

‘Admitida la división de la Humanidad en razas superiores y razas inferiores, nada más natural que la supresión del negro en Africa, del piel roja en Estados Unidos, del indio en el Perú.’ Discuss in relation to González Prada’s essay ‘Nuestros indios’.

(Danny Concha)

In 'Nuestros indios' (1904), Manuel González Prada identifies and challenges the inherent racial hierarchies which dominated the sociological discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He sought to demonstrate the ways in which this ideological division of humanity into 'superior' and 'inferior' races significantly contributed to the continued suppression of the latter, by assessing the condition of Peru's indigenous population living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Republic. In 'Nuestros indios', González Prada is, above all an "agitator" and an "awakener of men's minds and spirits"<sup>1</sup> as he exposes the inherent flaws and social harm caused by otherwise uncontested theories supporting the continued existence of racial hierarchy.

In this sense, 'Nuestros indios' is first and foremost a reaction against the dominant European racial theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Peter Wade refers to this period as the "age of scientific racism" and the "apogee of scientific racial typologies"<sup>2</sup>, whereby phenotypical differences were widely considered to exist within a Darwinian hierarchy of 'fitter' and 'weaker' variation (often referred to as "Social Darwinism"). Such ideas were rapidly absorbed by Spanish America's intellectual elite, as thinkers sought to make sense of the continent's great racial diversity, as well as more recent events such as North America's defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American War in 1898, which effectively cemented the notion of white Anglo-Saxon 'superiority' into the popular mind<sup>3</sup>.

For González Prada, such beliefs are epitomised in the racial theory of Gustav Le Bon, who becomes his main target of criticism. The choice is an obvious one given both the extremity of Le Bon's racial views (González Prada considers him "la exageración de Spencer", another key theorist) but also his status as one of the most popular and controversial European racial thinkers among Peruvians at the time<sup>4</sup>. For González Prada, Le Bon's notions of "racial character" as a series of fixed, inalterable traits, his emphasis on white 'superiority' and above all his argument that racial hierarchy ought to be integrated into national policy as a means of "redeeming disorganised nations"<sup>5</sup> embody all the flawed assumptions and underlying Eurocentric interest amongst the "prominentes sociólogos" at the time.

González Prada critiques the hierarchical division of race firstly on basis of it being dogmatic, arbitrary and fundamentally inconsistent. He brands race-centred sociology as "la ciencia de las afirmaciones contradictorias" first by identifying the external inconsistencies amongst theorists as "si un gran sociólogo enuncia una proposición... otro sociólogo no menos grande aboga por la diametralmente

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Stabb, *In Quest of Identity: Patterns in the Spanish American Essay of Ideas, 1890–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967) pp. 110

<sup>2</sup> Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997) pp. 10

<sup>3</sup> Stabb, pp. 12-13

<sup>4</sup> Marisol de la Cadena, "The Racial Politics of Culture and Silent Racism in Peru", pp. 3

<sup>5</sup> Stabb, pp. 23

opuesta". He then notes the internal inconsistencies and double standards within the hierarchies themselves, starting with "la misma raza blanca", whereby the flaws and vices of "anglosajones" are considered "cosas inherentes a la especie humana", whilst those of the "latinos" are "degeneración de raza". Similarly, the backwardness of feudal white Europe is considered "como una etapa de la evolución" whilst the revolutionary troubles in Spanish America are declared "un estado irremediable y definitivo". By raising these contradictions (González Prada asks "O ¿habrá dos leyes sociológicas...?"), he not only undermines the air of objectivity surrounding racial theory, but also identifies its Eurocentric bias.

Aside from being contradictory, González Prada also considers such hierarchies to be unscientific and regressive. This is according to his somewhat muddled and paradoxical understanding of Comtean positivism<sup>6</sup>, which proposes science as the final phase in a three-stage model of human progression. González Prada's interpretation of Comtean theory led him towards a "deep positivistic faith in science... as the great deliverer of humanity"<sup>7</sup>, with an emphasis on the ethical role of science; a view in which scientific advancement and "high morality" go hand in hand<sup>8</sup>.

With this moral awareness in mind, it is clear to see how González Prada might reject theories such as Social Darwinism as being pseudoscientific. Despite their claimed basis in evolutionary science, such notions of 'superior' and 'inferior' race were seen by González Prada as regressive, given that they reduced humanity to a biological competition of 'fitter' and 'weaker' race, and consequently overlooked the moral element that he viewed as being fundamental to any true 'positivist' concept science. He asserts that "si Augusto Comte pensó hacer de la Sociología una ciencia eminentemente positiva, algunos de sus herederos la van convirtiendo en un cúmulo de divagaciones sin fundamento científico", thus accusing the likes of Le Bon as perverters of positivist doctrine. Indeed, as Abramson claims, "para él, en una perspectiva comtiana, el darwinismo social es una regresión científica, ya que es una regresión moral"<sup>9</sup>.

Having identified these theoretical flaws, González Prada proceeds to assert the ways in which racial divisions legitimise the suppression and exploitation of those deemed 'inferior'. By exclaiming "¡cómoda invención la Etnología en manos de algunos hombres!", González Prada acknowledges both the arbitrariness ("invención") and inherent Eurocentric bias ("cómoda... en manos de algunos hombres") of racial theory, which he echoes in his reference to "la superioridad de los blancos y por consiguiente su derecho a monopolizar el gobierno del Planeta", as this explicitly states how notions of white 'superiority' become tools for white hegemony and domination. By referencing the "negro", "piel roja", "tágal", "amarillo" and "indio" in relation to the "blanco", González Prada suggests a global division of humanity into "dominadores" and "dominados"; a power narrative that appears exclusively in favour of the white man. The adjective "derecho" is crucial here as it reflects González Prada's view that racial hierarchy justifies such domination, making white hegemony a racial 'right' as well as an inevitability.

This justification for white hegemony and the consequent suppression of non-white races can be understood through the cultural model of civilisation and barbarism. These cultural concepts are crucial when considering issues of suppression, as 'civilisation' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was synonymous with social status and more crucially, worth. Indeed, Carmen de la Cadena argues that "during this

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Ward, "Manuel González Prada: Devoted Follower or Insubordinate Partisan of Auguste Comte?", *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 94.2 (1991) pp. 276

<sup>7</sup> Stabb, pp. 110

<sup>8</sup> Ward, pp. 277

<sup>9</sup> Pierre-Luc Abramson, "Ciencia y cientifismo en el pensamiento de Manuel González Prada" pp. 54

period, if race was an undeniable fact, civilisation was the ultimate goal"<sup>10</sup>, thus emphasising the importance of being considered 'civilised'. For González Prada, one's level of 'civilisation' was fundamentally determined by one's race, as illustrated in his analysis of Pearson's remark about the "solidaridad entre los hombres civilizados de la raza europea frente... la barbarie humana". In this, González Prada identifies how notions of 'superior' race ("la raza europea") become equated with socio-cultural worth ("hombres civilizados") and vice versa: "donde se lee "barbarie humana" tradúzcase "hombre sin pellejo blanco"". This problematic relationship reflects how racial inferiority readily translates into cultural (and thus social) inferiority as it feeds the "estigma infamatorio" of barbarism ("le acusan de refractario a la civilización").

This race-based social stigma is what brings about inevitable suppression. Quoting Le Bon, González Prada echoes popular rhetoric that "el destino final... de [hispano] América es regresar a la barbarie primitiva, a menos que los Estados Unidos le presten el inmenso servicio de conquistarla", which highlights the interlinked relationship between race, civilisation and suppression. The language in this statement is crucial as González Prada moves beyond the previous notion of white domination as a "derecho", to pick up on how it becomes a "servicio", once notions of civilisation and barbarism are factored in. In this case, González Prada demonstrates how the racially-defined notion of "latino" 'inferiority' translates into the social stigma of "latino" barbarism, which is then used to depict domination and suppression as not only being justified, but desirable; a "servicio" to those being suppressed.

González Prada detects these patterns of racially-motivated suppression in Peru's treatment of the 'indio' during the 19<sup>th</sup> century Republic. He does so by creating a parallel between Peru's colonial heritage and its post-independence period, claiming that "la República sigue las tradiciones del Virreinato". In claiming this, González Prada draws our attention towards systems such as *gamonalismo* during the closing decades of the 1800s, whereby the expansion of landed estates (haciendas) and the continuation of semi-feudal labour exploitation resulted in the continued suppression of the 'indio', only under a different guise; "si no existen corregimientos ni encomiendas, quedan los trabajos forzados y el reclutamiento". For González Prada, the extension of these colonial systems into the 19<sup>th</sup> is largely due to the continued notions of racial 'superiority' and 'inferiority' as this leads to a fundamental disregard for indigenous rights within the Republic. This is reflected in a series of decrees such as the 1852 *Código Civil*, which ignored the interests of local communities by sanctioning the privatisation and expropriation of community land and labour, thus paving the way for wealthy land-owners and exploitative systems such as *gamonalismo* to succeed. For Davies, such policy "effectively recognised the legality of slavery"<sup>11</sup>, thus emphasising the extent to which Peru's indigenous, illiterate, landless and 'inferior' population were abused.

The relationship between race and suppression is embodied in González Prada's scathing assessment of the "encastado". This term refers not simply to Peru's land-owning elite (*hacendado or gamonal*) but more specifically to the *hacendado* of indigenous descent; the "gamonal de la sierra" who has surpassed his status of "dominado" to become a "dominador" in his own right. By nominating this figure as the "verdadero tirano de la masa", González Prada is able to comment on the effects of socio-racial hierarchy not only in generating excessive cruelty and exploitation towards the 'indio' but also in dividing "semejantes" into "enemigos", corrupting one whilst dehumanising the other. The "encastado" embodies Gumplowicz's cited notion that "cuando un individuo se eleva sobre el nivel de su clase social,

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<sup>10</sup> Cadena, pp. 4

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Davies, "Indian Integration in Peru, 1820–1948: An Overview", *The Americas*, 30 (1973) pp. 186

suele convertirse en el peor enemigo de ella", as González Prada adds "no hay quizá opresores tan duros del indígena como los mismos indígenas españolizados e investidos de alguna autoridad". Looking beyond ideas of ownership and power ("autoridad"), there is a clear criticism of racial hierarchy here, contained within the loaded connotations of "españolizado". The notion is that once tainted with a sense of racial 'superiority', even the 'indio' becomes capable of exploitation and suppression. This adds weight to González Prada's criticism of racial hierarchy as it is shown to create inevitable cruelty and hatred, even amongst those of the same race.

However, this suppression also comes from the Republic itself, which González Prada considers equally complicit. Whilst the "encastado" suppresses through exploitation, the State is responsible for neglecting the 'indio' and allowing this suppression to continue. This leads González Prada to suspect an allegiance between the government ("el señorón de Lima") and the land-owning elite, against the 'indio'. He supports this claim by drawing attention to the ways in which the Republic consistently denies the 'indio' both protection and justice. In terms of protection, González Prada refers to the supposedly protective laws and decrees of indigenous rights as "palabras sin eco", which are without sufficient enforcement and consequently ignored: "saben que no serán obedecidas...y saben también que ningún mal les resulta de no cumplirlas".

In terms of justice, González Prada provocatively cites the Amantani massacre under President Nicolás de Piérola as a means of emphasising both the legal and political suppression of the 'indio'. In providing this example of indigenous genocide, González Prada emphasises how "el indio no tiene derechos sino obligaciones", given that any signs of protest or complaint are interpreted as either "insubordinación" or "sublevación". This lack of legal recognition and voice leads González Prada to proclaim that "no merece llamarse república democrática un estado en que dos o tres millones de individuos viven fuera de la ley", which, when considered next to an estimated elite of "cien a doscientos mil individuos", highlights a clear disjunction between nation and state. This is particularly relevant in the context of Peru's recent defeat to Chile in the War of the Pacific (1879-83), whereby many embittered Peruvians felt that had the 'indio' been incorporated into national life, Peru would have won the war<sup>12</sup>. For González Prada, the 'indio' ignorance in seeing this war as "una contienda civil entre el general Chile y el general Perú" reflects their total marginalisation.

Ignorance, in terms of illiteracy and insufficient education is suggested in certain aspects as another form of racially-motivated suppression. By repeatedly referring to Le Bon and his sympathisers as "pesimistas", González Prada recalls the general air of pessimism regarding the intellectual capabilities of 'inferior' races; Le Bon insisted on the inability of educational institutions to deliver racial equality, maintaining the immutable nature of racial 'inferiority' as being both physical and intellectual<sup>13</sup>. Whilst González Prada overtly challenges this assumption ("siempre que el indio se instruye en colegios... adquiere el mismo grado de moral y cultura que el descendiente del español") he also maintains that "la instrucción puede mantener al hombre en la bajeza y la servidumbre", in part-response to popular views at the turn of the century that the 'indio' should be educated "to a point at which his maximum potential as an agricultural worker or soldier is reached"<sup>14</sup>. Thus, with or without education, the 'indio' remains suppressed as he is offered two options: either "le conservamos en la ignorancia" or "la servidumbre". Combining this with the fact that education does not guarantee economic improvement, González Prada ultimately proclaims that education alone is an ineffective method for liberating the 'indio' from suppression.

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<sup>12</sup> Davies, pp. 189

<sup>13</sup> Cadena, pp. 4

<sup>14</sup> Stabb, pp. 23

This is because González Prada views the suppression of the 'indio' as primarily about wealth and ownership. He asserts that "la cuestión del indio, más que pedagógica, es económica", which is evident given his view that the exploitative allegiance between the Republic and oligarchy against the 'indio' is primarily founded on wealth: "las autoridades políticas, lejos de apoyar a débiles y pobres, ayudan casi siempre a ricos y fuertes". He repeatedly stresses the importance of property, wealth and ownership in guaranteeing one's social rights, as "con sólo adquirir algo, el individuo asciende algunos peldaños en la escala social", asserting that "sube más el que más pesa". This notion of material worth translating into social worth is particularly relevant in the case of the 'indio', who González Prada flags up as being consistently excluded from wealth: "el indio recibió lo que le dieron: fanatismo y aguardiente". Whilst this is more of a comment on economic realities and colonial heritage than race, it links back to the discourse of 'superior' and 'inferior' races due to the fact that such notions continue to justify the exploitation and thus economic inferiority of the indio.

In light of this, González Prada accompanies his more practical demands for economic reform with an attempt at transforming attitudes towards civilisation and race. González Prada does so by attempting to redefine 'civilisation' as a fundamentally moral notion, rather than a racially-biased one. He emphasises morality over "la ciencia", "la erudición" and "la industria" as science, education and economics have all been shown to favour the white European over the non-white 'indio'. Whilst echoing aforementioned notions of Comtean morality<sup>15</sup>, this moral concept of civilisation radically seeks to overcome the suppressive categories of race towards a state whereby "en vez de comparar una muchedumbre de piel blanca con otras muchedumbres de piel oscura, comparamos un individuo con otro individuo"; an equal moral playfield that fundamentally challenges racial hierarchy. Likewise, González Prada defines suppression and exploitation as the real forms of 'barbarism', asserting that "donde no hay justicia, misericordia ni benevolencia, no hay civilización". In this way, González Prada cleverly subverts the very same dichotomy used in support of race-centred notions of 'inferiority' and 'superiority' and turns into a weapon against racial division.

Whilst this moral concept of 'civilisation' displays clear traces of French anarchism, González Prada rapidly succumbs to radicalism in his final remarks. Ward traces a clear anarchic streak in González Prada's emphasis on the individual over institutional hierarchy as the determiners of social value, adding that this ideology ultimately inspired him to view personal action and revolt as the pinnacle of intellectual thought<sup>16</sup>. Yet these notions are taken to their extreme when González Prada claims that "todo blanco es, más o menos, un Pizarro" and incites violence as the only means of liberating the 'indio' from suppression ("a la violencia respondería con la violencia"). Whilst he doesn't go as far as to propose the domination of racial 'inferiors' over their so-called 'superiors', González Prada somewhat contradicts his earlier argument that an individual should be judged by their morality alone, rather than race. Yet overlooking this apparent contradiction, González Prada's radical and violent solution is perhaps the greatest reminder of how embedded these racial hierarchies were; a situation where uprising presented the only feasible solution.

Ultimately, when approaching issues surrounding race and suppression, 'Nuestros indios' is more praiseworthy for its diagnosis than its reform. Whilst we may well challenge González Prada's answers, we cannot deny the importance of his questions. This is especially true when we reconsider that he

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<sup>15</sup> Abramson, pp. 51

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Ward: "La colonialidad inherente y la musa rebelde", *Manuel González Prada: Escritor de dos Mundos* (Lima: Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos, 2006) pp. 121

was operating in a climate whereby the 'inferiority' of certain races was no more contested than the law of gravity<sup>17</sup>. By consistently challenging these otherwise uncontested racial hierarchies, González Prada demonstrates the way in which notions of 'superior' and 'inferior' race inevitably shape an individual's cultural worth (civilisation/barbarism), power role (dominator/dominated), legal rights, educational potential, economic position and ultimately social status and wellbeing. By attacking these divisions of humanity, González Prada offered a crucial first step towards liberty and equality.

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<sup>17</sup> Wade, pp. 9