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Stanley E. Blake, *The Vigorous Core of Our Nationality: Race and Regional Identity in Northeastern Brazil*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.

Rival Visions and Regional Change: The Politics of *Nordestino* Identity in Modern Brazil

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Nordestinos, the residents of Brazil's vast Northeastern region, have occupied a peculiar cultural position within the national imaginary, paradoxically representing both a marginal and underdeveloped "other" and the most genuine expression of Brazilian identity. Stanley E. Blake's text expertly traces the development of "*nordestino*" as a racialized regional identity over time, elucidating the ways in which perceptions of the Northeast influenced projects to modernize state government and northeastern residents themselves. Drawing from a variety of legal,

medical, and bureaucratic sources, Blake's book is mainly concerned with the profound impact of changing constructions of *nordestino* identity on local, regional, and national politics and policies. Though the region consisted of five to eight states depending on the prevailing delineation, the bulk of evidence here comes from the state of Pernambuco. The crux of Blake's argument is that local elites and intellectuals conceived of *nordestino* identity in ways that ran counter to prevailing stereotypes, and while those conceptions varied with time, they all promoted a certain positioning of the region and its residents within the nation. Because of these rival visions, regionally directed social and economic reform projects approached *nordestinos* in distinct ways than did programs conceived and directed by national or international agencies. Thus, Blake provides a sense of *nordestino* identity from within and from without.

Of equal importance to Blake's arguments is the connection between changing regional identity and the unique role *nordestinos* played in framing Brazilian national identity. Conceptually, ideas about race connected the regional to the national, and Blake uses his analysis of race and region to delve into a broader history of Brazilian politics, social relations, and economic change. The racialized regional identity of the *nordestino*, therefore, embodied ideological assumptions and contradictions on a number of levels, and this had key implications for notions of citizenship and political participation. In Blake's words, "the *nordestino* is thus both a social and a political construction, reflecting the objectives of the northeastern ruling classes, the popular and working class responses to the challenges of planter rule, and the changing economic, political, and symbolic position of the region within the nation" (10). This monograph contributes a number of significant interventions into modern Brazilian history, the most salient of which illustrate the importance of northeastern discourses of race on Brazilian national identity, the regional development of public health projects during the Old Republic, and the modernization efforts of the Pernambucan state.

Blake situates his analysis of northeastern identity within the context of the region's deteriorating sugar economy. Once the economic and political center of Brazil, the Northeast was in decline by the late

nineteenth century when Blake's history begins, a sharp contrast to the increasingly dominant coffee and industry-based economies of the South. Even as the century drew to a close, paternalistic relations between sugar elites and their enslaved and free laborers continued to define the top-down vision of the *povo* as a dependent, if unstable, labor force. This changing economic climate had critical political consequences, including regional stagnation and marginalization and the failed attempt to emulate southern Brazil's immigration boom. Beyond these tangible changes, the glaring disparity between north and south also served as inspiration for the scholarly imagination since the Northeast increasingly appeared distinct from the rest of the nation. As the author explains, many of Brazil's most significant and enduring statements on the nature of its citizenry were born in the Northeast, written either by local intellectuals or those who took on the region as a specific problem. These thinkers include Silvio Romero and his colleagues at the Recife Law School, Nina Rodrigues, of the Medical School of Bahia, journalist and chronicler of the Canudos War, Euclides da Cunha, and Brazil's most celebrated sociologist, Gilberto Freyre. Despite their diverse fields, approaches, and intentions, these scholars all concluded that there was something about the racial blending and social dynamics of the Northeast that was emblematic of the challenges or potential of national integration. Tracing the emergence and development of their scholarship, Blake demonstrates the importance of race and race relations in characterizing the Northeast as a region, and he introduces the reader to a few recurring tropes in constructions of the *nordestino*.

As "*nordestino*" itself became as much a racial category as a regional identification, Brazilians outside of the region attributed the economic and social gap between North and South to "human types" rather than circumstances and structures. Romero, Rodrigues, and Freyre pioneered the tradition of utilizing the *nordestino* to draw some larger conclusion about race mixing and its consequences on the nation as a whole. These authors used their experiences, observations, and research on the Northeast and its inhabitants to place race (problematically) at the heart of Brazilian identity. Together, they provide some of the best examples of what Blake calls the "unique approach to race, citizenship, and

national and regional identity” that emerged in the Northeast between the 1870s and 1930s (50).

Many of Blake’s strongest arguments and most novel interpretations connect regional identity to the medicalization of the Northeastern population via state, federal, and international initiatives. In these chapters, the author argues that projects aimed at eradicating disease, improving public health, and defining mental illness were imbued with specific, though contested, constructions of *nordestino* identity. Though most histories of public health in the Northeast begin with the infamous scientific missions conducted by the federal Oswaldo Cruz Institute in the 1910s, Blake explains that the Pernambucan government identified public health as a state priority at the turn of the century. Therefore, vaccination, sanitation and disease-control efforts were already underway when the scientists from the Oswaldo Cruz Institute began to survey the Northeast.

Blake makes a provocative and convincing argument about the local and “outsider” gaze on Northeastern health. An internal versus external divide existed even in the conception of the region’s public health challenges. From the earliest years of the Republic, for example, the Pernambucan Public Health Service defined their activities around the containment of epidemic disease. In contrast, the scientists of the Oswaldo Cruz Institute and the health experts of the Rockefeller Foundation diagnosed endemic diseases (hookworm, yellow fever, and malaria) as the chief perils threatening the region. This was a significant shift because the latter conception implied that *nordestinos* suffered from permanent deficiencies related to their habits and environments rather than periodic episodes of contagious diseases, which were in no way specific to the Northeast. Pernambucano elites were at times ambivalent towards the prevailing assumption of the *nordestino* as diseased and enfeebled, but that characterization was the key to both federal investment and the controversial projects of the Rockefeller Foundation. Where Pernambucan physicians and bureaucrats envisioned an *unhealthy* population in need of interventions, Brazilians from outside the Northeast saw an *inferior* population that could be improved but not made equal to other citizens.

From within Pernambuco, the 1920s and 1930s brought more social explanations for the poor health and “underdevelopment” of the *nordestino* population. More concrete critiques about the generalized state of deprivation and hunger in the region existed alongside theoretically abstract constructions such as defining Afro-Brazilian religion, millenarianism, and folk Catholicism as evidence of mental pathology. In an attempt to bolster worker productivity, the Pernambucan state took a proactive approach to the material problems facing residents, providing housing, maternal and child assistance, nutrition programs, and educational reform. In all of these areas, reform advocates continued to identify the *nordestino* popular classes primarily as laborers. Blake provides detailed accounts of several projects, but in fact, many of the social assistance programs enacted in Pernambuco were similar to contemporary developments across Brazil. However, the author makes a clear case for seeing the emergence of social hygiene and welfare programs as responses to local and regional concerns.

As Blake admits, most of the public health and research projects he traces were created in the Pernambucan capital of Recife and worked primarily with an urban population. On the question of a radical divergence between *pernambucano* elites and those from the South in their construction of *nordestino* identity, the author does not really explore whether or not the divide between urban Recife and the rural interior of the state influenced these constructions. Had the state’s reach extended further beyond the boundaries of the capital city, there may have been more convergence between the *nordestino* “insider” and Brazilian “outsider” visions of the regional health problem. In some sense, the Pernambucan public health bureaucracy worked with communities living under distinct circumstances from those studied and treated by the scientists from the Oswaldo Cruz Institute and the Rockefeller Foundation.

The decades of the 1920s and 1930s also marked a new stage of research on the *nordestino* as a unique object of study. The popularity of “eugenics, biotypology, and racial psychology” led the Pernambucan state to fund a number of population studies (116). The Biotypology Service undertook large-scale anthropometric data collection and classification

projects on *pernambucano* students, workers, and soldiers. Again, the objective was to use scientific tools to measure and qualify the *nordestino* as a distinct category, a discrete Brazilian type, and then to relate the implications of those measurements to the potential social and economic progress of the region. On the whole, these research initiatives concluded that northeastern workers were no less capable than their southern counterparts. This evidence supports Blake's argument that local intellectuals and politicians rejected the northeastern "backwardness thesis" and located the productivity problem in other social conditions. Blake strongly and correctly argues that his history of regional identity is closely linked to the modernization of the state, particularly in Pernambuco. A certain essentializing of racial distinction, deprivation, and curable deficiencies was also at the heart of *nordestino* identity through the various reform projects of the state. Ultimately, the state took the position that *nordestinos* were fundamentally robust and resilient or could be made so through targeted interventions. In closely analyzing the state, Blake convincingly demonstrates that "uniquely regional understandings of nature, society, and the body" conditioned developmentalist approaches to civil society (16).

On the issue of population studies, Blake's discussion poses intriguing comparative questions about similar contemporary anthropometric research projects undertaken in Rio de Janeiro on homosexual men, as explained in James Green's *Beyond Carnival*, and on public school students and teachers, as told in Jerry Dávila's *Diploma of Whiteness*.¹ The comparative conversation between these three texts reveals the significance of constructions of the body and of physical and mental normalcy to the institutionalization of "modernization" projects in the early twentieth century. Taken together, they illustrate a fascinating process of specifying, regulating, and standardizing identities on a national scale in the name of maximizing Brazilian development.

Connecting the local to the national, Blake argues that the *nordestino* came to symbolize a cooperative, accommodating, *white* laborer

¹ James Green, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999) and Jerry Dávila, *Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

in the 1930s, exactly the type who could best serve the nation-building strategies of President Getúlio Vargas's Estado Novo government, 1937-1945. Conservative state *interventor* of Pernambuco Agamemnon Magalhães particularly championed this version of *nordestino* identity, rhetorically aligning himself and his state with the consolidation efforts of the president. For Magalhães, the vigor, whiteness, and loyalty of the northeastern worker placed *him* in the perfect position to become the symbolic bedrock of *brasilidade*, despite the region's economic marginalization. Thus, this conception promoted the Northeast and *nordestinos* as critical elements of Brazilian modernity, not impediments to it. Blake problematizes the inconsistency between Vargas's intentional erasure of regional identities and the contradictory position of the *nordestino* as both a distinct "other" and a quintessential Brazilian. Thus, Blake's arguments about race, region, and the modernizing state have important implications for rethinking and decentralizing the history of the Vargas period in general. From the vantage point of the Northeast, several social, political, and ideological tensions of the Estado Novo are revealed—tensions between regionalism and nationalism, heterogeneity and homogeneity, and *mestiçagem* (miscegenation) and *branqueamento* (whitening).

Blake's arguments on this northeastern identity crisis are intriguing, but he could have given more attention to certain conceptualizations of history and time that are inherent in this logic. *Nordestinos* could be both distinct and authentic because the "authentic" version of the 1930s and 1940s kept northeastern residents frozen in time, as a living throwback to Brazil's simpler past. The very conception of the Northeast as backward, unchanging, and timeless allowed Brazilians to construct *nordestinos* as simultaneously the "regional other" *and* the "national archetype." Also though Blake extends his arguments on regional identity beyond Pernambuco, he does not ultimately reconcile the relationship between "*nordestino*" as a racialized *regional* identity and areas of the Northeast that historically have been constructed as primarily black or *mulato*, such as Bahia and Maranhão, two of the most populous states in the region. Blake explains that the characterization of the *nordestino* as a docile,

modern, non-threatening and Catholic worker was, in part, a function of “imagining out” the Afro-Brazilian presence within the region, creating an alternative to other entrenched visions of the Northeast. However, it also seems likely that “*nordestino*” as racial identity was constructed *against* Bahian identity, in particular. For example, *pernambucano* Gilberto Freyre and prominent Bahian ethnologist, Edison Carneiro maintained a hostile rivalry over their divergent views on the politics of Afro-Brazilian culture and the persistence of Brazilian racism.² Thus, it is not clear whether Bahia and Bahians made it into this reconceptualization of the Northeast. This would suggest complicating the development of a racialized regionalism as not only a conflict of North versus South, but as an internal debate within the region as well.

Despite these lingering questions, Blake’s text is a first-rate, well-researched study, written in a style that is both engaging and compelling. Blake tackles new questions and breaks new ground in the study of the Northeast. *The Vigorous Core of Our Nationality* is highly recommended for scholars, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates with an interest in modern Brazilian history and the contradictory role of regional identity in national mythology and public policy.

² See Anadelia A. Romo, *Brazil’s Living Museum: Race, Reform, and Tradition in Bahia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).