sexually* so. Mestizaje was the impure consequence of rape or female sexual deviance. It had resulted in mestizos, sexually irrepressible, culturally chaotic, and therefore immoral social beings. Hence, hybridity in Cuzco represented not biological but moral degeneration, stirred by the alteration of the original order, by an inappropriate cultural environment, and furthered by a deficient education. The elite—regardless of skin color and of cultural mixture—were sheltered from the stains of mestizaje. They were educated, occupied their racial proper places—both geographically and socially—and thus lived within the dictum of moral order. They were *gente decente*, people of worth. Men were gentlemen, their women were ladies, and as such they displayed appropriate sexual behavior. *Caballeros* were responsible patriarchs and *damas* virtuous women, but more importantly *decencia* inspired them to fall in love with each other, thus preventing the transgression of racial boundaries. Sexual disorder was not normal among *gente decente*: it was the attribute of urban commoners, the mestizos.

Anti mestizo feelings colored Indigenista nationalist activities, including the most cultural ones, like stagings of "Inca Theater." This was a local dramatic genre, performed and written by elite intellectuals, considered the only ones versed in Capac Simi. This term translates as "the language of the chiefs" and was a colonial, hispanicized Quechua sociolect, imagined as a kind of High Quechua, the allegedly exclusive language of the Inca aristocracy. Non-elite playwrights, deemed mestizos, and therefore denied the category of intellectuals, were prevented as much as possible from staging Inca Theatre because they supposedly used Runa Simi, which translated as "the language of the people" and was considered a low class quechua, polluted with Spanish words and devoid of the supposed philological individuality of Capac Simi.

Indeed the search for cultural racial purity transcended guardianship of Inca tradition. It also organized urban and rural regional policies. In the city, market women--abhorred and known as mestizas--were a direct target of Municipal sanctions and supervision. Guards strolled the market place to prevent abusive mestizas from increasing foodstuff prices at their will. Similarly, in order to ease the supervision of cleanliness, city authorities obliged market women to wear white aprons and to cut their hair: their indigenous woolen clothes and long braids nested bugs of all sorts. Meanwhile, in the countryside, anti-mestizo policies acquitted gentlemen hacendados from abusing Indian peons and from cattle rustling, charges that were leveled instead to plebeian owners of newly acquired properties, considered illegitimate because they were not backed by colonial aristocratic titles. Clearly, Indigenista anti-mestizo practices targeted urban and rural, female and male commoners whose income could be considerable, yet who lacked the education (and allegedly the consequent morality) that would allow their entrance into the elite. Ultimately, Indigenista anti- *mestizaje* rhetoric represented a conservative class rhetoric against an incipient, obviously nonaristocratic, petty bourgeoisie that was emerging from among the popular classes. Hence being mestizo in Peru was a racialized class fact, where class was not only judged in terms of income but of education and origin.

The idea of "race" linked to education (and indeed to class and gender) leads me directly to address--if briefly--how my own identity has shaped the research of which this paper is part. I am a brown-skinned, middle class, Limeña intellectual. As result of my background-- and, crucially, of my academic training-- I belong to Peruvian elite intellectual circles where "whites" predominate, and where as a result of implicit racialized feelings, people either politely ignore my skin color, or consider me "trigueña", that "wheat like" version of Limeño blurred whiteness. I think that most less privileged Peruvians would not make a crucial distinction between me and individuals considered 'white' by North American standards. This contrasts sharply with the perception that my US friends have of me, particularly those who met me in this country and not in Peru. For them, I am a Latina, therefore inevitably and overtly marked as a 'woman of color,' as a friend of mine recently called me (to my surprise, so much had I internalized the colorlessness of my Peruvian trigueño whiteness!!!) These experiences motivated my initial reflections about the Peruvian racial/cultural processes and their

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