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## **The Child-Saving Movement in Brazil Ideology in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

by

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### **The Idea of Child Saving**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the plight of impoverished children came to be of great concern in Brazil. This was the moment when childhood was first seen as a social problem whose solution was fundamental to a larger project of nation building. The country's elite sought to forge a nation that was at once "cultured and modern,"<sup>1</sup> along the lines of important European and North American cities—especially Paris, London, and New York—and the transformation of childhood was part of this larger endeavor.

In several influential circles, there was talk of the "*magna causa* of childhood" and "the crusade for childhood." Childhood was seen, not only in Brazil, but also elsewhere, as "the key to the future" (Cunningham 1995: 42). In Brazil, this nineteenth-century notion that "to save children was to save the country" implied the concomitant imperative of distancing children from the temptations that might lead them astray from the straight and narrow of discipline and work; society had to be protected from those given to vice, from those who threatened public order. New ideologies concerning the control and protection of children paralleled those in other Western countries, suggesting an extensive exchange of information among the political and philanthropic elite of this era.

With special reference to Brazil, this chapter examines the emergence of the idea that childhood was the key to the future; it also considers the problems that were perceived in and the solutions proposed for the task of “saving” poor children and rendering them useful to the overarching goal of “civilizing” the country. The expression “child saving,” current at the time, turned on the notion that investing in children was tantamount to investing in the nation’s future. I begin, then, with a discussion of the historical context, moving on to examine the child saving movement in Brazil, its origins and repercussions.

An examination of ideologies current at the turn-of-the-century suggests that a heightened interest in poor children can be seen as part of an essentially political project. The “idle” segments of the population could be contended with if they were rendered, from childhood, useful elements for the country’s capitalist development. At the same time, protecting children was a means of safeguarding society itself. The discourse was, therefore, double-edged, with children described in the documents as by turns endangered and dangerous. This latter attribution, that children were dangerous, was reserved for offspring of a specific social class, that of the poor.

Concern over the plight of destitute children gave rise to a complex network of laws and institutions. Yet the aim was not to lessen profound social inequities. The poor were denied full rights of citizenship, continued to suffer discrimination, and were to endure system of education aimed at submission; wealth and privilege remained, and to this day remain, in the hands of a small minority.

### **The Historical Context**

The final decades of the nineteenth century were marked by events of great importance for Brazil. In 1888, slavery was abolished and 1889 saw the abolishment of the imperial monarchy and the establishment of a Republic. As a result, the economic, political, and social life of the country was profoundly altered. Meanwhile, new relations of production and of labor proved necessary for the liberal state to adapt to a less mercantilist and more industrial economy (Sodré 1989).

The rapid growth of cities, fed by the arrival of foreign immigrants and by internal migration from rural areas, transformed urban life. The strict social control exercised in the rural context and in small towns was absent, giving rise to pervasive fear. At its extreme, this fear was about rioting, even insurgency against the established order. In this context, traditional forms of social control proved ineffectual. The new urban conditions called for new responses.

At the center of this analysis, then, is a recently urbanized world that stood in stark contrast to the backwardness of the rural milieu. The lights of the city—the metropolis, “the cosmopolitan center” — were emblematic in the eyes of the contemporary elite of everything “modern,” “cultured,” and “civilized.” In particular, I focus on what was then the capital, Rio de Janeiro. Of the older but rapidly developing cities, Rio most closely approximated the European or North American notion of the civilized city. By the end of the nineteenth century, Rio was unquestionably the center of Brazil's political, cultural, and intellectual life. The city also brought to mind images of disorder, disease, crime, and depravity.

Life in the city, so vulnerable to vice and indolence and so different from that of rural areas, was described in alarming tones. The very architectural forms and the spatial division of the city gave rise to a preoccupation with security and order. The existence of corners, alleys, and narrow passageways, dark at any hour of day (Chevalier 1973: 2), seemed to bring out the ghosts and unexpected dangers inherent to city life.<sup>2</sup>

Rio de Janeiro brought together an unknown and frightening demographic mixture, a population that “could be compared to the dangerous classes spoken about in Europe in the early part of the nineteenth century” (Carvalho 1991: 18). Amid the ostentatious display of wealth could be found all nature of people loitering about: impoverished workers, vagabonds, beggars, ruffians, prostitutes, and street urchins. The term *pivete*, roughly knave, is still used today to pejoratively describe these impoverished and potentially dangerous children.

Documents from this era suggest that children and young people figured prominently

in discussions of abandonment, poverty, and urban disorder. Indignant over the rounding up and incarceration of children on the streets of the capital, the jurist Evaristo de Moraes wrote in 1898, “As a rule, children apprehended in the streets are orphans or have been abandoned by their families. Once made to spend a night behind bars or in the barracks, these poor children, deprived of homes and bread, are turned over to a judge.”

The unsettling presence in the streets of children who were “materially and morally abandoned,” to use the language of the times, led to appeals for the country to confront this grave social problem. Senator Lopes Trovao, in a speech delivered in the year 1896, proclaimed, “Whosoever with an observant eye ventures across the streets of the capital of the Republic will be saddened to observe that in this milieu so ruinous for the body and soul a goodly portion of our children are set loose to a life of unrestrained liberty—or abandonment—left to suffer disrespect and learn all nature of vices and ready themselves for the commission of diverse crimes” (cited in Moncorvo Filho 1926: 129-130).

The state’s role in behalf of such children was defended as part of a larger “patriotic and civilizing mission of healing” and reform. Indeed, in the first years after the Republic was established, this mission was envisioned as part of a larger project of nation building. The threat implicit in the discourse of the time was that the country would be overrun by disorder and immorality if it let down its guard in the face of abandonment, particularly of children.

“Saving children” obeyed a logic that was politically compatible with the thinking of the times. It was understood that in protecting children, it was ultimately the country that was being defended—from crime, from disorder, from anarchy.

### **The Child-Saving Movement**

The child-saving movement was based on the belief that a harmful environment coupled with certain innate proclivities made monsters of children, a situation that could have devastating consequences for society as a whole. Saving children was a

mission that went beyond the boundaries of religion and family, taking on a political dimension of control justified by the imperative of defending society and preserving social peace and order.

According to historian Hugh Cunningham (1995), the child-saving movement was particularly strong in the Protestant countries of Europe and North America from 1830 until 1920. During that period, there was a fresh surge of activity among individuals and philanthropic organizations that worked to defend the poor and the needy. In particular, children were the intended beneficiaries for this sort of activity and there was growing pressure for the state to take responsibility for the situation and implement policies to help children. The demand that the state take on a leadership role in addressing the problems of children and in implementing programs for them was the cornerstone of a process that began to take shape across the Western world. From that point forward, the same efforts were undertaken almost simultaneously in Europe and North America, and similar ones can be identified, a short time later, in Latin America. There was a remarkable exchange of knowledge and experience, especially during international congresses where the elite of the two continents mapped out possible future policies for their countries. It is evident in the Brazilian literature that discussions held at these international meetings were widely cited and employed to add legitimacy to domestic reform campaigns. The tactic was apparently successful.

In *The child savers: The invention of delinquency*, Anthony Platt offers a critical reading of the North American philanthropic movement. According to Platt (1977: xx), “the child-saving movement” was not a humanitarian undertaking on behalf of the working classes that challenged the established order. “On the contrary,” he writes, “its impetus came primarily from the middle and upper classes who were instrumental in devising new forms of social control to protect their power and privilege.” Reforms championed by the movement in behalf of children were part of a larger objective of adapting existing institutions to the demands of an emerging capitalist system. In his view, they were a reaction to the instability evident in demonstrations of dissatisfied workers struggling to improve their social and economic conditions and in the

turbulent economic affairs of the late nineteenth century.

Children, as suggested by the alarmist discourse of reformers and philanthropists, were linked to notions of disorder. It was well known that children had for centuries swelled the ranks of the poor.<sup>4</sup> What was new at this moment was that poverty could not be contained by poor laws, parishes, almshouses, workhouses, orphanages, rural institutions, and the like. Poor children were visible on the streets of the industrializing cities and their presence caused alarm.

Children raised amid vice, it was feared, would reproduce disorder. In congresses held during this period, attention was drawn to the preponderance of children among the hordes of vagabonds and beggars in the streets. Given this threat to public order, something had to be done. Those children with potential were to be “saved” and put to work, and the truly recalcitrant restrained. The children identified as potential criminals had to be separated from the world of crime. In 1880, the criminologist Enoch Wines expressed what was on the minds of many at the time, that these children had to be saved, “as they were born for crime and were raised for criminality” (cited in Platt 1977: 45).

The need for the salvation of the soul comes from Christian dogma about original sin. A German sermon delivered in 1520, for instance, suggested that “Just as a cat craves mice, a fox chickens, and a wolf cub sheep, so infant humans are inclined in their hearts to adultery, fornication, impure desires, lewdness, idol worship, belief in magic, hostility, quarreling, passion, anger, strife, dissension, factiousness, hatred, murder, drunkenness, gluttony, and more” (cited in Cunningham 1995: 49).

The innate passions and depravations of children had to be reined in, for the sake of salvation and in the interests of social order. Augustinian and Calvinist tenets about original sin were employed to justify various sorts of interventions in family life and child rearing. As Saint Augustine himself asked, “Who can recall to me the sins I committed as a baby? For in your sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth” (cited in Sznajder 1996: 13).

Despite the ideological differences between Catholics and Protestants, many

similarities can be found in their understanding of children. The idea of the child as key to the future has had enormous influence on Western societies. This notion, born in the sixteenth century, was invoked in particular during moments of great pressure for reform and was a catalyst for what the French historian Philippe Ariès (1962) has described as the moment when children came to be sharply differentiated from adults. Children were to occupy a new social space and their upbringing would require considerable attention if they were to be made into the sort of adult considered ideal for the nation.

The idea of children as the key to the future was linked to a new concept of childhood that had considerable impact on the conceptual formulations and practices of the West, namely humanist notions of childhood in Renaissance Europe associated with Erasmus. The virtues of the family, responsible for the upbringing of children, would reflect the virtues of the state.

The notion of children as so much earth to be shaped – for good or for ill – raised new concerns about their upbringing. For childhood to be reshaped, it would be necessary to create institutions capable of challenging the hegemony of the family. In the sixteenth century, schools began to do just that. Other more clearly coercive institutions and measures were created to contend with poor families, whose relationship to the church and the state was one of submission, through dependency or force.

This discussion was not always driven by the concrete social condition of real children. Childhood within the European, Christian world was conceptualized in abstract terms, terms that also had enormous influence in the colonies, including Brazil. In the sixteenth century, Jesuits were already present in Brazil and they established an institutional culture whose imprint is still evident.<sup>5</sup>

### **Saving Children to Save the Nation**

Brazilian children described as being in need of salvation tended to hail from families deemed unworthy or unfit to raise them. Social reformers were particularly concerned

about children in a state of “moral abandonment” (Moraes 1900). Ferri and Lombroso, leading figures of the famous Italian school of criminology, championed this idea and others followed their lead. Caring for physically abandoned children was the responsibility of the state. But what of children whose moral well-being had been abandoned? Challenging the family and paternal authority—institutions until then protected by the church and by law—was no simple matter. With the aim of protecting children from moral abandonment, however, many families came to be labeled as delinquent. Accused of leading their own sons and daughters down the wrong path, families could lose custody of their children. The family’s upbringing of its children was to be monitored, as a patriotic obligation. A guardian was needed to keep a tight rein on the situation of children, and that guardian would be the state. It was incumbent upon the state to save children—“the children of the fatherland,” as they would come to be called<sup>6</sup>—to take them in and render them useful for the nation. Implicit in the conflation of the ideas of saving children and saving the nation was the hint that the nation, not unlike children themselves, could be shaped.

Like a father who sees his child as an immature being, the concerned Brazilian elite viewed their country’s majority as primitive, semi-barbaric. This elite included some of the growing number of jurists and doctors whose work brought them face to face with poor children. Urban life only heightened the perceived differences between the common man, seen as brutish and ignorant—in a word, infantile—and the elite, the modern industrial capitalist class. Given the putatively backward condition of much of the country and the countless shortcomings of her people, the challenge was not merely to properly educate (in the broadest sense of the word) children, but to educate a childish population, a people still in its infancy. In a speech delivered in 1920, Moncorvo Filho (1920: 4), a doctor and one of the leaders of the children’s defense movement, suggested, “I have always accepted as an unshakable truth what the Englishman William Cheverry said only recently: ‘Nothing defines the dignity of a country so much as the way it cares for its children.’ And further, ‘The progress of a country can be deduced from its childhood.’”

If children embodied hope, the future of the nation, they were also seen as threat. Their innocence was called into question and elements of cruelty and evil identified in their souls. Children came to be regarded as potentially delinquent and were to be distanced from the “schools for crime,” especially the street and jails. In the words of a contemporary jurist (Lobo 1907: 28), “Let us admit that the myth of the innocent and pure soul of the child is now dead.”

In turn-of-the-century Brazilian discourse, this ambivalent view of children as at once endangered and dangerous became something of a leitmotiv. And childhood itself was divided in two. The term “minor” gained the currency of everyday usage. The term “minor,” closely linked to ideas about criminality, came to refer only to those children who were poor and potentially dangerous.

In the interests of maintaining social order and safeguarding the future of the nation, a variety of measures were endorsed. Professionals in the field of health were to identify means (both physical and spiritual) of treatment and rehabilitation; the legal authorities were to oversee the protection of children, and of society; in cooperation with public institutions and philanthropic agencies were to minister to the poor and downtrodden.<sup>7</sup> These public and private initiatives took shape in the first three decades of the twentieth century and despite a sometimes disharmonious discourse and practice, shared a common goal—that of saving children in order to save Brazil. As the Senator Lopes Trovão was to declare in 1896, “We have a homeland to rebuild, a nation to secure, a people to forge . . . and to undertake this task, what more supple and pliant element do we have than childhood? The time has come for us to cultivate through childhood a better youth and a more perfect humanity.”

Despite a new rhetoric about Brazil as a country to be remade, power was not exercised in a truly new fashion. The lettered elite that dominated the political arena promoted education, but not to the detriment of their inherited privileges. “Instructing the people” — that is, offering training for work — was seen as a *sine qua non* of progress. The challenge was to do this while keeping the poor in check.

### **Laws and Services: Child Saving in Brazil**

In a 1913 declaration (cited in Moncorvo Filho 1926: 73), Ataulpho de Paiva, the influential Rio appeals court judge, member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, and advocate of “New Justice” (Nova Justiça) for children, argued that “Simple repression—the fundamental idea of our codes—has always misinterpreted the plight of minors, leaving them unprotected before the law and the justice system. Juvenile delinquency is a crisis of alarming proportions, especially in that it is being compared to adult criminality. . . .”

Reformers turned to the fields of sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and anthropology in an attempt to understand what factors led children to commit crimes. In a 1911 article published in the *Jornal do Commercio* and entitled “New Justice: Courts for Children,” de Paiva placed the blame on “the nefarious influence of a deleterious social milieu . . . coupled with lack of education. . . .” He also called for reform. In a 1916 article he stated that “Formerly, the only concern of the criminal Judge was to classify the crime and apply the corresponding punishment” (70).

Brazilian advocates for children were also inspired by a larger international movement for legal reform that sought individual regeneration through education, rather than through the exclusive reliance on punishment. But the fear that motivated these reforms was clear. As jurist Hélio Lobo (1907: 23) suggested, “frightened by the alarming increase in juvenile crime, civilized countries have sought to protect themselves from this evil.” Elsewhere (as cited in Paiva 1911: 27), he argued, “it would be no exaggeration to say that society has never faced a more serious threat to its security and peace.”

Leaving children in a state of moral abandonment was said to encourage their becoming delinquents. Reformers argued that Brazil was failing to follow the example of more civilized countries that took juvenile justice seriously. The solution, as they saw it, lay in reorganizing the justice system on a new foundation, taking inspiration from the humanitarian tradition of the nineteenth century but adapting it to modern, twentieth-century civilization. The perceived malleability of children and youths was

said to augur well for their chances of recovery.

Through the combination of new legislation and services, the state was to take on in the early twentieth century a guardian-like role in relation to children. In the legal sphere, the responsibilities of the state were no longer to be limited to punishment and repression; the state now had social responsibilities. It carried these out with the aid of philanthropic organizations, which had access to the poor and needy. The philanthropists, in turn, saw in the legislators the solution to the increasing dangerousness of the poor. As such, the alliance between philanthropies and legal authorities was built upon the perceived need for change in contending with the poor.

Throughout the 1920s, calls for “New Justice” continued. Municipal and state bodies, particularly those of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, debated bills about children. The process eventually led to new regulatory measures, such as the creation of a special juvenile justice system (*os juizados de menores*) and the implementation of special legislation, the Minor’s Code (*O Código de Menores*). By championing the virtues of discipline and work, representatives of the legal sector and philanthropists together sought the moral regeneration of society.

#### In Defense of Children and Society

The juvenile justice system in Brazil was influenced by an international debate in the late nineteenth century about stemming juvenile delinquency, and Latin America became a sort of willing laboratory for ideas originating in Europe and North America. Juvenile justice, though seemingly wide in scope, was in fact concerned with poor children raised in families deemed not to adhere to contemporary models of morality, children who had come to be known as minors.

The talk of the times was of the possibility of recovering minors, with the supposed success achieved in the United States offered as an example to follow. Yet these new measures had an old objective, that of forging useful citizens of individuals who otherwise would be a burden on society. The discourse of protecting children was integrally linked to the aim of defending society from the proliferation of the idle and

criminal, who were clearly hazardous to capitalist relations of production, as well as from insubordination and disorder.

In Brazil, from the beginning of the twentieth century until 1927 when the Minor's Code was approved, numerous bills were introduced and debates held on the intertwined challenges of protecting children and protecting society from them. Although the proposed activity went beyond the bounds of legislation, the prime movers were, overwhelmingly, representatives of the legal profession. The jurists worked together with the police, politicians, medical associations, and charitable and philanthropic organizations, encouraging debate, publishing their ideas, and establishing strategic alliances with elected representatives, newspapers, the leadership of philanthropic associations, universities, and international academic associations.

Shortly after the Republic was established, bills were introduced in the Chamber of Deputies that identified abandoned and delinquent children as the responsibility of the state. And through the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government, the state was granted the power to intervene in family life. The "laws for the protection and aid to minors" were promulgated, asylums and penal facilities for children reorganized, and a system of "conditional freedom" (*liberdade vigiada*), aimed at keeping an eye on minors outside of institutions, was created.

The measures proposed during the early twentieth century concerned, above all, the policing of the streets and dealing with those apprehended, including children and youths. For example, Law 947, which went into effect on 29 December 1902 and was entitled "Reform of Policing in the Federal District," includes the following text: "The executive branch of government is authorized to create one or more correctional facilities for the rehabilitation, by means of work and instruction, of any able-bodied beggars, vagabonds or vagrants, ruffians, and vicious minors as may be found in the Federal District and judged as such. In Brazil, the state took on a tutelary role of authority and control of almost monopolistic proportions, a situation not dissimilar to that in many Latin American countries.

### **The Route of Social Exclusion**

Children and youths came to be classified according to their “type of abandonment” or “degree of dangerousness.” The law permitted the apprehension of children found to be abandoned or depraved or “in danger of so becoming.” A child’s physical appearance or style of dress or mere suspicion on the part of the authorities was sufficient grounds for arrest; according to the law, “If a minor is not caught in the very act, but the proper criminal authorities find it expedient to restrict his liberty, they shall proceed according to paragraphs two and three of Article 86” (Código de Menores, 1927).

The early twentieth century judicial and institutional measures regarding children contributed to the social exclusion of the poor. Although the state was concerned with “rehabilitating minors,” it did not make universal education a priority. When the idea that children were the future of the nation was invoked, it was understood that what was vital was shaping children in such a way that the great majority of the population would remain submissive, as in earlier times.

Although lip service was paid to education, an element of the republican ideology of “order and progress,” education was also seen as a “dangerous weapon.” Education remained decentralized in the early years of the Republic and lacked support from the national government. The result of this laissez-faire attitude was not only complete lack of coordination among the states but considerable disorganization in terms of how education was actually delivered. The outdated schools of the Empire were inherited by the republic. According to one contemporary observer (cited in Carvalho 1989: 24), the result was “schoolhouses without light, children without books, books without a methodology, schools without discipline, and teachers treated like pariahs.”<sup>8</sup>

The very use of the word “education” (*educação*) in this period seemed to refer not to the enlightenment of the masses or to a means of achieving greater social equality. Education was spoken of as a sort of antidote to idleness and criminality. The Escola Quinze de Novembro (The Fifteenth November School) for the “rehabilitation of

minors” is an apt example. The bylaws of the school, which took in “minors” rounded up in the streets, stated that “As the institution is meant for social pariahs, the education imparted herein shall not go beyond that which is indispensable to the integration of the internees within society. The vocational training necessary for a trade shall, however, be offered.” In 1905, Brazil’s president, Rodrigues Alves (cited in Vaz 1905), argued that “A healthy modern city requires a population purged of its worst elements. . . . It is imperative and urgent that vagrancy, criminality, and vice be contained through the creation of correctional facilities and that the young people for whom these are intended be protected by means of education imparted in the appropriate institutions.”

The reality of “children’s aid and protection” mean a dichotomization of childhood. Just as the majority of the population was denied the full benefits of citizenship (Carvalho 1991), “minors” were given minimal education, just enough to make them useful workers. In highlighting the “minor” as one type of child, a type that encapsulated a dangerous childhood, the allied legislative and service provision sectors could easily justify their attempts at rehabilitating this group. After all, the goal was to civilize the country.

### **The Child-Saving Movement and Its Repercussions**

This chapter has examined the political arguments that awakened interest in childhood, arguments found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century attempt to make of Brazil a “civilized country.” Paradoxically, the example of countries that Brazil sought to emulate made it clear that it would not be easy to have a population that was at once educated and docile, hard working but amenable to the established order, efficient but unaware of the value of its labor, patriotic but uninterested in governance. The challenge was especially daunting given the instances of insubordination in the very “civilized” countries whose example the Brazilian elite wished to follow.

Notwithstanding the magnanimity of many Brazilian reformers, the discourse of

child saving was in truth an impediment to the extension of the rights of citizenship in Brazil. Although the future of the country was said to rest on the (re)education of children—that is, poor children — this meant they were to be conditioned for submission. The country focused on the creation of laws and charitable services for children deemed potentially troublesome rather than for a national policy of quality education accessible to all. This history forms a backdrop to the current reality of a country of profound contradictions where discourse and practice about the condition of children are nearly always at odds with one another. The political choices made in the early years of the Republic served the interests of those in power and paved the way for the vast social and economic inequalities the country now suffers . To this day, millions of Brazilian children are kept at the margins of society, and seen, like the poor in general, as a threat to law and order.<sup>9</sup>

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### Notes to chapter 7

<sup>1</sup> Numerous terms in this chapter, culled from the literature of the period – books, dissertations, speeches, newspaper articles, and laws – appear between quotation marks. The chapter emerges from extensive archival research, especially on the discourse of the concerned elite who took on the “cause of childhood.” This group, made up for the most part by men trained in medicine and law, some of whom worked in charitable organizations, held considerable sway in politics, in the press, and in the universities.

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of these issues, see the works of British historian Gertrude Himmelfarb (1983; 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Records suggest that 42 to 53 percent of the poor receiving relief in English parishes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were themselves children, even with an infant mortality rate in excess of 50 percent. According to Cunningham (1995: 111), these figures were similar in other parts of Europe.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the “institutional culture” underlying approaches to child welfare in Brazil in the twentieth century, see Rizzini (1992; 1997) and Piloti (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Similar terms were employed in France – *les enfants de la patrie* – (Donzelot 1980: 35) and in the United States (Peixoto 1933: 148).

<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the idea of charity, based on religious, i.e., Christian precepts, philanthropy is associated with the modern era, to a spirit of rationality and science. Gertrude Himmelfarb (1983) has argued that the eighteenth century was described as an “era of benevolence,” in which philanthropic entities ministering to the poor proliferated. The humanitarianism characteristic of this period is associated with the emergence of liberal capitalist society. See also Sznajder (1996).

<sup>8</sup> The comment was made in 1894 at the inauguration of a schoolhouse.

<sup>9</sup> This chapter was translated from the Portuguese by Tobias Hecht.