

COMMENTARY

‘The Roots of a Plant that Today is Brazil’: Indians and the Nation-State under the Brazilian Estado Novo*

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Abstract. This article looks at the construction of the Indian by government officials and intellectuals during the Estado Novo (1937–45), and the efforts of indigenous peoples to engage these images. State officials – concerned with national consolidation, territorial defense, and racial pedigree – upheld the Indian as an icon who had made invaluable contributions to Brazilian historical and cultural formation. The proto-patriot, however, could only be fully redeemed through government tutelage. Confronted by an ambiguous state project, indigenous groups demonstrated varied responses.

This article analyses the cultural building blocks through which the Estado Novo regime (1937–45) sought dominion over indigenous people. A dynamo in the process of Brazilian national integration, the Estado Novo was marked by the centralisation of federal power, broad state intervention in the economy and society, and a nationalist programme.¹ In examining how state officials and intellectuals during the Estado Novo fashioned and disseminated notions of Indianness, and how Indians engaged them, we can shed light on the process of state formation at this important juncture in Brazilian history.

Drawing inspiration from Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer’s *The Great Arch*, this article rethinks approaches to the relationship between indigenous people and the Brazilian state.² In their study of English state

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* The author wishes to thank Emilia Viotti da Costa, Gil Joseph, Jeff Lesser, and the JLAS readers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ On the Estado Novo, see E. Carone, *O Estado Novo (1937–1945)* (Rio de Janeiro, 1977); and T. Skidmore, *Politics in Brazil, 1930–1964* (New York, 1986), pp. 30–47.

² P. Corrigan and D. Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 1985).

formation as ‘cultural revolution’, Corrigan and Sayer examine the role of the state in circumscribing social behaviour and shaping the lives of its citizens. Nevertheless, as they point out, state power not only constrains and coerces, but at times empowers and enables its subjects.³ Neither the exercise in martyrdom of institutional histories, nor the master plan of a Leviathan state of revisionist analyses, indigenous policy under the Estado Novo looms as an ambiguous project shaped by historical factors and social actors.⁴ Indians emerge not as ciphers but as social interlocutors who embraced and/or contested state policy, spawning new possibilities.⁵

Vargas and the Indians

In August 1940, President Getúlio Vargas travelled to the village of the Karajá Indians on Bananal Island in central Brazil. Vargas was the first Brazilian president to visit an Indian area, or the nation’s West for that matter. Three years earlier he had dismissed Congress and disbanded all political parties, proclaiming an Estado Novo (‘New State’) committed to national development and integration. As part of his multifaceted project to construct a new Brazil – more economically independent, politically integrated, and socially unified – Vargas set his sights on its aboriginal inhabitants for their symbolic value. Unlike the ‘exotic plants’ of economic liberalism and Marxism, which the nationalist authoritarian regime would seek to extirpate from Brazilian soil through police repression, censorship and federal intervention in local state affairs, Indians would be upheld by Vargas for comprising the true roots of Brazilianness.

The Karajá, a responsibility of the federal Indian bureau, *Serviço de Proteção aos Índios* (SPI), received the presidential delegation with great ceremony. They performed ‘traditional’ rituals and sang the hymn to the Brazilian flag. Vargas, in turn, distributed knives, axes, and tools to the Indians. Consonant with his image as ‘Father of the Poor’, the president held a Karajá baby in his arms.⁶

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 205–6.

⁴ For a sympathetic account of the origins and goals of the Brazilian Indian bureau – if not necessarily its accomplishments – see D. Ribeiro, *Os Índios e a Civilização* (Rio de Janeiro, 1970). For a revisionist analysis, informed by Foucault, highlighting the repressive role of the state in arrogating control over indigenous affairs, see A. C. de Souza Lima, *Um grande cerco de paz: poder tutelar, indianidade e formação de Estado no Brasil* (Petrópolis, 1995).

⁵ Throughout this essay, I use the term ‘Indian’, as defined in Brazilian legislation, to refer to an individual who is a descendant of pre-Columbian peoples and who identifies and is identified as belonging to an ethnic group whose cultural characteristics are distinct from national society. I use the term ‘white’ as it is popularly employed in the context of Brazilian interethnic relations, to refer to all non-Indians.

⁶ Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda, *Rumo ao Oeste* (n.d.), p. 4.

After exploring the island, Vargas announced his desire to reconnoitre the territory of the ‘extremely ferocious Xavante’ living nearby. Binoculars in hand, Vargas viewed from the safety of his plane an uncontacted Xavante village. Undaunted by such potential opposition, the distinguished visitor outlined his plan for the West. Vargas vowed to parcel out land to the Indians and *caboclos* (mixed-bloods) living in the region. In ‘fixing the man to the soil’, the state would root out nomadism, converting Indians and *sertanejos* (backlanders) into productive citizens. The SPI would edify the Indians, ‘making them understand the necessity of work’.⁷

Vargas’s junket in the backlands, crafted to resemble the daring forays of the *bandeirantes* in the colonial period, was in fact far from a rough-and-tumble trek. The wonders of aeronautics facilitated journeys to places once so inaccessible from the centre of state power. Furthermore, the state’s *Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda* (DIP), entrusted with disseminating the ideological and cultural directives of the Estado Novo, ensured smooth sailing.⁸ A DIP cameraman accompanied Vargas, filming images that the nationalist authoritarian regime sought to enshrine: spry Indians emblematic of the native Brazilians’ innate strength; the ‘traditionalism’ of indigenous communities; camaraderie between Indian and white; the bonhomie of the president, the epitome of the *bomem cordial brasileiro*; the long arm of the state extending into the backwoods to provide assistance.⁹

A minuscule percentage of the Brazilian population living predominantly on the remote frontier, Indians were suddenly summoned to the political stage. Several factors prompted their appearance: the Estado Novo’s effort to consolidate power and to redefine national territory; and elite concerns over the nation’s origins and present-day racial make-up. All would have a bearing on the state’s formulation of a cultural identity for Indians and a policy for their integration.

The March to the West and the Indians

The rediscovery of the Indian formed part of the government’s campaign to popularise the March to the West. A state-led project to settle and develop Brazil’s hinterland, the March was launched by Vargas on the eve of 1938. In Vargas’s words, the March embodied ‘the true sense of Brazilianness’, a remedy to the nation’s woes. Despite extensive territory,

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The DIP was created in 1939. For further discussion of the DIP, see Carone, *O Estado Novo (1937–45)*, pp. 169–72.

⁹ The photograph of Vargas holding the Karajá baby was distributed to Indian posts throughout Brazil. See Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (SPI), *Boletim* 20 (July 1943), p. 196.

Brazil had prospered almost exclusively along its coastal regions while its vast interior stagnated – victim of colonial mercantilist policy, the lack of viable roads and navigable rivers, and the economic liberalism and federalist system that characterised the Old Republic (1889–1930). Over ninety per cent of the Brazilian population occupied about one-third of national territory. The vast hinterland, principally the Northern and Central-Western regions, remained sparsely populated. Many Indians, of course, had fled deep into the nation's interior precisely for these reasons. But their days of isolation, state officials announced, were numbered.

Under the care of the federal government, Estado Novo officials asserted, the potential of the backlands would no longer be left untapped. Mining the precious natural and human resources of the backlands would ensure the nation's prosperity. As Vargas noted, Brazil need not look further than its own forgotten backyard, 'to the vast and fertile valleys' and 'entrails of the earth... from which the instruments of our defence and our industrial progress will be forged.'¹⁰ By providing schools and health services for both Indian and backlander alike, and networks of communication and transportation, the government would consolidate the nation as an organic whole.

Vargas incorporated central Brazil and its populations into the ideological repertoire of his regime. The state had set the stage with rugged pioneers and valiant government officials.¹¹ Music even accompanied the show, ranging from a Villa-Lobos composition to a 1939 Carnival song, 'March to the West'.¹² Vargas received top billing. Without an audition, the Indian received the role of hero – albeit in need of a make-over.

The Vargas regime's campaign to glamourise the Indian found an eager collaborator in Cândido Rondon. The first director of the SPI, established in 1910, Rondon took heart in the Estado Novo's attentiveness to the Indians and their 'problems'. Following the revolution of 1930, when budgetary allocations to the SPI were more than halved, the agency worked its way back into the good graces of the Vargas regime; by 1944 the SPI's annual budget was the second highest in its thirty-five year

¹⁰ Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, *Goiânia* (Rio de Janeiro, 1942), p. 1.

¹¹ Otávio Velho argues that the March served to circumvent structural reform of the boss rule (*coronelismo*) entrenched in the Brazilian countryside. See Velho, *Capitalismo autoritário e campesinato* (Rio de Janeiro, 1976), pp. 148–51. Likewise Alcir Lenharo points out that the March, with its rhetoric and pageantry, created an illusory sense of popular political participation in a society marked by dictatorial rule. See Lenharo, *Colonização e trabalho no Brasil: Amazônia, Nordeste e Centro-Oeste – os anos 30* (Campinas, 1986).

¹² The lyrics to songs promoting the March are reprinted in A. Lenharo, *Sacralização da Política* (Campinas, 1986), pp. 53–73.

history.¹³ Prizing the Indians and their ideological value for the Estado Novo, Vargas placed Rondon at the head of the *Conselho Nacional da Proteção aos Índios* (CNPI), a bureau created in 1939 to promote public awareness of indigenous culture and state policy.¹⁴

In a speech entitled ‘Bound for the West’, sponsored by the DIP in September 1940, Rondon rhapsodised about indigenous contributions to Brazilian history, and the invaluable role the state played in their integration. Friend, warrior, confidant, and sexual partner, the Indian had provided vital assistance to the Portuguese in their settlement of Brazil, Rondon asserted. ‘They have given us the base of our national character’, he exulted, ‘resistance, bravery, generosity, and modesty, brought by the Indian to the formation of our people, is what we consider precious, as much in the past as it still is in the present.’¹⁵

Inventing traditions, Rondon omitted Indian treachery towards the Portuguese and downplayed atrocities committed against Indians.¹⁶ Whitewashed, for example, was the account of the seventeenth-century war of the Portuguese against the Dutch in northeastern Brazil. Citing historical accounts, Rondon boasted that Indians and *caboclos* had confronted not only the Dutch, but a craven Portuguese crown wont to surrender sacred Brazilian terrain. Notwithstanding Rondon’s insistence that this ‘was the first heroic manifestation of our national existence’, the Indian had played a far more complex role during the Dutch invasion than proto-patriot. In fact, many Indians sided with the Dutch and, upon Holland’s defeat and withdrawal, bewailed their abandonment.¹⁷ Such truths were swept under the carpet by government officials: they were unbecoming of the image of the noble savage and of a nation seeking to put its house in order.

¹³ According to the SPI’s annual report of 1954, the agency’s annual budget between 1910 and 1930 ranged (with readjustment in *cruzeiros*) from a low of CR\$300,000 (1915) to its all-time high of CR\$3,880,000 (1930). The average hovered around CR\$1,000,000. In 1931, the budget plunged to CR\$1,560,000, dipping to under a million in 1940, but increasing steadily from 1941 to 1944 when it reached CR\$3,703,000 cruzeiros. SPI, *Relatório das Atividades do Serviço de Proteção aos Índios durante o Ano de 1954* (Rio de Janeiro, 1954), p. 117.

¹⁴ For a more complete discussion of the origins and trajectory of the CNPI, see C. A. da Rocha Freire, ‘Indigenismo e Antropologia – O Conselho Nacional de Proteção aos Índios na Gestão Rondon (1939–55)’, unpubl. Master’s thesis, Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro-Museu Nacional, 1990.

¹⁵ Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, *Rumo ao Oeste: conferência realizada pelo General Rondon no D.I.P. em 3-IX-40 e discursos do Dr. Ivan Lins e do General Rondon, pronunciados na Associação Brasileira da Educação* (Rio de Janeiro, 1940), pp. 21–22.

¹⁶ On the invention of traditions by state officials to naturalise social relations and processes, see Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

¹⁷ See J. Hemming, *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians, 1500–1760* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 292–311.

In Rondon's appraisal, 'of all the precious things that befall us in this new march to the West, all relevant to the greatness of Brazil, none surpasses the Indian'.¹⁸ There, on the frontier, Brazil could mine from among uncontacted (and hence uncorrupted) Indians their cultural essence: forbearance, chivalry and pride. To ensure the Indians' survival, the SPI would demarcate their land, as mandated by the federal constitution of 1937. But since indigenous culture and identity were seen as transitory – an evolutionary stage – the plots demarcated need not sustain their way of life.¹⁹ An orthodox positivist, Rondon, together with fellow ideologues in the SPI, believed in the ineluctable progression of societies as they evolved from so-called stages of primitivism to scientific or 'positive' rationalism.

In the golden future, Rondon could envision 'emancipated Indians' dividing their reservation lands into individual parcels or even residing with non-Indians on the agrarian colonies which the government would establish as part of the March to the West.²⁰ The Indian would surely have to be integrated into Brazilian society; as the SPI declared: 'We do not want the Indian to remain Indian. Our task has as its destiny their incorporation into Brazilian nationality, as intimate and complete as possible.'²¹ Integration, however, would not only benefit the Indians, but the nation as well, which could not allow such a valuable resource to be squandered. As Vicente de Paulo Vasconcelos, director of the SPI in 1939, stated:

What must be dealt with is impeding the abnormal disappearance of the Indians through death, such that Brazilian society, in addition to the obligation to care for them, can receive in its breast the precious and integral contribution of indigenous blood, which it lacks for the constitution of the racial type, so appropriate to this medium, that it was born here.²²

¹⁸ In placing the Indians at the foreground of the settlement of the West, Rondon's tactic differed from the image of the Indian in the settlement of the West in late nineteenth-century US discourse. Richard White focuses on the two primary images employed. Frederick Jackson Turner's classic thesis on the US frontier marginalised the Indian from the history of the settlement of the West. Buffalo Bill, on the other hand, demonised indigenous peoples as bloodthirsty savages. See White, 'Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill', in James R. Grossman (ed.), *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 6–65.

¹⁹ See A. C. de Souza Lima, 'A identificação como categoria histórica', in João Pacheco de Oliveira (ed.), *Os poderes e as terras dos Índios* (Rio de Janeiro, 1989), pp. 139–97.

²⁰ Rondon, *Rumo ao Oeste*, p. 31.

²¹ SPI, 'Memória sobre as causas determinantes da diminuição das populações indígenas do Brasil', paper presented at the IX Congresso Brasileiro de Geografia, July 29, 1940, p. 2. Fundação Nacional do Índio (Brasília), Documentação-SPI/Documentos Diversos.

²² Vasconcelos, quoted in Departamento Administrativo do Serviço Público (DASP), *Revista do Serviço Público*, vol. 3, no. 1–2 (July–Aug., 1939), p. 34.

The Cultural Production of Indianness

The Estado Novo cast the relationship between Indians and the nation-state in a romantic light. In 1943, consecrating a cultural icon, Vargas decreed 19 April the Day of the Indian. Over the following years, the Day of the Indian occasioned numerous cultural events and public ceremonies. In a veritable blitz, the state organised museum exhibitions, radio programmes, speeches and films about the Indian – all with the assistance of the DIP.

The cluster of Indianist texts published during this era of state censorship reveals the intellectual interest in the Indian and the tacit state support behind it. In his book on the Brazilian West, Agenor Couto de Magalhães hailed the Indian for assisting in ‘the construction of a great nation; giving blood and labour to the Portuguese for the formation of the present-day race’.²³ Francisca de Bastos Cordeiro contended that Brazilian territory had been the true site of ancient Near East civilisations and that Indians were descendants of Biblical nations.²⁴ Affonso Arinos de Mello Franco, the future Brazilian foreign minister, argued that Brazilian Indians, with their egalitarian societies, contributed to the birth of liberalism over which Europeans now claimed sole paternity.²⁵

Angyone Costa, an archaeology professor, surpassed all of his peers with *Indiologia*, a paean to the Indian published in 1943. The Indian, Costa emphasised, had imparted to Brazilians:

tameness, a delicateness in treatment, a certain irony that we dispense to people, kindness for animals, an acuteness for all things. To us also came strength in suffering, a contemplative tenderness for the land, excessive fondness for children, the sensitivity in which we become involved in our sympathy for the world that surrounds us.²⁶

Tributes to indigenous people transmitted another message as well. Displayed alongside the Indians, and not so unsubtly, was the ‘benevolence’ of the Vargas regime and the omnipotence of the Indian bureau. The state would ‘civilise’ Indians who lived in the remote backlands. Exhibition photographs and documents highlighted the acculturation of Indians under the direction of the SPI.²⁷ Reifying the nation-state, Brazilian government officials depicted a consolidated entity

²³ A. Couto de Magalhães, *Encantos do Oeste* (Rio de Janeiro, 1945), p. 42.

²⁴ F. de Bastos Cordeiro, *Brasilidades* (Rio de Janeiro, 1943).

²⁵ A. Arinos de Mello Franco, *O Índio Brasileiro e a Revolução Francesa* (Rio de Janeiro, 1937).

²⁶ A. Costa, *Indiologia* (Rio de Janeiro, 1943), p. 13.

²⁷ Conselho Nacional de Proteção aos Índios (CNPI), *19 de Abril: O Dia do Índio as Comemorações Realizadas em 1944 e 45* (Rio de Janeiro, 1946), *passim*.

into which the Indian would be integrated.²⁸ In fact, the scenario was far more complex: efforts to integrate the Indian formed part of the process of state consolidation – a process, we shall see, indigenous peoples themselves played a role in shaping.

The Return of the Native

Questions nevertheless remain regarding the state's celebration of the Indian. Why did elites construct the image of the Indian in this manner? What purpose did rhetoric hailing indigenous contributions to Brazilian 'national character' serve? In analysing government propaganda, one detects that despite romantic recitals of the past and utopian visions of the future, the Estado Novo fashioned the Indian from the substance feeding contemporary concerns.

Brazil's infatuation with the Indian under Vargas formed part of a continental outpouring of concern with indigenous culture and policies. The Day of the Indian, for example, was promoted at the Pátzcuaro Congress in 1940, an international convention sponsored by the Mexican government which aimed at developing cultural understanding of indigenous peoples and projects for their integration. But if Mexico spearheaded the continental Indianist movement, most notably with the organisation of the *Instituto Indigenista Interamericano*, that movement also found adherents in Brazil.²⁹ Indeed, the imposing monument of the Aztec leader Cuauhtémoc, given to the city of Rio de Janeiro by the Mexican government, came to inspire Brazil's own Day of the Indian festivities.

Indians, whose appellation Europeans had attributed to people they believed to be Asians, were now celebrated for their Americanness. Indeed, Zoroastro Artiaga, the director of the historical museum of Goiás, asserted in his book that the Brazilian Indian originated in South America, not Asia.³⁰ Oswaldo Aranha, the Brazilian foreign minister, hailed 'the anonymous hero, historical, indigenous, or cosmic, the brave

²⁸ Historians of the Estado Novo have highlighted similar ideological sleight of hand in the regime's crackdown on German immigrants for alleged pro-Nazi sympathies. State officials spoke of a constituted 'Brazilian nationality' threatened with destruction by a subversive ethnic group; in reality, the construction of a 'Brazilian nationality' was predicated upon the elimination of ethnic distinctions. See S. Schwartzman, H. M. Bousquet Bomeny, and V. M. Ribeiro Costa, *Tempos de Capanema* (Rio de Janeiro, 1984), p. 146. The case of the Indian varies from the German immigrant, however, in that most government publications and pronouncements did not portray the Indian as an enemy, but rather as an icon.

²⁹ For a more complete discussion of the interrelationship between Mexican *indigenismo* and the policies of the Brazilian government, see Freire, 'Indigenismo e Antropologia', pp. 57–68.

³⁰ Z. Artiaga, *Dos Índios do Brasil Central* (Uberaba, n.d.), pp. 13–26.

son of the New World'.³¹ Newspaper articles saluted Indians from 'the Yukon to Patagonia'.³² In his 1944 speech on the Day of the Indian, Rondon reproached the early European settlers for exploiting native Americans.³³

Vilifying the European and consecrating the native American, Brazilian ideologues and intellectuals during the Estado Novo inverted or subverted the Brazilian elite's Eurocentric conception of the nation's history, culture and destiny. The essence of Brazilianness had been redefined by members of the elite and intelligentsia; it no longer flowed from across the Atlantic, but oozed from the nation's soil, from its flora and fauna and primordial inhabitants.

The switch was hardly a new tactic. In the nineteenth-century, the authors José Alencar and Gonçalves Dias celebrated the birth of a distinctly American culture with highly romanticised accounts of Indians.³⁴ More recently, in the aftermath of the Week of Modern Art in São Paulo in 1922, the modernist poet Oswald de Andrade had symbolically embraced indigenous culture with the 'Cannibalist Manifesto' (1928), assaulting imitativeness of European styles in Brazilian art and endorsing a synthesis of the autochthonous and the foreign.³⁵ Parting company from Andrade, the intellectuals of the right-wing *Verdeamarela* movement, such as Plínio Salgado, Menotti del Picchia, and Cassiano Ricardo, rejected the European altogether with nativist writings that glorified the pre-conquest past, endorsed the study of Tupi language, and upheld the Indian as a national symbol.³⁶ And in the early 1930s, Gilberto Freyre hailed the indigenous contribution to Brazilian cultural formation.³⁷ Brazil, then, had a rich tradition of paying tribute to the Indian that thinkers during the Estado Novo could tap into for material.³⁸

³¹ Oswaldo Aranha, in the preface to the Portuguese translation of E. Padilla, *O homem livre da América*, trans. Fernando Tudé de Souza (Rio de Janeiro, 1943). As the title suggested, the book by Padilla, a Mexican Foreign Minister, was an ode to pan-Americanism. ³² *O Dia*, 19 April 1945, p. 15.

³³ CNPI, *19 de abril*, pp. 39–41.

³⁴ D. Brookshaw, *Paradise Betrayed: Brazilian Literature of the Indian* (Amsterdam, 1988), p. 75.

³⁵ M. Gonzalez and D. Treece, *The Gathering of Voices: The Twentieth-Century Poetry of Latin America* (London, 1992), pp. 96–101. For a discussion of the embrace of 'primitivism' during the Week of Modern Art by Brazilian intellectuals – and their European influences – see K. D. Jackson, *A prosa vanguardista na literatura brasileira: Oswald de Andrade* (São Paulo, 1978), pp. 9–18.

³⁶ The symbol of the *Verdeamarela* movement was the *curupira*, the Tupi-Guarani mythical protector of the hinterland. See G. Vasconcelos, *Ideologia Curupira: Análise do Discurso Integralista* (São Paulo, 1979), p. 20.

³⁷ G. Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves* (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 81–184.

³⁸ Indeed, the Estado Novo not only was influenced by the ideological movements of the 1920s, but incorporated some of its most prominent intellectuals (from all political

Nevertheless, as the motives behind such celebrations of the Indian varied over time, so too did their tone and timbre. If, for example, nineteenth-century nativism had aimed at separatism from Portugal, and romantic literature served to camouflage the institution of African slavery, under the Vargas regime Indianist rhetoric transmitted other messages.³⁹ During the Estado Novo, the state orchestrated or promoted an Indian discourse that resonated with all of the issues abuzz in world politics at the time: racism, xenophobia and chauvinism.

At a time of worldwide economic crisis and heightened nationalism, Brazilians came under fire for admiring foreign ideologies. Marxism and liberalism, Estado Novo officials asserted, were unbecoming of national realities. So, too, were European theories of racial superiority which, critics chided, ought to provoke outrage – not to mention discomfort, given that many influential families lacked lily-white pedigrees. As Anyone Costa taunted, regardless of the obsequiousness and pretensions of the elite, all Brazilians were considered by Europeans ‘as a people situated slightly above Negroids, below Yellows, and infinitely distanced from Whites.’⁴⁰ Costa, therefore, called on the nation to value its indigenous roots:

We will not become a great nation, with a real spirit of national self-formation, if we do not orient ourselves, socially and politically, outside foreign frameworks, in a firm American direction, with a sense of love for the land, of comprehension and valorisation of the Indian, its legitimate owner.⁴¹

In fact, however, Costa and his ideological cohorts, carried on Brazilian elites’ age-old practice of tinkering with ‘foreign frameworks’ to fit domestic realities.⁴² The Estado Novo, despite claims to homegrown authenticity, had done exactly the opposite – borrowing heavily from a Fascist corporatist model in its efforts to reorder Brazilian society. So, too, in its discourse on race, the Vargas regime rebroadcast European doctrines, but redefined which groups were considered undesirable.

persuasions) into the regime. See L. Lippi Oliveira, M. Pimenta Velloso and A. Castro Gomes, *Estado Novo: Ideologia e Poder* (Rio de Janeiro, 1982), pp. 10–11.

³⁹ For a discussion of the romantic poets and the ideological message of their Indianist literature, see D. Moreira Leite, *O caráter nacional brasileiro* (São Paulo, 1992), pp. 171–73.

⁴⁰ Costa, *Indiologia*, p. 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² For a discussion of nineteenth-century Brazilian elites’ selective adherence to European liberal ideas, see E. Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Chicago, 1985), pp. 53–77; and R. Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London, 1992), pp. 19–31. On the Brazilian manipulation of European racial doctrines, see T. Skidmore, *Black Into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (Durham, 1993), p. 77.

With its overwhelmingly interracial population, Brazil could not credibly embrace an ideology demonising all non-Europeans. The non-white Brazilian would not only have to be defended but embraced.⁴³ “Inferior” in the question of race is synonymous with “backward,” the SPI affirmed, substituting the notion of inherent racial inferiority with racial perfectibility.⁴⁴ Upholding the pedigree of the Brazilian Indian, the SPI pointed out,

The indigenous soul is subject to the same passions to which is subject the European soul, displaying, however, superiority in temperament, in patient energy and even, we will say, in truth, even justice and charity.⁴⁵

Should anyone impugn racial mixture in Brazil, the anthropologist Roquette-Pinto countered:

To contradict the opinion of those who believe in the bad influence of mixture for racial vitality, we will point to, among other examples, the population of Northeastern Brazil (Ceará, etc.), a region of big and strong families of courageous and active men, conquerors of the Amazon forest, all with some Indian and white blood.⁴⁶

Or as *Cultura Política*, the mouthpiece of the Estado Novo, boasted,

The constitutive traits of our character help us: we have the marks of all peoples and we will not be confused with any of them. It is possible that in Brazil a new man (*homem novo*) will emerge and with him a new age.⁴⁷

Furthermore, lest these arguments dispel fears about Brazil’s racial composition and social cohesion, elites could renew their age-old faith in the ‘whitening’ of the Indian, as SPI policies held to the ideal that through integration and miscegenation such a day would ultimately come.⁴⁸

⁴³ See Skidmore, *Black Into White*, pp. 205–7. Skidmore notes the manifestos against racism issued in 1935 by twelve prominent Brazilian intellectuals, and in 1942 by the Brazilian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology.

⁴⁴ Brazilian eugenicists, as Stepan shows, rejected notions of racial supremacy and embraced a Lamarckian faith in improvement through environmental change. See N. Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, 1991).
⁴⁵ SPI, ‘Memória sobre as causas’, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁶ E. Roquette Pinto, ‘Contribuição a antropologia do Brasil’, *Revista de Imigração e Colonização*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1940), p. 440.

⁴⁷ P. de Figueiredo, ‘O Estado Novo e o Homem Novo’, in *Cultura Política* vol. 1, no. 1 (March 1941), reprinted in Paulo de Figueiredo, *Aspectos Ideológicos do Estado Novo* (Brasília, 1983), p. 20.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the Brazilian elite’s belief in the prospect of whitening as a solution to the nation’s purported racial dilemma, see Skidmore, *Black Into White*, pp. 64–77.

The obstacle to national progress lurked, rather, in the ‘inassimilable immigrant’ who resided (or might attempt to) in Brazil, spoiling its racial harmony.⁴⁹ The Indian, however, since the Portuguese conquest fortified the Brazilian nation through sexual and military alliances.

The Indian as Sentinel

Conquest and fortification were themes that preoccupied Brazilians during the troubled times of World War II. The war, which Brazil formally entered in 1942, provided a constant backdrop for images projected of the Indian. The Portuguese conquest was reexamined in light of the latest European menace to national sovereignty. Ever faithful to Brazil, Indians once again were proving their patriotism, contributing to the war effort through agricultural labour and rubber production.⁵⁰ Government rhetoric stressed that given the Indian’s ‘love for his piece of land’, love for Brazil was ‘a simple extension’.⁵¹

At a time when state officials spoke of the nation’s growth determined by the ‘proportion of men endowed with greater energy’, the Indian represented an asset.⁵² Tributes to the Indian lauded his ‘physical hygiene, comparable to the masculine beauty of the Greeks of the Olympics’.⁵³ Who could better safeguard Brazil’s unfortified borders and its ‘vital space’ from ‘famished nations’ searching for a dumping ground for their ‘excess population’ than the Indian?⁵⁴ Touting their brawn and patriotism, Rondon endorsed military service for indigenous men.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ For an example of an attack on immigrant ‘cysts’ published during the *Estado Novo*, see Leão Padilha, *O Brasil na posse de si mesmo* (Rio de Janeiro, 1941). For historical analyses of immigration policies during the Vargas period which aimed at keeping out one such undesirable group, Jews, see J. Lesser, *Welcoming the Undesirables* (Berkeley, 1994) and M. L. Tucci Carneiro, *O anti-Semitismo na era Vargas (1930–1945)* (São Paulo, 1988). The differential treatment accorded by Brazilian intellectuals to Indians in relations to other ‘non-Europeans’ is perhaps no more strikingly revealed than in the work of Affonso Arinos de Mello Franco. The same author who celebrated Brazil’s indigenous heritage and contributions to Western Civilization also wrote the virulently anti-Semitic *Preparação ao nacionalismo: cartas aos que têm vinte anos* (Rio de Janeiro, 1934), which opposed the entry of Jews to Brazil.

⁵⁰ CNPI, *Relatório* (Rio de Janeiro, 1946), p. 54.

⁵¹ Report by SPI Director, Colonel Vicente de Paulo Teixeira da Fonseca Vasconcelos (1940?). Museu do Índio, Rio de Janeiro, Setor de Documentação (Herein MI-SEDOC), Film 237/Fot 1237–1273.

⁵² João Lyra, ‘Raça, educação, e desporto’, *Estudos e Conferências*, No. 14 (December 1941), p. 32. Lyra was a member of the National Council on Sports.

⁵³ Olegário Moreira de Barros, ‘Rondon e o Índio’, *Revista do Instituto Histórico de Mato Grosso*, vol. 22, nos. 43–44 (1940), p. 17. For a discussion of the *Estado Novo*’s physical education project to forge robust citizens see Tucci Carneiro, *O anti-Semitismo na era Vargas*, pp. 139–42.

⁵⁴ *Revistas de Imigração e Colonização*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1940), p. 207. The magazine was the official publication of the government’s Council on Immigration and Colonisation.

⁵⁵ SPI, ‘Memória sobre as causas’, p. 29.

Furthermore, incorporation into Brazilian society forestalled the possibility that Indians might be ‘attracted to bordering nations’.⁵⁶

The fear of an indigenous fifth column – of attraction ‘to bordering nations’ – demonstrated that for all their nationalist symbolism, Indians presented a thorny problem for elites as well. Predating the nation-state, Indians challenged its institutions and traditions. They presented an alternative to Brazil’s laws, values, and socioeconomic system – in sum, everything on which the government’s legitimacy rested.⁵⁷ In heroicising the Indian, the Estado Novo sought to gloss over this conflict which suggested that such loyalty was not innate nor forthcoming.

And not all government officials concealed their misgivings. As an army official near the western border, Colonel Themístocles Paes de Souza Brazil concluded of the Indian:

He produces nothing, not even that sufficient for his own comfort; he is nomadic; he does not obey laws and has no knowledge of them, he has no notion of the Nation...; his brain is slightly evolved, not being in satisfactory condition to assimilate in a complete way the education and other demands of our civilisation.⁵⁸

Likewise, Ildefonso Escobar, a former member of the *Conselho Nacional de Geografia*, viewed the Indian as a dead weight for the nation. After four centuries, Escobar railed, the Indian remained ‘naive and lazily contemplating nature while all other Brazilians... work for the progress of the Nation’.⁵⁹

Defending the Noble Savage

The figure of the ignoble savage, like its noble counterpart, had deep roots which stretched back to the European conquest, through the colonial period and the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ The dichotomy stemmed from European ambivalence regarding their own societies which they projected

⁵⁶ DASP, *Revista do Serviço Público*, vol. 3, no. 3 (September 1943), p. 84.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the conflictual relationship between Indians and the nation-state, see G. Urban and J. Sherzer, ‘Introduction: Indians, Nation-States, and Culture’, in Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (eds.), *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America* (Austin, 1991), pp. 1–18; and E. Ribeiro Durham, ‘O Lugar do Índio’, in Comissão Pró-Índio/SP, *O Índio e a Cidadania* (São Paulo, 1983), pp. 11–19.

⁵⁸ T. Paes de Souza Brazil, *Incolas Selvícolas* (Rio de Janeiro, 1937), pp. 65–9.

⁵⁹ I. Escobar, *A Marcha para o Oeste: Couto Magalhães e Getúlio Vargas* (Rio de Janeiro, 1941), p. 116.

⁶⁰ On the colonial period, see B. Perrone-Moisés ‘Índios Livres e Índios Escravos: Os Princípios da Legislação Indigenista do Período Colonial (Séculos XVI–XVIII)’ in Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (ed.), *História dos Índios no Brasil* (São Paulo, 1992), pp. 115–32; on the nineteenth-century dichotomy between the ‘peaceful’ Tupi and the ‘ferocious’ Tapuia, see M. Carneiro da Cunha, ‘Prólogo’, in Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (ed.), *Legislação Indigenista no Século XIX: Uma Compilação: 1808–1889* (São Paulo, 1992), pp. 7–8.

onto indigenous populations, as well as from the varied response of indigenous peoples towards Europeans.⁶¹ Both images, in fact, continued to command credibility among the Brazilian populace.⁶² Thus the Vargas regime, in fashioning its image of the Indian as primeval Brazilian citizen, had chosen from a wide array of materials.⁶³ But how, then, could the state rationalise the existence, no less defend the actions, of the noble savage's evil twin, whose behaviour in earlier centuries might have provided grounds for enslavement in a 'just war'?⁶⁴

When the SPI acknowledged the 'ferociousness of our Indians', such as the Xavante, it blamed *civilizados* for provoking indigenous aggression. By nature 'tame and affectionate', the Indians could not tolerate what 'in their understanding constitutes an affront or a lack of respect'.⁶⁵ Such a viewpoint protected the hallowed image of the noble savage. It also, however, robbed Indians of historical agency, stripping them of the complex social directives and political agendas that marked their interaction with the white world. Furthermore, the state's model of interethnic relations suggested that just as white malevolence could transmogrify indigenous societies, white benevolence would have the opposite effect.

The government, after all, had assigned a great task to the Indians: to render the hinterland productive, to thwart imperialist designs, and to ensure Brazil's 'ethnic formation'. To assist the Indians, the state would extend transportation networks, health care, and education to the backlands. Other 'problems' such as nomadism, lack of labour discipline, and the absence of civic-mindedness were also to be remedied by the government.

The Dual Legacy of Vargas

The Vargas regime, proponents cheered, had redeemed the rural downtrodden. At long last the Indians – 'the modest but dedicated jungle worker, the true sentinel of the frontier, the vigilant soldier of the nation' – would be 'incorporated definitively as labourers for national gran-

⁶¹ The notion of the Indian as a screen for the projection of white fantasies is discussed by R. F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York, 1978).

⁶² Ribeiro, *Os Índios e a Civilização*, pp. 128–29.

⁶³ Tucci Carneiro provides an extensive review of Brazilian thinkers influenced by racist European theories which demonised Indians, blacks and mixed-bloods. See Tucci Carneiro, *O anti-semitismo na era Vargas*, pp. 83–154.

⁶⁴ On the enslavement of enemy Indians during the colonial period, see Perrone-Moisés, 'Índios Livres e Índios Escravos', pp. 123–28.

⁶⁵ The theme of the Indian corrupted by white evil, common in SPI publications during this period, would be reiterated in Heitor Marçal, *Moral Ameríndia* (Rio de Janeiro, 1946), a text published by the Ministry of Education and Health.

deur'.⁶⁶ Brazil's strong central government, hailed SPI director José Maria de Paula in 1944, heralded a promising era for the Indians.⁶⁷

Such protectionist language reflected the Estado Novo's pattern of conferring notions of citizenship and entitlement to previously disenfranchised or marginalised social groups.⁶⁸ To be sure, the state's symbolic embrace of the Indian represented more of a bear hug. Smothered by government rhetoric, Indians would have to struggle to express their own views regarding their land, community, culture and history.

Under Vargas, the state continued to cultivate a relationship with indigenous groups whose legal terms had been dictated decades earlier. The Civil Code of 1916 defined Indians as 'relatively incapable' in civil matters. In 1928 Indians were placed under a federal wardship system (*tutela*), administered by the SPI. In theory, *tutela* aimed at protecting indigenous groups – often unprepared or unfamiliar with the Brazilian socioeconomic system – from exploitation. When state officials defended indigenous communities, as João Pacheco de Oliveira Filho illustrates in his ethnography of the Ticuna, Indians benefitted from and valued government assistance.⁶⁹ In this same spirit of goodwill, the Vargas regime ennobled the state's wards, imparting cultural prestige to Indian groups through their consecration as primordial Brazilians.

But, on the flip-side of *tutela* and other paternalistic policies endorsed by the Vargas regime lurked state repression and abuse. The wardship system would allow for the systematic disregard of indigenous concerns; policies were enacted by the state without the consultation of indigenous groups, presumed incompetent to preside over their own affairs. As the SPI pronounced in 1939: 'The Indian given his mental state is a kind of big child to educate. He is very susceptible to receiving advice, applause, gifts, and other stimuli, to improve his life and modify noxious habits.'⁷⁰ Efforts to discipline an indigenous work force and to stamp out nomadism – couched in redemptive terms – epitomised such heavy-handed treatment; so did state efforts to redraw indigenous territorial boundaries with the March to the West.

Although close to two hundred different indigenous groups lived in Brazil with diverse cultures, languages and relationships to Brazilian

⁶⁶ J. Rondon, *O Índio como sentinela das nossas fronteiras* (Rio de Janeiro, 1949), p. 34.

⁶⁷ J. M. de Paula, *Terra dos Índios* (Rio de Janeiro, 1944), pp. 90–1.

⁶⁸ For an examination of how the Vargas regime reached out to the working class, see A. de Castro Gomes, *A Invenção do Trabalhismo* (Rio de Janeiro, 1994), p. 185.

⁶⁹ J. Pacheco de Oliveira Filho, 'O nosso governo': os Ticuna e o regime tutelar (São Paulo, 1988), pp. 176–92. Oliveira Filho found that the Ticuna fondly remembered the tireless efforts of an SPI post chief to protect them from the exploitation of rubber barons. For an account of an SPI post official's efforts on behalf of the Mundurukú, see E. Arnaud, *O Índio e a Expansão Nacional* (Belém, 1989), p. 203–55.

⁷⁰ SPI, *Relatório*, (1939), p. 3.

society, the state had reduced them all to ‘Indians’, a cultural construction embodying white goals and ideals. Rich in symbolic value, the regime’s invention of the Indian was at odds with the historical and contemporary realities of indigenous groups. Furthermore, the state’s lofty goals and legal armour would be systematically riddled by bureaucratic corruption, local elite opposition, and indigenous resistance.⁷¹ Nevertheless, Indians, along with the government and its critics, would have to contend with the ambiguous images and policies popularised under Vargas for years to come.

Yet, from the very outset of the March to the West, indigenous groups engaged a state project that endeavoured to map their destiny. Some Indians rejected government policy outright. Others collaborated in state-led efforts to ‘civilise’ the frontier, allying with state officials who offered the promise of a better life. Yet others embraced the Estado Novo’s Indianist rhetoric, but criticised the state’s performance and proposed alternatives. Indeed, the variety of indigenous response demonstrates, as William Roseberry has pointed out, that hegemony creates not a shared ideology, but a common material and meaningful framework for addressing and acting upon social orders characterised by domination.⁷²

The Xavante and the March to the West

In 1941, one year after Vargas flew over the area of the ‘extremely ferocious Xavante’, an SPI ‘pacification’ team set out to bring the Indians a message of goodwill. The Xavante would not be an easy audience to sway. In the first place, Xavante referred to themselves as *A’uwe*, which in their Gê language signified ‘the people’. Other groups could not aspire to such humanity; the ethnocentrism of Brazilian state officials had surely met its match. Furthermore, the Xavante had painful recollections of white domination. As adventurer bands began to flock to Goiás in search of gold in the eighteenth-century, the A’uwe became the target of military campaigns, slaving raids, settler attacks, and resettlement projects (*aldeamentos*). Warfare, disease, migration and resettlement disaggregated A’uwe communities.⁷³ By the 1840s, according to David Maybury-Lewis, a definitive split took place. One group, which came to be known as the Xerente, settled near the Tocantins river, where it would maintain ongoing contact with the white world. Another contingent, today known

⁷¹ See Ribeiro, *Os Índios e a Civilização*, pp. 191–204.

⁷² W. Roseberry, ‘Hegemony and the Language of Contention’, in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (eds.), *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, 1994), p. 361.

⁷³ For further discussion of Xavante history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see A. Lopes da Silva, ‘Dois séculos e meio de história Xavante’, in *História dos Índios no Brasil*, pp. 362–65.

as the Xavante, fled Goiás to Mato Grosso, crossing the Araguaia river to flee settler exploitation.⁷⁴

The Xavante carved out an extensive domain in northern Mato Grosso. For nearly a century, they sowed terror throughout the region, slaying goldminers, ranchers and other Indians who invaded their territory.⁷⁵ With the March to the West, the need to contact or ‘pacify’ the Xavante became urgent. There in the dead centre of Brazilian territory lay a hostile indigenous group, lacking civic-mindedness and a ‘proper’ work ethic, unschooled in Portuguese, thwarting westward expansion and economic development. There in the impenetrable backlands also lay a precious human reservoir. With their valour, the Xavante embodied elites’ ideal of an indigenous essence with its potential contributions to the so-called Brazilian national character. As one newspaper asserted:

The Xavantes are the great Indians of Brazil, the really representative Indians, the Indians that should be erected as symbols of the native race – in place of the romantic creation of José Alencar.⁷⁶

Genésio Pimentel Barbosa led the SPI expedition which established an ‘attraction post’ nearby a Xavante village at the Rio das Mortes. Consisting of five whites and three Indians – including two Xerente recruited to serve as translators – the SPI team offered clothes, tools, and other knickknacks as a peace overture and a foreshadowing of state assistance.⁷⁷ The Xavante, however, preempted Vargas’s nationalist pitch. In November 1941, the Indians bludgeoned to death Pimentel Barbosa and five of his assistants. The Xerente translators and another team member, away from the camp at the time of the attack, found their slain comrades.⁷⁸ The battered bodies lay as testimonies to the Xavantes’ response; they neither wished to be placed on pedestals nor refashioned by government planners.

The March to the West had hit a snag, and state officials rushed to gloss over the Xavantes’ rebuff. Preserving the image of the Indian as noble savage and innate patriot, Cândido Rondon stated:

The Indian is a docile creature of primary intelligence, who only requires mild methods to surrender to our appeals. I can only, therefore, attribute the thoughtless gesture by the Xavantes to some reprisal.⁷⁹

The ‘thoughtless gesture’, in fact, formed part of a complex realm

⁷⁴ D. Maybury-Lewis, *Akwe-Shavante Society* (New York, 1974), p. 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 167–70. On the fissuring of Xavante villages in the aftermath of seeking refuge in Mato Grosso, see B. Giaccaria and A. Heide, *Xavante (A’uwe Uptabi: Povo Autêntico)* (Sao Paulo, 1972), pp. 36–43.

⁷⁶ *A Noite*, 24 August 1944, p. 1.

⁷⁷ L. de Souza, *Os Xavantes e a Civilização* (Rio de Janeiro, 1953), p. 31.

⁷⁸ Maybury-Lewis, *Akwe-Shavante Society*, p. 5.

⁷⁹ Rondon, quoted in *A Noite*, 16 November 1941, p. 1.

which state officials never really delved into with any seriousness: indigenous culture. The Xavantes' strategy of lightning attacks kept invaders at bay for decades. The defence of extensive territory was essential for a Xavante village to maintain its mixed economy based on hunting-gathering and, to a lesser extent, farming. For although the Vargas regime portrayed the West as a utopia, the Xavante knew of the temporal variability and poor soils of the region which made reliance on agriculture a risky venture.⁸⁰ Because a Xavante community required extensive territory to hunt game and forage fruit, nuts, and roots for subsistence, it combatted any encroacher who threatened access to coveted natural resources.⁸¹

Furthermore, for the Indians, the importance of such a show of force, far from a 'thoughtless gesture', extended way beyond the battleground. Physical prowess, prized in young Xavante men, defined masculinity and social standing. Like hunting, the most common expression of virility, warfare required endurance and fleetness.⁸² While Xavante men took pride in their physical strength – validating the Estado Novo's tributes to the native Brazilians' 'natural' brawn – the Indians hardly aspired to border patrol. Public exhibitions of manliness served to reinforce the gender divisions and age hierarchies undergirding the Xavantes' social order.⁸³

Because of their social directives, cultural guideposts, and historical memory, the Xavantes' love for Brazil could hardly be a 'simple extension' of love for their piece of land. The Xavante village at the Rio das Mortes would not be 'pacified' until five years later – when a better outfitted SPI team, blessed with aerial support, returned to the region.

'All of the Indians are at Brazil's Service'

Not all indigenous groups, however, enjoyed the leverage that allowed the Xavante to spurn the state's offer. Indians exploited by landowners, rubber barons, labour contractors, missionaries, or other indigenous groups, could not aspire to such intractability. Indeed, the Karajá might not have performed so eagerly for Vargas had they not been increasingly encircled by whites and preyed upon by their mortal enemies – the Xavante.

Likewise, although we do not know the personal motivations that impelled some Xerente to collaborate in the 'pacification' of the Xavante,

⁸⁰ On the ecology of central Brazil and Xavante adaptations to it, see N. Flowers, 'Forager-Farmers: The Xavante Indians of Central Brazil', unpubl. PhD diss., City University of New York, 1983.

⁸¹ Maybury-Lewis *Akwe-Shavante Society*, pp. 35–61.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 141–42.

we do know of the socioeconomic ills plaguing their communities at the time. When Curt Nimuendaju carried out his ethnographic fieldwork among the Xerente in 1937, he found an indigenous group hemmed in by white settlers. The native village, he observed, had become 'a place of scarcity' and the Xerente had turned to loafing, begging and stealing from whites.⁸⁴ The March to the West, however, offered some Xerente the possibility of employment and adventure in the SPI, and the glamour of contacting their notorious long-lost relatives in a great patriotic campaign.

For precarious lives such as the Xerente and Karajá, then, the Estado Novo, with its far-reaching vows of state protection and assistance, offered a ray of hope. Long reviled as brutes by their 'civilised' neighbours, Indians could now stand proud as the primordial Brazilians entitled to respect. Indians could envision new allies in their struggles. They could even turn to the nation's president, who had demonstrated such personal interest in their problems.

In September 1945, Lírio Arlindo do Valle, a Tembé Indian, did just that. In a ten-page letter to Vargas, Valle thanked the president for 'the promise made to the Indians of Brazil' and recounted the suffering of Indians at the hands of cattle ranchers in his home state of Pará. Valle wrote, however, not only to express gratitude but for self-advancement as well: he sought appointment as the SPI inspector of Pará, a position presently occupied by a white official. In its attempt to enlist the backing of the nation's supreme patron, the letter offers a fascinating window into the role indigenous people played in the process of Brazilian state formation. While clearly not representative of all indigenous people or communities, this text merits close analysis, as written evidence by indigenous people documenting their response to the Estado Novo and the March to the West is extremely fragmentary.

Born in 1895 in a Tembé village of an Indian mother and an unknown father, Valle studied as a youth in a Catholic seminary in Belém. In 1911, an inspector of the newly formed SPI recruited Valle into the Indian bureau in Pará. Dispirited by the lack of pay, Valle left his job, resumed his education and did a brief stint in the Navy. Returning to the SPI in 1934, he was assigned to a post among the Anaubé Indians at the Rio Carari, but worked 'without comfort, without the protection of the SPI, and earning nothing'. In 1941, Valle was appointed SPI delegate in the county of Moju, Pará.⁸⁵

In 1945, the Tembé Indian travelled to Rio de Janeiro to participate in the *queremista* movement, the ground swell of popular support backing

⁸⁴ C. Nimuendaju, *The Xerente* (Los Angeles, 1942), p. 8.

⁸⁵ Letter from Lírio Arlindo do Valle to Getúlio Vargas, Rio de Janeiro, September 1945. MI-SEDOC, Caixa 4.

Vargas's candidacy in the upcoming election.⁸⁶ On his pilgrimage to the capital, Valle passed through the state of Minas Gerais, shoring up support for Vargas and spreading Indian fever. To confirm his latest goings-on to the president, Valle enclosed affidavits from local government officials.

Aristide Sousa Torres, an official from the town of Conde Lafaiete, affirmed that in April 1945 Valle regaled a local labour union with indigenous songs and customs and praised the Estado Novo's 'kind and efficient protection dispensed to workers, Indians, and children'. That same month, the self-appointed indigenous spokesman lectured in Barbacena, whose mayor hailed the '*cacique* Lírio do Valle [who] showed himself to be a great patriot and lover of the growing development of our dear Nation.'⁸⁷

In his appeal to Vargas, Valle articulated what must have pleased the crowd in Minas Gerais. He resurrected Poti – a Potiguara warrior who had resisted the seventeenth-century Dutch invasion – an inspiration to all Indians and Brazilians, 'who love liberty and known how to fight for it'.⁸⁸ He vowed to integrate the Indians and make them 'respectable Brazilian citizens'. Finally, Valle embraced the image of the generic Indian, one seeking partnership with Brazilians:

I am an Indian who knows all of the customs of the Brazilian Indians and speaks the official language among them, and all of the dialects of their tribes... and I come to search among civilisation for comfort and assistance for my people, who have been suffering since 1500.⁸⁹

Notwithstanding his anthropological claims, it is improbable that Valle knew 'all of the customs' of approximately 200 indigenous groups. Nor is it likely that his linguistic talents enabled him to speak their scores of dialects. What Valle most certainly did know, based on his statements, were the customs of white officials. Like Estado Novo propagandists, Valle collapsed distinctions between indigenous groups. He upheld a European narrative of indigenous history beginning with the Portuguese conquest, one enlivened by mythologised Indians, and focused on the indigenous contribution to Brazil's 'national character'. Valle's assertion that 'we the Indians are the roots of a plant that today is Brazil' and his pledge that 'all the Indians are at Brazil's service' seemed scripted by a DIP ideologue.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ For a discussion of *queremismo*, see Skidmore, *Politics in Brazil, 1930–1964*, pp. 50–52.

⁸⁷ Annex of letter from Valle to Vargas.

⁸⁸ For a biographical sketch of Poti, see Geraldo Gustavo de Almeida, *Heróis Indígenas do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1988), pp. 105–6.

⁸⁹ Letter from Valle to Vargas.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Reinterpreting Indians and the Nation-State

How can we make sense of the relationship between Indians and the Brazilian state under the Estado Novo? Celebratory accounts of Brazilian indigenous policy might laud the assistance and uplift provided by the state to indigenous peoples such as the Karajá and Xerente. Revisionists, on the other hand, might denounce the hegemonic project of the state towards the Xavante, and its effects upon the behaviour and identity of Indians such as Valle. To move beyond this binary – in which the state has replaced the Indian as the embodiment of either good or evil – we must not only recognise the ambiguity of the state project. We must also pay more attention to variety and nuance in indigenous engagement of state power.

Just as the Xavante rejected the Vargas regime, Karajá, Xerente and Tembé Indians helped to reinforce it. Nevertheless, even while playing their assigned role as Indians, some indigenous people sought to edit the script. Indeed, upon closer examination, Valle's appeal reveals how some Indians embraced and promoted the state's project, while seeking to amend its format.

Years of working in the SPI without proper payment and adequate resources led Valle to criticise not the state's mission to protect and integrate the Indians, but its *modus operandi*. Indigenous traditionalism had not doomed his tenure at SPI posts, Valle asserted, but rather the agency's officials who had pocketed allotted finances. Furthermore, Valle inveighed against racism in the SPI, charging 'the SPI lately is not interested in Indians, because only whites work there and whites are not interested in Indians...'

In Valle's remodeled agency, Indians would fill top position. With Valle at the helm in Pará and other 'competent and civilised Indians' ensconced in the directorate, the true integration of indigenous peoples could proceed. Returning to the fabled Poti, Valle imbued him with new symbolism. Poti lived on in indigenous communities in their struggle to repel not only the foreigner, but the 'white invader of the SPI, dishonest whites'.⁹¹

Valle's discourse reveals how Brazilian Indians, like other subaltern groups, have both appropriated and challenged dominant symbols.⁹² In celebrating state protection of indigenous peoples, Valle embellished elite-born notions of an essential Indian character, a proto-patriot and cultural

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² For further discussion of the contradictory nature of popular culture, see G. Joseph and D. Nugent, 'Popular Culture and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico', in *Everyday Forms of State Formation*, pp. 21–2.

icon. That not all Indians viewed Vargas as their saviour nor Brazil as their homeland, the Xavantes' attack confirmed. Nevertheless, Valle's elaboration, mediated by personal experience, was by no means uncritical. The malfeasance and racism of SPI officials tinged Valle's perceptions of the state, galvanising his call for an Indian-led bureau.

If Valle exhibited what Gramsci termed the 'contradictory consciousness' of subaltern groups – embracing an indigenous essence consecrated by elites, scorning whites while seeking their assistance – several factors accounted for such behaviour.⁹³ For one, the Estado Novo sent contradictory signals to indigenous peoples. Protectionist policies endorsed by the regime were vitiated by social practice. Ideologues upheld as the perfect Indian a concoction part noble savage, part generic Brazilian. Furthermore, power dynamics in Brazilian society circumscribed the options for Indians such as Valle. Lacking the territorial dominion and autonomy of the Xavante, such 'competent and civilised' Indians endeavoured to make the most of an ambiguous state project. Once stripped of their protective buffer, Indians such as the Xavante and countless others in the Amazon region would be forced to pursue a similar strategy.

⁹³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (ed.), Quintin Hoare, trans., Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (New York, 1971), p. 333.