

**Racial Prenotions:
Donald Pierson's *Negroes in Brazil* as Cautionary Tale**

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“What has happened to the Africans,” sociologist Donald Pierson asks, “who were imported in such large numbers into this part of the New World?” In *Negroes in Brazil: A Study of Race Contact at Bahia* (1942), Pierson reports on the trajectory of Africans in Bahia, a Northeastern state in Brazil, from enslavement to the 1930s. In some ways, it is a tour-de-force, accounting for, in just 350 pages, varied aspects of the subject at hand—mapping the urban geography of Bahia, including the residential segregation and disparate living conditions of blacks and whites; detailing the period of enslavement, including slave revolts; describing the uneven prevalence of miscegenation and intermarriage; outlining labor market disparities that largely fall along the Brazilian color line; and discussing the (dying, in his take) presence of African cultural forms like Candomblé and African languages like Nagô and Gêge; and much more.

Yet astoundingly—interwoven with his descriptions of violent slave resistance, white denigrating dismissals of African cultural forms, the poor living conditions of most Bahian blacks, the predominance of white leadership across occupations and social institutions, practices of interracial marriage largely excluding darker-skinned blacks—Pierson repeatedly concludes: Brazil does not have a race problem, it has a class problem. How and why does Pierson appear so blind to what he himself documents? What lessons might his scholarly focus on race and yet blindness to its workings have for scholars of race and racism in cities today?

In *Negroes in Brazil*, Pierson fails to see analytically what he himself describes because he does not break from his *racial prenotions*. In *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*, Pierre Bourdieu and his co-authors underscore the dangers of such “prenotions” generally, by which they mean those seductive preconstructed and preconceived imaginings that lead us to false conclusions about the social worlds we investigate. This, I argue, is precisely Pierson’s failure. Pierson never breaks from two fundamental racial prenotions that he carried with him: Gilberto Freyre’s racial democracy and Robert E. Park’s assimilation.

Blinded by these racial prenotions, Pierson concludes in *Negroes in Brazil* that the “relations between the races in Brazil have always been, to a considerable extent, intimate and cordial,” (335) thus providing for “the gradual but persistent reduction of all distinguishing racial and cultural marks, and the fusing, biologically and culturally, of the African and the European into one race and common culture” (337). If then, in his analysis, racial distinctions were in the process of disappearing in Brazil, there could only be a class problem—as any “race problem” would soon cease to exist. Perceiving Brazilian racial dynamics through an easily achieved amalgamation of the prenotions of racial democracy and assimilation leads Pierson to a class reductionism, and to a misrecognition of the saliency of race (and anti-blackness) in Brazil.

Prenotions as a Conceptual Prism

Bourdieu et al. (1991)'s discussion of prenotions in *The Craft of Sociology* provides a fruitful conceptual prism through which to understand why Pierson fails to see analytically what he details. Prenotions appear in the seemingly self-evident, in the illusion of immediate knowledge. Our prenotions encourage us to ask certain questions (and ignore others), to think in certain ways (and not others), and to define terms in certain ways (to the exclusion of others). As such, they are inculcated ways of thinking and analyzing that both constrain and produce what we see. In other words, they involve an unconscious and “unconditional obedience to an *organon* of logical rules [that] tends to produce an effect of ‘premature closure’” (Bourdieu et al. 1991:8). Prenotions are so powerful that they can trap us into not seeing even what so desperately calls our attention to be seen.

Importantly, these prenotions come not only from presumed commonsense, but also take *scientific* forms. For this reason, Bourdieu (et al. 1991) contends that traditional and dominant social theories have “to be fought with the same weapons” as those we use against the immediate knowledge of commonsense, because too frequently such social theories are but an outgrowth of that commonsense, merely erudite versions of the illusions of instant understanding (28). When the sociologist fails to maintain epistemological vigilance, that is, when he fails to interrogate his own thinking, he cannot but understand his object of inquiry through those “unconscious presuppositions” that are “in accordance with a logic which always owes something to the position he occupies within the intellectual field” (Bourdieu et al. 1991:72-73).

So then, if, in Bourdieu's epistemic formulation, the point of view creates the object of inquiry: What was Pierson's point of view? What prenotions did he carry with him that overdetermined his analysis of racial dynamics in Brazil? Through the concurrently dominant scientific prenotions of racial democracy and assimilation, themselves white racial commonsense disguised as social theory, Pierson navigates the dissonance involved in reducing race—in a “study about race contact”—to class.

The Prenotion of Racial Democracy, or Slavery as Mild

In *Negroes in Brazil*, Pierson preconstructs Brazil as a “racial democracy,” as a racial paradise of cordiality and intimate proximity. At the time, racial democracy was the much lauded lens through which to understand a supposed lack of racial tensions in Brazil, with Brazilian intellectual Gilberto Freyre as its most noted and influential proponent (for more on this, see Skidmore 1974). And a key component of racial democracy (indeed, a framing upon which it hinges) is the euphemization of the social relations and institution of Brazilian slavery.

In Chapter Two, “The Coming of the Africans,” Pierson details the occurrence of numerous slave revolts in Bahia in the nineteenth century. He also describes other forms of resistance as enslaved persons sought both individual and collective liberation, including frequent escapes and the “troublesome” *quilombo* fugitive slave communities (42). He then catalogs various atrocities seen under slavery: “the raping of small children, the use of stocks, the fracturing of teeth with a hammer, the filling of razor slashes with salt, the castration of males and the amputation of the breasts of females...[and] the custom of *novenas* (nine-day) and *trezenas* (13-day) slave beatings [that] sometimes resulted in death” (47-48).

Yet, Pierson fails to break from his prenotion of Brazilian racial democracy. He concludes that slavery in Brazil was nonetheless “ordinarily a mild form of servitude.” He continues: “In general, slavery in Brazil was characterized by the gradual and continuous growth of intimate, personal relations between master and slave which tended to humanize the institution and undermine its formal character” (45). Here the “soothing, sugar-coated vision” of the prenotion of a Brazilian racial democracy provides the “false image of a mild or even pleasant form of slavery” that makes Pierson blind to the meanings of the racial domination and violence that he recounts (Nascimento 1989:3).

Another key component of racial democracy, as Gilberto Freyre details in *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933), asserts that the particularities of Brazilian slave-master relations provided for interracial intimacy, including miscegenation (here again, another euphemization of the violences of slavery). This element is central to how Pierson sees assimilation in Bahia.

The Racial Prenotion of Assimilation, or Absorbing the Negro

The prenotion of racial democracy and its built-in presumptions of interracial intimacy set the analytical stage for the “absorption” of blacks—Pierson’s take on Park’s assimilation. Because of the prevalence of miscegenation and interracial marriage, itself imagined as both consequence and demonstration of Brazilian racial democracy, Pierson contends that blacks are in the process of being *absorbed* racially, biologically and culturally into white Brazil.

“The Negro as a racial unit, like the Brazilian Indian before him,” Pierson (1942:322) writes, “is gradually, but to all appearances inevitably, disappearing.” He continues: “The general tendency throughout Brazilian history has been to absorb, gradually but eventually, all ethnic elements into the dominant European stock.” This perspective echoes throughout *Negroes in Brazil*. On earlier pages, he similarly states: “The general tendency is for the predominantly European portion of the population to absorb the lighter mixed-bloods while the mulattoes in turn absorb the blacks. This means that the Brazilian population is constantly becoming more European, less negroid, in appearance” (123). It is worth noting that other scholars have seen this not as “absorption” but as “the Brazilian strategy of liquidating the Black African” (Nascimento 1989:62; see also Vargas 2005; Silva 2007).

“Absorption” serves as Pierson’s Brazilian extension of assimilation. Assimilation, in Park’s formulation, involves “a process by which individuals and groups of individuals are taken over and incorporated into larger groups,” noting how “interbreeding has broken up the ancient stocks...creat[ing] new national types” (1914:606; for accounts of Park’s race relations paradigm, see Morris 2015; Steinberg 2007). This racial prenotion provides for Pierson to presume the disappearance of the black Brazilian racially and culturally (which did not come to pass).

Reducing Race to Class in a Study about Race

Together these prenotions obscure the saliency of race and the pervasiveness of anti-black racism in Bahia—leading Pierson to understand Brazilian racial dynamics as fundamentally reducible to class. “Class,” Pierson asserts, “and not race, is the primary consideration” (152), as “rising in class tends to

take a man out of even the color category” (219). The Bahian social order, he writes, is that of “a class society wherein competition takes the form a struggle between classes (which by reason of historic accident happen to coincide to a considerable degree with color) rather than a struggle between races or colors as such” (232). It is not race, but instead class and culture, he asserts, that explain the position of the black Bahian.

This necessitates surprising dissonance. He writes, “The Brazilian mixed-blood was marginal, however, in the *cultural* rather than in the racial sense.” But then continues, stating in the same paragraph: “he inescapably carried with him in his *physical* characteristics a mark of low status...the stigma of his *color*” and “his *negroid* features” (175, emphases added). (For more on issues of class reductionism in race scholarship, see Hall 1980).

Conclusion, or Looking Back for a Present-Day Epistemological Vigilance

Pierson’s *Negroes in Brazil* provides an illuminative case of how racial prenotions influence and overdetermine how we understand racial dynamics. Yet the goal here is not merely to critique past scholarship, but to demonstrate the importance of *epistemological vigilance* (Bourdieu et al. 1991), and to show a model-through-application of the ongoing reflections needed when conducting social research. Returning to older texts like *Negroes in Brazil*, in which these prenotions (because they emerge from a different milieu) are more readily apparent to the reader, helps to develop the tools—including, for example, “a systematic prejudice against all fashionable ideas” (Bourdieu et al. 1991:74)—that are necessary to see the workings of such racial prenotions, and that may, I hope, aid in maintaining epistemological vigilance in our own moment as we carry out research on race and racism in the world’s cities. The struggle against racial prenotions is never finally won—we are always in danger of being blinded by their self-evidences.

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