

THROUGH OTHER EYES

Racism in textbooks

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Reprinted from The UNESCO COURIER, March 1979.

The ever-increasing store of children's literature forms a fundamental element in the education of the child, opening up the world of poetry, of fable and legend and bringing to him the life stories of national and world heroes. The prestige of the printed word and the importance that teachers attach to books weigh heavily with children; it is through books that the foundations of their knowledge are laid.

The importance of books for transmitting information and values prompted me to examine the "image" of the "Indian" (or, more precisely, the indigenous inhabitant) as it appears in thirty children's books recently published in Argentina. Eighty-three per cent of the passages I analysed refer to the Indian in the past, a past that stretches from pre-Columbian times, through the age in which America was "discovered", the Spanish colonial period and its end, to the era of independence and national construction. The few references to the "Indian" of today bear no relation whatever to the actual conditions of their lives.

Most of the texts which give prominence to the past deal with occasions when the Indians came into contact with the troops of Christopher Columbus and his successors. One of them tells how Columbus sailed westwards in the service of the Spanish crown until the day when "A sailor on the *Pinta* spied land. It was the twelfth of October, 1492. Christopher Columbus went ashore on an island populated with *Indians*, and called it San Salvador. The *Indians* were wide-eyed with astonishment at the sight of the *white men*. Columbus thought that he had reached the Indies, but he had discovered a new world. Points to remember: Christopher Columbus discovered America on the twelfth of October 1492".

The central idea the child is intended to grasp is that of "discovery". This is a concept of European historiography; it is an ethnocentric concept since it presumes that the continent, its people and its wealth only acquired value because they were discovered and recognized by the centre of the world, in other words, Europe. It is hardly surprising, then, that civilization (clothes, big ships, white men and the faculty for naming places and people) should be equated with Europe and that barbarism (the Indians and the "new world") should be equated with America.

The artist who illustrated this text depicted a handsome and angelic Columbus stepping ashore amidst a fierce and menacing group of "Indians". The illustration is accompanied by exercises in which the child is required to fill in blanks in an incomplete sentence; the words "Columbus discovered America" are given as the correct words to complete the sentence: "When — — —, he met savages whom he called Indians". At that moment and for all time, the indigenous people of this continent were wrongly labelled "Indians".

This fallacious generalization subsequently came to describe the multitude of indigenous nations of America whose people would be presented as half-naked "savages" garbed in feathered head-dresses.

Another description of the "discovery" runs as follows:

- "Land ahoy!
- Land! Land!
- The Indies! The Indies!
- At last! We've made it! An Island! Palm trees!"
- There's something moving over there in the trees
- Look! *Half-naked men!*
- They're wearing feathers! They're signalling to us! They're coming to us!"

— "(...) The island was inhabited by *men with copper-coloured skins*; who were *half-naked*. Columbus called them *Indians*, for he was under the impression that he had reached the Indies, the country he was looking for. However, the land was part of a hitherto *unknown continent* which would later be called America".

The stereotype begins to take definite shape. The indigenous people were half-naked and copper-coloured (in English they would be dubbed redskins) and were generally referred to as "Indians". Here lies the first major contradiction: a continent inhabited by people with their own cultures is described as "unknown". Why do the authors insist on the European origin of America, a continent inhabited for over 20,000 years by groups of émigrés who originated in Central Asia and crossed over what is now the Bering Strait?

This fundamental historical ambiguity, which the child learns early in life, prevents him from understanding the link which exists between Argentines (and Latin Americans in general) and the great civilizations which flourished in our continent for thousands of years. As generation after generation of children read this account of the "discovery", they are induced to denigrate that part of our origins which goes back to men who lived at the beginning of the Bronze Age and to men who at the end of the Middle Ages came into contact with a Genoese sailor and a handful of Spaniards.

The authors of the second description of the "discovery" quoted above have also published an account of the foundation of the city of Buenos Aires by the Spaniard Pedro de Mendoza in 1536: "When they (the Spaniards) disembarked, the *Indians* were very astonished. They had never seen *men with white skin*, nor such clothing ... Mendoza named the settlement 'Santa Maria del Buen Aire' ... The Indians offered them food: fruit and game. But conflict soon broke out and provisions began to grow short. The settlers set out in search of food and often had to fight the *savages*. One day the Indians attacked the city and burned it".

Why, one might ask, do the authors fail to explain the changes in the relationship between the "Indians" and the "white men"? Why do they insinuate that the indigenous population was capricious and savage by nature, while keeping silent about the many extortionate demands made on them by the Christian conquistadors? What a contrast between this ethnocentric reading of history and the following denunciation of the conquistadors penned by the Spanish Dominican Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in 1513! "When they arrived at the village (of Camaguey in Cuba) they found the Indians living peacefully in their habitations. And yet they increasingly wronged and scandalized them and, not content with what the Indians offered them of their own free will, robbed them of the few valuables they possessed. Even worse, some of them attacked women and girls, for such is and always has been the usual behaviour of the Spaniards in the Indies".

The illustrations to the story of Buenos Aires show the "savagery" of the attacking Indians and the superiority of the Europeans; Mendoza, dressed like a lord, founds the city and gives it its name while an "Indian" squatting at his feet gapes in astonishment. The exercises which go with the text require the child to use the words he has just learned: "savage, tribe, chief, bow, arrow" in order to complete such sentences as "The Indians lived in a — state".

One third of the passages referring to "the Indian" in *the age of independence and national construction* present their positive characteristics; the rest are pejorative. In general, the texts give prominence to three moments in Argentine history: the war of liberation beginning in the nineteenth century; the organization and expansion of the nation; and the age of the liberal republic.

All the texts favourable to "the Indian" fall in the first period. The author of a text for ten-year-old children recounts how, in 1819, "a chief of royal blood", Inca Atahualpa Huascaringa, a descendant of Peruvian sovereigns, also known as José Manuel de Minoguyé, gave "30,000 armed Indians of his personal guard to fight the Spaniards". Although the context aims to express the idea that the indigenous population took part in the liberation struggles waged by the *criollos* (Latin Americans of Spanish descent), the author does not say whether or not the proposal was accepted, nor does he say what became of the chief and his troops.

Elsewhere, the same author tells the story of Cumbay, chief of the Chaco, who offered the Argentine general Manuel Belgrano some 2,000 Indians to fight the Spanish forces. Yet again the reader is not informed whether the offer was accepted nor whether the indigenous people took part in the liberation of the nation. In each case omission of this vital information suggests that the matter in question was to be considered a trifling one and even prefigures the decline of the indigenous nations; liberation brought no improvement in their living conditions, indeed they fell victim to a new domination which completed the process of making them a marginal people.

A general textbook for eight- to nine-year-old children recounts how, during the long process of national consolidation, "a landed proprietor named Juan Manuel de Rosas, who was governor from 1820 to 1832, carried out a mopping-up campaign against the Indians who were attacking the towns". The textbook does not indicate which Indians were concerned, for many of them had come to terms with Rosas and were not involved in these attacks. It does not explain why the indigenous peoples felt such animosity towards the *criollos*; nor does it place the facts in the context of the *criollo* policy of achieving secure frontiers, expanding to the limits of the former Spanish vice-royalty, and occupying all the fertile land for stock-raising and agricultural purposes. Their historic goal of dominion was in total opposition to the aims of the indigenous peoples who had enjoyed free use of these lands for thousands of years before the arrival of the Spaniards and *criollos*.

Nor, indeed, is there any mention of Rosas' conviction that "the Indian problem would only be resolved by their total submission or by the extermination of the recalcitrant among them, that is to say by pursuing the methods used during the Spanish conquest" (Ernesto Palacio, *History of Argentina, 1515 to 1955*, Buenos Aires, 1977). The children are not told that during Rosas' campaign more than ten thousand Indian warriors were liquidated and four thousand taken prisoner. All these historical omissions reinforce the idea of the indigenous population as "savage Indians", "irrational" and "barbaric" enemies of civilization.

Another work from the same publishers, intended for seven- to eight-year-old children, affirms that: "It is difficult today to imagine what life was like in the countryside in the past. The Indians had left the towns but were still masters of the plains. Can you imagine how dangerous it was to cross the pampas? Think of the long, hard roads, the wild animals, and the *Indians always lying in wait*". The author shows concern only for those who lived in the small towns in the interior of the country, for their security and their anxieties. But what of the indigenous peoples who never formed a majority or even a significant minority in any creole town? What were the feelings of these peoples who had once been masters of the land living free of the menace of better-armed enemies? This ethnocentric reading of history gives children a totally false picture of the facts. It presents a slanted account of the confrontation which led to the defeat of the indigenous peoples. The "Indians" are depicted as wild animals of the jungle, always lying in wait for their prey.

How does this picture of the "Indian" of our historic past compare with the image of the indigenous Argentine of today to whom reference is made in some seventeen percent of the texts?

According to certain authors: "In the Chaqueña region today, some Matacos and Tobas still live in the *primitive state*. They generally work at weaving, at picking cotton and cutting sugar cane. From the carob bean *they make a drink called aloja* (a kind of mead) of which they are very fond. The preparation of this drink is the occasion for festivities during which *large quantities are drunk*". Why, of all the aspects of the Mataco and Toba culture, do the authors choose to emphasize their "primitive state" and the fact that they are makers and festive drinkers of *aloja*? Why are we not told of their concept of the communal nature of property, of the way they share their food, of the solidity of their family ties, the absence of ~~sexual promiscuity~~, their skill at building cool dwellings in a sub-tropical climate, their strong religious beliefs and the decorum of their social life? If they live in a "primitive state", this is not from choice, but because they are the descendants of conquered peoples, forced to inhabit the poorest and most inhospitable regions of a rich republic. This then is a highly biased account which completely ignores the special values and characteristics that have ensured the survival of these ancient peoples.

In another work, the same authors explain that "the Puna (a region of north-west Argentina) is virtually uninhabited; the *native element* is predominant there; it consists of the Coyas who can stand the rarefied air of the mountains better than *the white man*". Although the name of the tribe (Coya) is mentioned, the general reference is to a dehumanized thing, the "native element", as opposed to the white "man". Even more serious is the fact that the Coya is depicted as organically different from the white man — as if the human race in general could not live in the mountains after a period of acclimatization! In this text, the Coya is portrayed as just another denizen of the region, on a par with the llama, the vicuna and the alpaca.

A handicrafts guide for eight-year-old children explains how to make a doll, a shadow theatre, a farm, a dining-room, a colonial building, a piglet and other objects. The young reader is also shown how to make just two figures — the mythical figure of Father Christmas and an Indian and his hut. Thus the indigenous Argentine is placed firmly in the

world of objects and myth; he is not seen as a real person. The "Indian" is a thing that children can make out of paper and string and paint; his hut *is not even a replica of an Argentine dwelling*, but a stereotyped imitation of the *teepee* of the Sioux Indians of the great prairies of North America, as depicted throughout the world by the mass media.

Yet another text makes play with a similar stereotype. The hero of the story is a little boy whose name, Geronimo, inevitably evokes the famous Apache chief who defied the federal troops of the United States from 1850 to 1880. Why did not the author choose an indigenous name from the thousands still in use in our tribes today?

In a "note to the teacher", the author of a book of stories for children of pre-school age explains that "in addition to fairies and other magical creatures, the characters children feel most affection for are other children, toys and animals — dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, ducks, and squirrels. The teacher should take care to *present each animal in accordance with its real characteristics* since this helps the child to situate himself in the world and to understand it (. . .). It is the task of the school to achieve this".

Later on in the same book we come across a piece of dialogue between children who are "playing at Indians": "I am the chief", says Luis, "*because I am the biggest*." "I am the doctor of the tribe", says Jorge, "*because I have got a satchel*." "I am an *Indian hunter*", cries Carlos, "because I have some sticks pointed like arrows." Then chief Blue Eagle speaks: "Come on, *Indians*, let's go into the forest." The story ends with a song: "I'm an Indian, I'm an Indian, *Me kill puma*, I'm an Indian, I'm an Indian, And I eat maize, I'm an Indian, I'm an Indian, I'm off to bed".

The writer is putting into the heads of five-year-old children the notion that chiefs are chosen for their physical stature, whereas, in fact, wisdom and experience are the most important considerations in a complex selection process; similarly, the medicine man is chosen for his spirituality and religious knowledge. No one can claim any special right simply because he possesses a particular object. An Indian does not become a fisherman because his father has given him a boat — this would be more in line with the way things are done among the wealthier classes in the west — but

because his father and, indeed, the whole tribe have taught him to fish, an activity that is practised collectively in a communally owned boat.

The indigenous Argentines do not refer to themselves as "indians". We know that some tribes refer to each other as *paisanos*, and this is how they wish to be known. It is insulting to make the "Indian" use the infinitive ("me kill puma"). This may well raise a laugh in the nursery school, but not from the indigenous pupils for whom, even today, Castilian Spanish is the language of the dominant culture. The author has forgotten his own warning note to the teachers — "animals must be presented in accordance with their real characteristics". Why did he not follow his own advice when describing the native peoples of his own land?

The picture that emerges from all this leads to the following conclusions:

- the indigenous Argentine is a creature of the past;
- little is known about the different aboriginal peoples and their cultural characteristics — they are all "Indians";
- the native American is depicted in pejorative fashion as a half-naked savage wearing a feathered head-dress, irrational and inferior to the white European;
- the emphasis on the "discovery" of the continent over-values Europe to the detriment of ancient American civilizations and covers up Europe's appropriation of the continent;
- the indigenous person is often denigrated and considered an object — children play at Indians, make models of Indians and their huts;
- history omits information essential to the understanding of the complex causes of the decadence of the indigenous Argentine nations;
- instead of presenting the true situation of the "Indian" there is a tendency to reproduce North American stereotypes — teepees, Geronimo, Blue Eagle.

All this amounts to a process of negation, of a kind of cultural genocide which in turn leads to an indirect form of real genocide — no less serious because it is indirect — which consists of depriving an important ethnic minority of a share in the resources of their land of origin. □

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