

Europe Looks at the New World: Alexander Caldcleugh in Brazil

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At the beginning of the 19th century, Napoleon's campaign reached its zenith. Marching toward Great Britain, the main obstacle to his plans, the French emperor allied with the Spaniards and summoned the Portuguese to join him. Charles V, king of Spain, declared war on dom João, the Portuguese regent prince, who then agreed to close the ports to the British. Caught between two fighting powers, dom João moved the court and its treasures to Brazil, protected by the British navy. The European conflicts reached the Americas: the Spanish colonies rebelled against the metropolis and the United States declared war on England. In 1815, Brazil became a kingdom united to Portugal, which ended the colonial system and the monopoly of the metropolis. The British protection against the French and the Spaniards, however, demanded compensation. Dom João discharged the Francophile ministers and opened the Brazilian ports. Portugal lost, besides the monopoly, the precedence and advantage in Brazilian business and our goods now went directly from Rio to London. England obtained powers of treasurer and suzerain, and Brazil put itself under its influence.

Such was the political scenario when Alexander Caldcleugh followed the English minister to the Brazilian court and traveled around South America. When he returned home, he collected his notes and published them under the title of *Travels in South America, During the Years of 1819-20-21, containing an Account of the Present State of Brazil, Buenos Ayres, and Chile*. Interspersed with his comments of commercial opportunities for British entrepreneurs there are evaluations of Brazil that seem to support Hippolyte Taine's theory of artistic creation. Applying the principles of Darwin, Taine tried to study art as a product of "la race," "le moment," and "le milieu"—the biological inheritance, the historical situation, and the geographical, social, and political environment. Caldcleugh depicts the landscape and the climate, the races with their mores and classes, the flora and fauna, and, of course, commerce and its possibilities. His gaze obliterates differences and makes Brazil, like the rest of the New World, appear as the Other, that which is different from the British and European I, in a metropolis–colony, center–periphery relationship.

Climate and lassitude

Of the three categories defined by Tayne, “le milieu” occupies Caldcleugh’s interest as the one that most determines people’s behavior. He reports on the social and political events with fair accuracy, and his physical descriptions of the land sometimes take a pictorial quality. Contrary to many travel reports, however, Caldcleugh’s book does not reenact a return to paradise, a “locus amenus” to be found in an exotic, faraway place. The landscape that receives him is at the same time magnificent and a source of distress, never idyllic or pastoral; the luxuriant vegetation shelters a noisy, perplexing, and threatening fauna. The roads are bad and the inclement heat kills by dehydration. “The garden of the world” it may be (26), but not the Garden of Eden, which must be England, where nature is amenable and obeys cycles that men have known and can control since long.

More than the landscape, Caldcleugh believes the climate exerts a determining influence on the Brazilian population, as in other tropical colonies. Here its effects, “without being particularly favourable to longevity, are certainly far from proving destructive to human life” (19). There is no doubt, he says, that the climate of Brazil is better than that of the United States, even if according to some vague criteria. The tropical heat in Rio de Janeiro, however, “rendered any long subservience to the laws of society extremely disagreeable” (60) and to dress fully was something to be done only at night. For him, it is not the laws of society that must adapt to the environment but the opposite, echoing the British ideology of conquest of nature and its submission to the conventions of a hegemonic culture.

The hot weather affects culture and biology alike. Caldcleugh observes about the opera that “it cannot be denied that some of the Venuses of the ballet were not exactly of an European tint; but, in this climate, great allowances must be made” (62). The European imagery provides the ideal of beauty with which he condescendingly judges Brazilian women. This same position is repeated when he explains that, “The climate and the retired habits of the Brazilian women, have, early in life, a considerable effect on their appearance” (65), and soon their youth is gone, which doesn’t usually happen in England.

The climate has consequences of far more import, though. It deprives Brazilians or whoever lives in the country “of that activity of mind of which there is no deficiency in Europe” and produces “considerable lassitude” (66). This and “[t]he variety of wants, which

leave little time for intellectual enjoyment” (66), prevent the production of literature in Brazil. A Benedictine told Caldcleugh that “this is not the country to read in,” with which he agreed, for “[i]t requires more energy—more love of reading than is innate in the natives of this fine country, to struggle against an increasing lassitude” (66). As with other tropical countries, Brazil does not favor massive immigration from Europe: the excessive heat, the rapid vegetation, and the ease to find food provoke “indolence, sickness, and death” (96). Nature in the tropics is Other; uncontrollable, it does not submit to civilizing reason and makes of Brazil a pandemonium in which Europeans may encounter a nefarious destiny.

The coexistence of different races in Brazil, however, dismantles his theory about climate effects. The same heat that makes gangrene develop quickly and kill Brazilians and mules is very good for Africans, who, because of it, are generally healthy (88). To Europeans, it brings disaster, as happened to the Swiss colonists that the government tried to settle in Rio: the heat decimated them and affected their moral habits. Although the inhabitants of the Mines boasted much of the salubrity of the climate and complained that the heat of the coast was destructive to their health, to Caldcleugh the province seemed unhealthy. An English doctor established in Vila Rica confirmed his impression (257). If the population were homogenous, he complains in another occasion (75)—and the climate as uniform as in England, I would add—his hypotheses about climate influence on health would be more easily verified.

Race, morals, and manners

“La race,” by which Tayne means the biological inheritance, becomes the major category in the mental framework that Caldcleugh uses to explain Brazil. The racial mixture and the tropical climate produce manners characteristic to the country, which Caldcleugh claims he does not want to judge in any way. Here, as in most travel literature, the depiction of habits and manners tries to erase the native’s individuality, to encode differences, and to fixate the Other in an ahistorical present, where his habits unvaryingly repeat themselves.

The Brazilians

All Brazilians “rise early”, according to him, “and commence the day by hanging out of the window partially dressed to enjoy the morning air: they dine early, spend much time on the sofa, eat a substantial supper and retire for the night” (63). It does not occur to Cald-

cleugh that he is describing some inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, one of many provinces. Even after going to Minas Gerais, quite different from the capital, according to him, Caldcleugh does not correct his observations. His speech only changes with the passage from the collective “they” to “he”, not of the individual but of the specimen type.

“Taking little exercise and a great proportion of food, [Brazilians] become,” he asserts, “at that period of life when the passions moderate, much stouter and more corpulent that is generally the case in Europe: this remark more particularly applies to the women” (63-64). Here he generalizes Brazil and Europe, but distinguishes between men and women. Such a distinction is illusory; it serves only to validate a comparison that effaces individual traits. The same happens when he describes the Brazilian family. As the familial nucleus is the smallest constitutive social group, it too—and mostly because of that—must be encoded, leveled, and reified. “It is on Sundays and on feast days that all the wealth and magnificence of a Brazilian family is exhibited. At an early hour the household prepares for church, and marches, almost without exception, in the following order: first, the master (...); next follows the mistress (...); then follow the sons and daughters; afterwards a favourite mulatto girl of the lady; next, a black mordomo, or steward (...); next, blacks of both sexes” (64). Left out is the description of clothes, which, of course, all Brazilians wear the same. The phrase “almost without exception” plays the same role that “particularly” did in the previous example. It seems to open a space for difference, when, in fact, it allows him to make Brazilian families uniform.

The journey to Minas Gerais and the encounter with other Brazilians did little to change a discourse that flattens differences. In Vila Rica he had the opportunity to observe “how generally thin the ladies of the Minas are” (250) and how they “are excessively fond of showing their skill in making preserves, to which all classes are so partial, that fruit in a crude state is seldom eaten” (257). We should remark, besides the women’s unvaried features, that “all classes” like the same thing. The inhabitants of the mines, writes Caldcleugh, “are generally tall, thin, and well made, with a lively countenance, and very light brown complexion; they have long necks and narrow chests, with black hair and eyes” (224). Again, he tries to qualify the statement with “generally”, but the ruse falls apart in the next sentence. “There is scarcely any race of men with features more clearly marked than these,” he claims, “independently of their dress, they can be at once recognized in the streets of Rio de Janeiro from

the coast Brazilian or from the inhabitant of St. Paul's" (224). The mineiros as a race stand out among the other groups of Brazilians but to Caldcleugh's eyes, in the whole they make up a block without individual features.

Portuguese, Africans, and Native Brazilians

Caldcleugh adopts an even more leveling strategy with Portuguese and Africans. The Portuguese "have been at no time distinguished for their love of [cleanliness]" (21); "their houses [are] generally mean and ill furnished" (60), as they do not "attempt to give that air of comfort to their dwellings which an Englishman looks for under any circumstances" (61). Moral judgments follow a similar procedure and are applied to both groups: "a great proportion of the vices of the Portuguese [sic] and their descendants is sunk in that mass of depravity peculiar to a slave population, obliged to obey every will and passion of their masters" (75). Desire and passion mixed with depravity produce connections between whites and slaves, from which occur a large number of manumissions and a mixed race.

Caldcleugh remarks that, "to judge by the usual effects of enfranchisement, the negro had better remain in the trammels of slavery. The free blacks are usually idle, vicious, and disorderly" (86). This results not from their racial heritage but "[f]rom being turned on the world when unfit for it" (86). The outcome is that, unprepared, they ruin themselves and set a bad example to other slaves. Caldcleugh does not take into consideration that the Africans were snatched from their land and, thus, are unfit to live in a foreign, though not exactly hostile, environment, where they occupy the lowest position in the power hierarchy.

Besides the Portuguese and the Africans, Caldcleugh's look deprives the Native Brazilians of their individuality. Their wandering manners, according to him, "forbid that persevering labour requisite in plantations, and little or no good can arise from their employment" (93). Their sense of religion amounts to "little more than an idea of a good and evil spirit, and of a future world" (92). As when he tries to distinguish between races, with the Native Brazilian he can see differences but only at the level of the tribes. He "could never discover any resemblance between the Botocodus [sic] (...) and the Puris, or Coropos, of Brazil, the Indians of Paraguay, the Araucanos of Chile, or the small skulled descendants of the subjects of the Incas" (94). The strategy remains the same: he lumps the Indians into collectivities that he can more easily contrast with each other and with Brazilians, Portuguese or other Europeans, taken as models and point of reference.

Such a racial diversity hinders Caldcleugh's analysis, which he wants to be scientific and fair. "If the population were composed of one colour," he complains, "the prevailing character could be depicted with more facility" (75). As this is not the case, he lists the features of each group, transforming them into an indistinguishable mass. Thus, his discourse produces a textual Other, without an anchor either in the narrating I's reality or in an encounter with the Other. Race takes up a configuration that is little more than a catalogue of predetermined characteristics that he confirms in an observation presumed to be atemporal and objective. He evaluates Africans and Native Brazilians in relation to their working capacity and their adaptability to economic projects for the country exploitation, as if they stood apart from nature, in textual reservations. The ideological process of reifying is complete and England prevails as the center that structures discourse, that generates knowledge, and that orders the power relations.

The moment

In travel literature the depiction of manners is embedded in the narrative of daily events. Similarly, the considerations Caldcleugh makes about Brazilian commerce emerge episodically, but always with England and her interests as reference. The British have the Brazil trade entirely in their hands, he writes, "as if an exclusive monopoly existed in their favour" (53), guaranteed by the treaty of 1810, which gave customs advantage to their products. This treaty was, in his estimate, "nothing more than [what] the strict friendship subsisting between the two Courts, and the material assistance of blood and treasure afforded to Portugal in every way, gave England the right to expect" (105-6). Barely disguising his contempt for the Brazilians' ingratitude, caused by their ignorance of what he calls the "true principles of trade", Caldcleugh adds that soon the treaty will expire. Brazilians then will be able to look for a partner that offers them better conditions, but he is sure that Brazil will realize the worth of such a powerful ally as the English king.

Conclusion

More than a manual for investors, Caldcleugh's book gives shape to the relations between language, thought, and behavior that founded the British Empire in early 19th century. Like many such travel diaries, his represents the construction of the New World (and Africa and Asia) as Europe's Other. Conversely, this clash defines Europe as source and origin of the web of power and knowledge relations that constitute Western civilization. Contrary to what tends to happen in travel narratives, though, here the narrator hides himself behind a pseudo-scientific speech, but sometimes he appears as the owner of the narrative, introducing a discordant voice in the conventions of this kind of literature. This counterpoint, however, is not enough to demystify the possibility of reifying manners and morals, peoples and landscapes in a world deprived of difference, at the service of a hegemonic ideology.