RE-THINKING RACE AND ETHNICITY IN BRAZIL: ESSAYS IN HONOR OF THOMAS E. SKIDMORE

(RE) PENSANDO RAÇA E ETNICIDADE NO BRASIL: ENSAIOS EM HOMAGEM A THOMAS E. SKIDMORE

Introduction

This issue of EIAL honors Thomas E. Skidmore, professor emeritus of Brown University and eminent historian of Brazil. It features articles written by Professor Skidmore's former students and other scholars who have been inspired by his wide-ranging contributions to a deeper understanding of contemporary Brazilian history and culture. In 1960 Skidmore received his doctorate from Harvard University with a major in modern European history specializing in German and British history. At precisely that moment, the unfolding revolution in Cuba became a pressing concern for Washington policy makers and leading institutions of higher education in the United States. Both recognized that they did not have sufficient specialists trained in Latin American history, politics, culture, and society. Responding to this need Harvard University offered the young historian a three-year post-doctoral fellowship to travel to a Latin American country and develop an understanding of its history and culture. He was also offered the option to return to Harvard to either teach his newly acquired knowledge or to continue work on European history. Skidmore chose Brazil and devoted the next forty years to studying the country. The breadth of his interests took him from a study of Brazilian political history from 1930 to the 1964 military coup d'état, to an examination of race, and later to a history of the military regime that ruled the country for twenty-one years.

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When Thomas Skidmore first traveled to Brazil in the early 1960s, the United States was in the throes of racial, ethnic, and gender conflict. African-Americans and members of other minority groups were challenging segregation and women were demanding equal rights. While there was violent resistance from white supremacists, there were also more generalized confrontations that were not physically violent. Brazil was a study in contrasts to this environment in the United States. At the time of Thomas Skidmore's first visit, Brazilian diplomats received explicit instructions from the Foreign Ministry to characterize Brazil as a "racial democracy" at every opportunity. These instructions mirrored the dominant perception that Brazil was characterized by true racial harmony with a widespread mixture of races and a national self-image of cordiality.

The idea of "cordiality" was based on the widely held assumption (which relied on considerable over-simplification and omission) that Brazilians resolved differences and generated change peacefully. This image offered a sense of moral superiority in comparison to a supposedly violent Spanish America. Coupling cordiality with the celebration of race-mixture as positive national characteristics further allowed many Brazilians to imagine themselves as morally superior to the United States. This sense was a powerful palliative in a country where intellectuals frequently expressed insecurity and inferiority in comparison to Europe and the United States.

In the early 1960s, a foreign scholar conducting research in Brazil would not have seen much cordiality in the chaotic political confrontations that culminated in the 1964 military coup. Thomas Skidmore was in Brazil at the time of the *golpe*, conducting research for what would become *Politics in Brazil, 1930-1964: An Experiment in Democracy* (1967). His book characterized Brazilian politics as fractious, confrontational, sometimes violent, and never cordial. Twenty years later, the absence of that cordiality was still evident when he was detained and harassed by the police for giving a television interview in which he declared that President Figueiredo "likes traveling, not governing." His detailed history, *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-85* (1989), likewise documented the systematic use of state-sponsored violence to silence opponents of the generals' rule.

Skidmore, like other foreign scholars working in Brazil in the sixties, realized that the comparative tranquility of race relations belied easily visible racial inequalities. The intellectual landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s created analytical openings for comparative questions about Brazil's system of racial inequality. Thus he began to ask new questions about Brazil: Why did "cordiality" loom so powerfully? Why didn't black Brazilians challenge obvious patterns of discrimination, as they did in the United States? How could the idea of "racial democracy" be accepted in a society with practically no people

of color possessing wealth or authority? In other words, why was Brazil not more like the United States?

Scholars who had come to Brazil before Thomas Skidmore had also made comparisons. Historical studies by scholars like Frank Tannenbaum (1948) and Gilberto Freyre (1940) had proposed comparisons between the slave systems of Brazil and the United States in order to explain different trajectories of race relations. They cited, for instance, the supposed moderating role of the Catholic Church as a softening influence on Brazilian slavery (with clear echoes of the imagination of cordiality). By contrast, the anthropological studies by Charles Wagley (1953), Marvin Harris (1964), and others eschewed explicit comparisons, and focused instead on decoding the systems of values that guided Brazilian race relations. Wagley coined the term "social race" to capture the fluidity and elasticity of racial identity in Brazil. The term described the way in which racial identity was constructed (and constantly re-constructed) by a person's situation, environment, social relations, class, etc. In a simplified form, he suggested that "money whitens."

While those historians who worked before Skidmore focused on slavery, those who followed were in a position to tackle race relations more directly, as anthropologists had been doing. In 1971, Carl Degler published an influential comparative historical study, *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*. He emphasized what he called a "mulatto escape hatch" that defused racial tensions in an unequal society by granting mobility and integration to a small portion of Brazilians of color. The book won the Pulitzer Prize, illustrating the strength of interest in race relations in the United States at the time, and the appeal for an American audience to learn about race relations in a society that did not have segregation or the confrontations about integration that had gripped the United States at the same time.

Quantitative studies soon undermined the idea that there was a racial "middle category" in Brazil. Statistical indicators showed that blacks and mulattoes in Brazil were not so different from each other in economic and social terms, and were significantly worse off than whites. Still, Degler's study has experienced a revival in recent years as it has come to be read not as social history, but as a contribution to cultural history. While a "mulatto escape hatch" and a racial "middle category" do not exist in the Brazilian experience, they do exist in the Brazilian imagination. Despite evidence to the contrary, Brazilians believe that mulattoes are better off than blacks and that Brazil has multi-racial social stratification. *Neither Black Nor White* continues to be read not because of Degler's comparison with the United States, but for insight into the Brazilian racial values system that is compatible with the ideas developed by Wagley.

Degler's study, with its pitfalls and its promise, framed the intellectual space open to Thomas Skidmore as he wrote his second major book, *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (1974). In this work, Skidmore avoided comparison with the United States, focusing on values systems rather than social hierarchies. Though *Black into White* is an intellectual history, it fit more comfortably alongside the anthropological studies on race in Brazil than it did alongside the body of historical scholarship. Like Degler, Skidmore was interested in the mulatto as a social category, but his concern was not with the category itself. Instead, he explored the transformation of Brazilian intellectual thought from the nineteenth-century perception that mulattoes were a problem for the Brazilian nation, to the twentieth-century perception that mulattoes were a unique and positive asset to the Brazilian nation.

Black into White is a book about racial values, but first and foremost, it is a book about the Brazilian sense of moral superiority in questions of race. As such, it was received negatively in Brazil for many years. The *Jornal do Brasil* published an editorial criticizing the book. Years later, when Skidmore asked his Brazilian publisher, Fernando Gasparian, what he thought about his writing another book on race in Brazil, Gasparian demurred and suggested it might be better to do another book on Vargas.

While Skidmore did not write another book on race, his work opened up an interest in the United States to focus on topics like immigration and ethnicity in Latin America. Indeed, one of the remarkable aspects of *Black into White* is that virtually every topic treated by the new scholars of ethnicity in Brazil—from Japanese immigration, to anti-Semitism in immigration policy, to the relationship between medicine and Brazilianness—found its initial treatment in the book. It is no surprise that even today Thomas Skidmore's work is found in the first footnote of virtually every book in the country. The notes may be critical or positive, they may be informational or historiographic. But they are always the first.

In April 2006, many of Skidmore's former students, colleagues, and admirers gathered at Brown University for a conference entitled "Politics, Culture and Race in Brazil: A Conference Honoring Thomas E. Skidmore." The articles in this issue reflect some of the rich intellectual discussions and the scholarly production presented at that gathering.

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