Anti-Black Racism in Latin America
Racismo anti-negro en América Latina

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Abstract

This article address the racialization phenomenon of the African population and their descendants, born in America from a socio-historical perspective; including: their kidnapping, transfer and slavery in the American continent during the colonial period. Also the article address the construction of imaginaries and narratives that allowed their exploitation, favored rejection and resistance to the abolition of slavery, and excluded the black population from the process of construction of the emerging Latin American Nation-States. The research investigates the role of Latin American blacks in the independence processes and problematizes the phenomenon of structural racism from a critical sociological perspective, as a factor for the physical and symbolic annihilation of the black and Afro-descendant population in the past and in Latin America today.

Resumen

En el presente artículo se abordará el fenómeno de la racialización de la población africana y sus descendientes nacidos en América desde una perspectiva socio-histórica, entre estos: su secuestro, traslado y esclavitud en el continente americano durante el periodo colonial, así como, la construcción de imaginarios y narrativas que permitieron su explotación, favorecieron el rechazo y resistencia ante la abolición de la esclavitud, y excluyeron a la población negra del proceso de construcción de los emergentes Estados-Nación latinoamericanos. La investigación indaga en el rol de los negros latinoamericanos en los procesos independentistas y problematiza el fenómeno del racismo estructural desde una perspectiva sociológica crítica, como factor para el aniquilamiento físico y simbólico de la población negra y afrodescendiente en el pasado y en la América Latina actual.

1.Introduction

The violent colonization of the Americas constituted the beginning of a racialization process that affected native populations, who were massacred in response to their resistance to the conquest, as well as individuals of African descent, whose dehumanization allowed for justification of their seizing, relocation, commercialization, and enslavement. During this process of enslavement, European whites, from their self-granted superiority, adjudicated blackness negative and degrading connotations. The Africans that arrived through the system of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as well as their American-born descendants, were considered an intellectually, morally, and spiritually inferior "race"; therefore, they were conceived as lacking ethical, intellectual, moral, relational and organizational capacities.

Consequently, even after the abolition of slavery, persons of African descent continued to be considered, both individually and collectively, under this light, thus prolonging and materializing their exclusion from political, economic, educational and cultural domains. Above all, in an effort to whiten the image of the emergent Latin American nation-State, they were also erased from the historical narrative.

These conceptions about the black population in Latin America continue to have, even today, a strong presence in collective imaginaries. At the same time, they continue determining the access of racialized populations to human rights, as well as their advancement in educational, work-related, and cultural levels, thus prolonging their submission to different forms of inequality and life-threatening racist violence. In response to this situation, in the last few decades the organization of black populations has strengthened around social movements, as well as in connection to the professionalization of blackness. Their goal is to make the perpetuation of racism visible, to denounce the stigmatization of racialized social sectors, and to demand

that both their human rights and the eradication of structural racism be guaranteed by the State.

Along these lines, this chapter will approach the phenomenon of the racialization of African and African-descendant populations in Latin America from a socio-historical perspective. Concurrently, this study will problematize structural racism from a critical sociological perspective, as a key factor for the physical and symbolic annihilation of black social sectors in Latin America, both in the past and in the present.

2. Invasion, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and Colonial Racialization

One of the most important aspects to consider when approaching the phenomenon of blackness in Latin America is related to the understanding that, contrary to official discourses, racialization has been and continues to be a consequence of the process of colonization, not a cause in itself. As I have argued elsewhere (Racismo), what motivated European participation in the initial maritime expeditions to the Americas were economic interests (particularly the search for inexhaustible treasures mentioned in mythical oral and written narratives) within the context of the threatening decay of the social, political, and cultural European order. This situation was the consequence of excessive military investments connected to the invasive operations aimed at expanding and plundering American territories, and also motivated by the need to support the idle and unproductive European monarchy.

However, the illnesses brought to the American continent by European travelers, the magnitude of the implacable rhythm of the exploitative work imposed on the native populations, and the genocide executed against aboriginal peoples in response to their resistance to domination, in addition to the fleeing of those who

managed to survive colonizing violence toward distant and inaccessible regions, resulted in an obstacle for invaders who, after annihilating native populations, lacked the manpower needed to despoil the existing resources in the invaded territories.

The need for exploitable workforce created the conditions, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, for European invaders and colonizers –particularly Portuguese, Dutch, French, English, and Spaniards—that favored slave trade, thus initiating maritime expeditions towards the African continent. Europeans, then, arrived in sub-Saharan regions, which were the most accessible from Europe and from America, thus initiating a triangular trade (involving three continents, Europe, Africa and America), also known as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. In sub-Saharan Africa, Europeans reproduced the criteria of inferiority, superiority and domination of non-Europeans which they had used in America with respect to Indigenous populations in this manner:

Since African populations, like native Americans, had a specific cultural, political, economic and phenotypic organization different from Europeans', they were automatically considered an inferior race (…) In this manner, the consideration of difference from an economic and utilitarian perspective, as well as the understanding of the "other" as economically inferior and racially stigmatized, facilitated their definition as productive subjects and objects and their consequent objectification and resulting conversion into transferable, exchangeable and negotiable commodities. (Pineda, 2014, p. 21)

In this context, European invaders, colonizers, and then also slave traders, initiated a process oriented towards the capture of Africans (with the collaboration of other Africans who would exchange them for goods, and also through the use of force, that means, through kidnapping of potential slaves) for their immediate relocation in the American continent under inhuman conditions.

The boat trip, known as the Middle Passage, lasted between two and three months, depending on the ports of exit and the ports of entry. The British abolitionist William Wilberforce (1759-1833) declared that "he never saw so much misery condensed in a small space as there was in a slave ship during the middle passage." More than four hundred captives could be crammed in one of these ships, separated in three groups: men, young adults, and women and children. Women were provided with light clothing and they often suffered rapes by the crew and by the captain. Men would remain naked in good weather, and at night they would be chained together under the deck. (National Geographic, 2014, sp.)

On the same topic, Omer Freixa stated in his article "The First Africans in the New World":

The spaces were so reduced that smaller slaves were squashed by the bigger ones, and suffocated and even killed by asphyxiation. That situation resulted from a specific logic. The more ebony pieces were embarked; the bigger the gain. But that reasoning also implied that overcrowding would also result in a matter of mortality. In any case, nobody seemed to be moved by that, and slave chips were almost always filled to the limit. (Freixa, 2011, sp.)

The transportation of African men, women and children subjected to the slave trade entailed physical violence as a form of controlling upheavals and the possibility of disturbances, immobilization, seclusion, deprivation of food, rape, proliferation of illnesses, epidemics, and finally death. According to the National Geographic, "Dysentery and other intestinal problems were the most common causes of death, but also many lives were lost due to illnesses

transmitted by mosquitoes, such as malaria and yellow fever, together with scurvy and respiratory diseases."

But after the capture and transportation of Africans to America, their situation did not improve and their suffering was not minimized. On the contrary, they left Africa as Africans, and in America they became negros (blacks; pretos in Portuguese), which did not only mean black but also slave. Before the process of European colonization in the Americas, blackness did not exist as such; Africans were converted into blacks by Europeans, who self-defined as superior human beings, and allow themselves to dehumanize, animalize and bestialize Africans. They called them blacks based on the color of their skin, and the phenotypical characteristics, thus giving them an inferior and racialized denomination in order to allow and justify the trade and posterior enslavement.

This differentiation and subalternation of African people had the objective of legitimizing the systematic proliferation of violence that would be perpetrated against them based on their assumed racial inferiority, which encompassed the auction of men, women and children considered "pieces of ebony," and their commercialization, their marking (as a symbol of property), and their exploitation as slaves between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Their situation also included sexual, reproductive and labor exploitation (as workers in agriculture, domestic service and mining).

This process of trade and enslavement of Africans was progressively developing lasting four centuries. During this period, according to historian Omer Freixa, it is estimated that approximately ninety million Africans were taken from Africa and subjected to slave trade. However, only approximately ten million arrived in the New World between the beginning of the sixteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. For this reason, Freixa indicates that Africa suffered a demographic bleeding from which the continent could not

easily recuperate, a fact that favored the development and economic growth of the so called world powers.

This African drainage, implemented in order to satisfy the European need of workforce in order to exploit the resources appropriated from America, gradually blackened the continent, in the first place due to the racialized and enslaved Africans, and also through the children of Africans born under slavery in American territories. As Freixa has indicated, from Mexico to the Southern Cone they left their mark in Hispanic America after four centuries of trade and enslavement.

3. The Racism of the Emancipators and the Resistance to the Abolition of Slavery

The inhuman commercial exploitation of racialized Others during the colonial period was, without a doubt, a lucrative business, which allowed for the recovery, consolidation, and support of the European monarchy. At the same time, it facilitated the consolidation of colonial power in the Americas, and the enrichment of the elite American-born white creoles. The slave trade and the system of slavery expanded in the Americas without exceptions. However, some countries received more African slaves than others (particularly those with more and better maritime access from Africa, such as Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Caribbean Islands, especially Cuba and Puerto Rico). Nevertheless, this did not reduce the trade of Africans to be enslaved, and the installation of ports in the emergent cities of Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay. But it was in countries with more presence of black population were more resistance was developed to the elimination of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the social demands had changed, and there was opposition to the continuation of slavery. Slaves were expensive and there were too many

obstacles to obtain them. In 1807, England was the first nation to ban the slave trade and other European nations which had been in competition with this country, soon followed this policy. They did not do it only for humanitarian reasons, but for economic motivations. Capitalism did not need forced labor anymore, but paid workers that could also be consumers. The slave was then an archaic and expensive tool. In consequence, the slave trade was destined to disappear (Freixa, 2011, sp.).

For Europeans, the slave trade was not profitable anymore, due to both the high cost of Africans and the difficulty to access this kind of merchandise, that is, the subjects to be traded and enslaved, due to the incalculable deaths during the oceanic journeys, as well as to the increasing participation of American creoles in this business, which created a reduction in the profits. Also, the prohibitions and legal restrictions that were beginning to be imposed on the slave trade, were another reason that, together with the motivations already mentioned, contributed to the support of the abolition of slavery even by those who had been an active part of this business.

However, this was not well received by white creole elites in Latin America, who were just initiating the process of emancipation from European tutelage and did not count on the abolition of slavery in the region, a notion that they strongly opposed. In the first place, the creole elite had economic reasons, since their wealth rested on the exploitation of slaves. Secondly, they had social reasons, since the possession of slaves allowed them to consolidate and expose their social power. Finally, they had ideological reasons, since the racialization initiated and developed by Europeans in order to justify the slave trade had been so efficient that creoles ended up believing that Africans and their descendants born in Latin America were subhuman beings, similar to beasts that could be exploited, but above

all, as blacks that were inferior to them, who were of European origin and had never been enslaved.

In this context, creoles in favor of emancipation left aside of their programs of independence the freedom of the black population, since, as René Villaboy has indicated in "The 'negro' dilemma of Latin American independence", they were, very often, slave owners. But this situation was not accepted passively. Africans and their descendants felt obliged to defend their humanity and claim their freedom through insurrections that originated with the Haitian Revolution.

Black rebellions flooded the American continent and this fact, in addition to the European pressures on the emergent American nation-States to ban the slave-trade and abolish slavery, reinforced the need to take action regarding this problem. However, these actions were gradual and unconvincing in their condemnation of slavery.

> It was then that, due to pressures, resistances, discontent and prejudices, some countries opted for the prohibition of slave trade. Others banned trade in their own territories (nevertheless, this did not mean the disappearance of slavery, which continued as an illegal practice for decades, thus increasing the smuggling of slaves). In other cases, freedom of wombs was granted (allowing blacks born in that specific country to be free only after they compensated their owners by working for them until they reached adulthood). On some occasions, slave manumission was used through the indemnification of slave owners, while in other countries slaves were offered and granted freedom in a conditional manner, provided they would join troops in the wars of independence, or after serving the army for a specific period. However, in the majority of cases the abolition of slavery was avoided and postponed, thus perpetuating itself after the independence, a process that denied and rendered invisible the contribution of

slaves in the struggle against colonialism. (Villaboy, 2014, p. 8-9).

Finally, the abolition of slavery took place in different moments in Latin America, even after several processes of abolition and derogation of the already abolished slavery. The inception of the abolition of slavery can be placed, from a historiographical perspective, in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1810, and then in Chile, in 1823, in Uruguay, in 1830, in Colombia in 1852, in Perú and Argentina in 1853, in Venezuela in 1854, in Puerto Rico in 1873, in Cuba in 1880 and in Brazil (the largest importer of Africans and the last country in Latin American in abolishing slavery) in 1888.

4.Structural Racism and the Place of Blacks in the Emergent Latin American Nation-States

The abolition of slavery was not effectuated willingly but out of necessity. Although Latin American societies were built thank to the exploitation of slaves, this did not result in any kind of social recognition; on the contrary, collective imaginaries and dehumanizing narratives elaborated about Africans and individuals of African descent during the process of colonization and slavery, did not disappear. For this reason, the conceptions and practices of contempt, discrimination and exclusion towards blackness continued and often deepened since blacks were not only perceived as foreigners but also as confrontational due to their aspirations of equality and recognition of their rights. This was taken by mantuanos, white creoles and mestizos, as a challenge, coming from those who had been considered, until very recently, not only as inferior, but as part of their possessions.

Nevertheless, after the independence and the unavoidable abolition of slavery opposed by the creole elites that feared the

citizenship of blacks, Ferreira y Seijas (2018), the emergent Latin American nation-States elaborated their Constitutions, and although racialization and racism against blacks was still current, there were no laws that explicitly prohibited enslaved African descendants the access to certain practices, spaces and relations.

This period of post-independence and post-abolition of slavery established a difference between the social situation of blacks in the United States and Latin America. As I have indicated in my book Racismo y brutalidad policial en Estados Unidos (2017), racism in the United States acquired a segregationist character after the abolition of slavery, reaching its height point with the legalization and institutionalization of racial discrimination with the Jim Crow Laws. In Latin America and the Caribbean, after the abolition of slavery, racism did not disappear but new scenarios, mechanisms, practices and non-juridical, segregationist or explicit narratives developed, through which anti-black racism could be reproduced and perpetuated.

In Latin America, after the abolition of slavery racism oriented towards the symbolic annihilation of racialized subjects. However, the lack of a legal and segregationist racism contributed to the construction of a narrative based on the denial of racism and the affirmation of a harmonious and successful miscegenation in the region, but above all, to the emergence of the popular discourse of "the melting pot", a narrative that concealed the persistence of a racialization and anti-black racism in Latin America, a situation that manifested itself through prejudices and stereotypes that generated behaviors of expulsions and exclusions of the black population.

As Paulina Alberto and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof have expressed in their essay "Racial Democracy and Racial Inclusion: Hemispheric Histories", the fact that persons that descended from Africans were recognized as people and allowed certain forms of judicial protection did not imply any notion of political or social

equality, since equality was not a distinctive element in the first political and social modern systems. "In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Latin American elites shared in general the idea that non-whites were not apt for either civilization or democracy" (Alberto y Hoffnung-Garskof, 2018, p. 326).

These conceptions materialized with the erasure of blacks and black heritage in the Latin American historical narrative, the unrecognition of their participation in the process of independence, the denial of their contributions in the formation of society and culture, the discrimination of educational spaces, the reduction of black population to precarious, unspecialized and underpaid work, the limitation of social ascent, the lack of access to positions of power and decision making, the indifference towards their interests and need, as well as the stimulation of European migration in order to whiten the continent thus erasing the unwanted negritude.

5.Blackness, Racism, and Resistance in Latin America Today

If the narrative on the inexistence of racism persisted in Latin American societies, the reality of racialization and racism against blacks continues to be as current as it was in the past. However, subtle, almost imperceptible socio-cultural mechanisms are being more effectively used in order to manifest and prolong racism.

Racialization, stigmatization and degradation of African people and persons of African descent born in the Americas have managed to perpetuate themselves in the socio-cultural fabric through their incorporation in the process of socialization and their inclusion in daily life, in social institutions and social spaces; for this reason, in spite of the particularisms and idiosyncrasy of each country, it is possible to find multiple and diverse manifestations of racism, intentional or not, that are part of routines, customs, and habits imbedded in the processes of social interaction.

This situation, which is pervasive everywhere in Latin America, is obviously more radical in those countries where there is a largest presence of black population as a result of intense slave trade in the colonial period, and where there was more resistance to the abolition of slavery, which then took place at a later date. In this respect, according to the information from the World Bank included in the report Afro-descendants in Latin America, which was based on census information from 16 countries, in 2015 there were 133 million of Afro-descendants in Latin America. Almost 24% of the total population. However, their distribution in the region is very unequal, since more than 91% continue to be concentrated in Brazil and Venezuela, and 7% in countries such as Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador and Mexico.

According to Carlos Agudelo's (2019) article titled "Paradojas de la inclusion de los afrodescendientes y el giro multicultural en América Latina", the majority of this population is still concentrated in spaces that were settlements in the colonial period, such as plantations, mining areas and other territories related to activities assigned to slaves, as well as in coastal areas, and in zones of refuge and resistance to slavery where blacks established themselves as free societies called cimarronas. Nevertheless, in the last decades significant processes of mobility and urbanization of black populations have been taking place, even as they continue to inhabit the peripheries and margins of the big cities.

In addition, as it has been demonstrated in the study by the World Bank, Latin America's black population is facing cumulative disadvantages, unequal opportunities and lack of respect and recognition, something that produces a variety of social and economic consequences. Their living conditions are worse than those of whites in cities like Caracas, Lima, Montevideo or Rio de Janeiro, where they are usually relegated to poor neighborhoods, with less access to public

services, and low educational levels. They suffer the highest levels of unemployment in every country, they work in occupations that require no specialization and are socially undervalued, and find themselves at a higher risk to be victims of natural disasters or regular crime.

Nonetheless, these facts, taken as a whole, have propelled black populations to organize themselves from academic spaces and through activism in order to visualize, denounce, propose, and contribute to the process of recognition of Latin American black social sectors and to the improvement of their social situation and they living conditions.

In this context, it is possible to identify as accomplishments of the individuals and movement of Latin American black population their advancement towards ethnic self-recognition, which was legitimized in the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Connected Forms of Intolerance held in Durban in 2001, where blacks were acknowledged as subjects of international law under the concept of Afrodescendants. Black communities have pressured governments in the region for the approval of laws that typify and sanction racial discrimination. They have also promoted the creation of statistics that register and systematize Afro-descendants and their lifestyles, and they have generated proposals for the development and implementation of public policies specifically oriented to the eradication of racial discrimination and to the guarantee of the rights of Afro descendants. They have demanded the incorporation of the ethnic perspective in education, and have pressured in favor of creating affirmative policies or those of "positive discrimination", such as quotas for access to education and public positions, in order to minimize the historic inequality that continues affecting them, and limiting the advancement of racialized communities.

However, in spite of the fact that it is possible to recognize these advancements at legal, institutional and statistical levels, the truth

is that they have not managed to generate significant changes in the social situation and in the living conditions of racialized communities, both black and Afro descendants in Latin America. They continue to face implacable racism inherited from the colonial period and particularly from slavery, in different aspects of their daily lives.

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