Jesuit Engagement in Brazil between 1549 and 1609
A legitimate support of Indian emancipation or Eurocentric movement of conversion?

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Abstract:

Even after almost 500 years we are still not sure how to view the missionary activities during the colonization of South America. Was the engagement of Jesuits in Brazil, for example, an extraordinary project in support of the emancipation and the development of autochthon people or just another imperialistic enterprise of Eurocentric cultural homogenization? Individual or collective self-determination is considered to be the normative core of any personal or political act. This standard of authentic action is the aim of any emancipation process and provides the criteria for every legitimate action of support. Only if support searches for securing or developing sources of personal or collective autonomy can it be justified. This requires, however, conceiving of the supported party as a subject of self-sufficient action. The Jesuit religious mission however saw the value of people in their potentiality to be Christians and not in their ability to be self-sufficient reasons of action. Seen in this way Jesuit mission applied, in contrast to the economical exploitation by the settlers, a softer version of cultural hegemony treating autochthon people as objects of catholic conversion.
The focus of this analysis is: Can the political and intellectual engagement of the Jesuits during the first period of the conquest of Brazil be considered a promotional act encouraging the emancipation of the indigenous population? There are at least two different possible answers to this question. The first answer is exemplified by the historian John Hemming (Hemming: 1995), who claims that we have to regard the politics of the Jesuits to have been a form of ethnocide, the intentional destruction of the Indian culture moving toward an Europeanization. The second, more optimistic reading of the conquest of Brazil is provided by the Jesuits themselves, by parts of the ‘official’ history of Brazil, as well as recent studies concerning the development of subjective rights. According to these modern studies the Jesuit mission represented a strong intellectual and ethical counterpart to Indian slavery. With their program of catechism, the Jesuits stood against the politics of the settlers and the Portuguese crown, which tried to exploit the indigenous population as cheap labor. In defense of the Indians, the Jesuits promoted the discourse of subject rights, which, from a contemporary perspective, can be read as the basis of the modern human rights theory. (Eisenberg 2004), (Eisenberg 2000), (Eisenberg 2007). In a more pragmatic sense the Jesuit laws declared the liberty of Brazilian Indians as argued by the Jesuit historian Serafim Leite (Leite 1965). To make the contrast here clearer, I will refer to this as the liberation through law thesis.

To briefly summarize: At first glance the discussion regarding the moral quality of Jesuit engagement during the initial years of Brazilian colonization moves in two directions. Critical historians and postcolonial thinkers hold it to be part of European imperialism, which led to an ethnocide of indigenous culture. The benevolent reading of the Jesuits’ praxis emphasizes their spiritually motivated mission strategy as humanistic counterpart to the general stereotype of political and economic colonization. This line of argumentation portrays the work of the Jesuits as a liberation of the Indians.

Even if there is strong dissent about the moral quality amongst the different studies concerning this part of colonial history and the systematic approach of missioning, the various positions all share a common ground:
Whether implicitly or explicitly all of these evaluations discussed involve — a standard of legitimate political action on the part of the Indians themselves. In other words, they more or less presuppose an ideal concept of cultural autonomy or development of the Indian culture.

To catch these intuitions of the moral value of autochthon self-determination and freedom from coercion, I propose an ideal concept of emancipation as a normative framework. Before we can try to solve the problem of an ethical evaluation of the Jesuit politics in the first colonial period between 1550 and 1609, we have to formulate criteria for a useful conception of emancipation. The analysis of the concept of emancipation leads us to the crucial problem of legitimate support of emancipation movements. The problem of legitimate support marks the difference between an act of self-liberation and liberation by another party.

As a basis for judging the Jesuit engagement it is helpful to explore the judicial discourse during the initial phase of the Portuguese settlement of Brazil. Let me briefly explain why I think it’s more fruitful to analysis the judicial discourse than to engage in a discussion of the most significant thinkers in Europe, like Francisco Vitoria and Domingo de Soto. While the judicial texts and the process of their development are concerned with some the Jesuit’s ethical and theoretical convictions as well as their aims, indeed the laws try to combine the special interests of the Jesuit mission with the reality of colonial Brazil especially the conflict with other political actors. We should take into account the theoretical framework of scholastic philosophy and practical implementation of the European ideals in the colonial reality, because, as I claim the intellectual guidelines of scholastic thinking as well as their realization culminated in a broader concept of mission – a theoretically empowered political strategy on the part of the Jesuits.

My argument proceeds in three steps: First, we have to formulate the criteria for legitimate forms of support in accordance with ideal emancipation. Second, we will analyze the juridical texts developed by the Portuguese crown that influenced Jesuit thinking. Finally, the third point involves judging the moral quality of the Jesuit mission as a possible tool for supporting emancipation.
I.

Let us begin with a short analysis of the concept of emancipation in order to get an idea of what legitimate support of emancipation might mean.¹ As I see it, emancipation seems to require an objective or perceived (1) situation of political oppression. This presupposes an object of oppression (an individual or collective political agent) which tries to become a self-governing political subject. For the constitution of this political agent we need an act of reflection which makes it possible for the agent to recognize himself as a political actor suffering political oppression. As such, the second step implies a kind of (2) self-recognition of the political agent as a political agent. As a consequence of the perceptual process of discovering the actor's quality and the situation of oppression, it's possible that the political aim of emancipation, which includes political actions and eventually the success of this self-emancipatory project of liberation. Finally, ideal emancipation leads to (3) the recognition of the agent by other political subjects. To briefly summarize: The political vocabulary of successful emancipation can be analyzed in terms of a three-step process. (1) recognition of political oppression, (2) recognition of the agent as an object of political repression and the eventual agent of a political liberation by the liberating subject, and (3) recognition of the former object of oppression as a political subject by other political agents.

Already within the theoretical framework of emancipation we discover a moment of self-awareness describing the political actor's self-discovery. This ideal process of self-recognition constitutes what I want to call the standard of authenticity. The criterion of authenticity refers to the insight that no obligation which is given to an actor by himself obligates him in an illegitimate way. In other words, only self-given obligations formulate the idea of a truly justified form of obligation.

¹ This analysis is inspired by Camus', Der Mensch in der Revolte und Fanon, (Camus 1996) and Fanon, Die Verdammten dieser Erde (Fanon et al. 2005).
Political actions which can be understood as authentic expressions of the means and the will of an actor can be seen as justified emancipatory actions.2

This is exactly what personal or political autonomy means, the self-determination of the subject. If we put it in terms of the language of democratic thought, we would speak of the identity of the governor and the governed.3 Even the standard of authenticity is theoretically speaking difficult, because it seems to require a certain kind of essentialism (Spivak 2008, 34). Politically speaking, it is a necessary part of liberation strategy and democratic thought.

Regarding the problem of authenticity in morality and politics we can easily recognize the difficulties created by actions taken in support of emancipatory processes. Every action undertaken by one actor to help another does not fulfill the criterion of authentic action. I will refer to this contradiction between the idea of support and emancipation as the problem of paternalism. In its most pronounced form this means that every obligation which is given to a moral or political agent is somehow invalid because it never arises as a product of authentic self-obligation. For the figure of paternalistic help this entails a dilemma, even if its aims are indeed morally convincing. Regardless of the intention, it is first with the performative character of help in which the moral dilemma arises. To help another actor emancipate himself implies, at same time, a burden of emancipation and authentic self-definition, because it necessarily treats the potential actor as someone who is not able to help himself. This prevents us from considering the actor to be someone who is able to define himself, and thus remains in the position of the victim.

2 This idea is well-known in the history of political thought. See Kant and Rousseau.

3 „Ohne religiöse oder metaphysische Rückendeckung kann das auf legales Verhalten zugeschnittene Zwangsrecht seine sozial-integrative Kraft nur dadurch bewahren, dass sich die einzelnen Adressaten der Rechtsnormen zugleich in ihrer Gesamtheit als vernünftige Urheber dieser Normen verstehen dürfen“ (Habermas 1992: 52).
I conclude: If we accept the standard of authenticity as the justifying criteria of every emancipatory action as a valid act of self-expression, which means that self-obligation is the only legitimate source of obligation, then we have problems with the principal of support. Every act of support requires, according to this perspective, a paternalistic action directed against emancipative ambitions. I call this dilemma the problem of paternalism. (Pogge 2007) (Pogge 2007: 35)

I believe the problem of the necessarily paternalistic structure of support can indeed be solved. Like the discussion of the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention shows, assistance can be legitimated, if it is a necessary precondition for every act of self-expression (Jokić et al. 2003; Orend 2006; Walzer 2007). If authentic self-expression cannot be reached simply by means of the actor’s own powers, then it would seem justifiable to treat the actor as a kind of object. Justifiably treating someone as an object means to speak in the name of the agent, if the agent is not able to speak for himself or if his statements are said to be unacceptable. To speak for someone who is not able to speak for himself is an act of paternalistic determination (e.g. as found in the German concept of “Vormund”). Against the intuition of post-modern philosophy⁴, I think that we can justify paternalistic determination. This, of course, leads to the position that I do not hold it to be morally wrong to speak in the name of someone else. It seems to me that paternalistic treatment is not per se unjustifiable, if we consider situations in which an actor is prevented or inhibited (in some real sense) from achieving self-determination.

I want to apply these principal insights now to the situation of the indigenous emancipation in colonial Brazil. If we agree that the aim of the indigenous population is authentic self-determination, which includes a variety of culture, rituals, languages, not to mention security and property, then the only way to justify the obviously paternalistic treatment would be to interpret their actions as securing the ability to self-determination.

⁴ See for example Levinas and Rorty.
Only if the Jesuits were in this sense ‘legitimate protectors’ of the Indians, could their invasive cultural strategies be deemed justifiable. This matches the Jesuit missionaries’ description of their activities: saving the Indians’ souls via catechism. Yet, this self-portrayal stands in opposition to others while accuse the Jesuits of ethnocide.

II.

In this section I am focusing on the political and juridical influence of the Jesuits in Brazil. The Jesuits arrived together with the first Brazilian Governor, Tomé de Sousa in 1549 in Salvador da Bahia. Manuel da Nóbrega was the leader and most renounced priest amongst the first missionaries in Brazil. Nóbrega studied in Salamanca and Coimbra before he joined the Companhia de Jesus at the age of 27. Five years later he was sent to Brazil and declared: “Esta terra é nossa empresa”.

Nóbrega and his colleagues reflected and coordinated their actions through the famous “cartas jesuíticas”. These writings were important sources of information about the new colonies for European politics and intellectuals. (Wright 2005) Moreover, they had a hermeneutic function for the interpretation of the holy will. (Torres Londoño 2002) The interpretation of the holy will led to the political strategy of mission in order to convert the local populations conquered by the Portuguese to catholic faith.

No contexto da espiritualidade dos jesuítas no século XVI, de alguma forma aqui tratada, tanto a missão como o que dela se escrevia estava conduzido pela busca da vontade divina. Princípio e fundamento do ser humano e da criação que se realizava na identificação do bem universal como o mais divino. Na proposta de uma ordem gerada em grande parte por ibéricos para servir à Igreja no século XVI, o bem universal foi identificado, em tre outros, na convocação para trabalhar no anúncio da boa nova aos infiéis da Ásia e da América. (Torres Londoño 2002, 29)
Beside the informational and the spiritual character of the cards, the Jesuits used them as a pragmatic set of tools by means of which to circulate their missionary strategies all over the world. This pragmatic character is shown in the "Diálogo sobre a conversão do gentio" (Nóbrega 1557). In this dialogue Nóbrega reflects in literary form about the conditions and goals of the conversation.

While this is not the proper place to analyze Nóbrega's writings, I would, nevertheless, like to point out that the Jesuits' thoughts and actions were more than just religious in character – they also included a political and very pragmatic program intended to convert the Indians.

Não devemos esquecer, todavia, que o motivo inspirador de toda esta discussão no âmbito da Companhia é eminentemente pragmático. Com efeito, o Diálogo, provavelmente elaborado visando a intenção de convencer a opinião pública católicaacerca do valor e da eficácia dos trabalhos missionários dos jesuítas junto aos índiosbrasileiros, obedece evidentemente à mesma lógica política e cultural que inspirou Nóbrega e a Companhia em sua atuação no Brasil. (Massimi 2003, 75)

Formally this praxis of conviction can be defined as a strategy of Europeanization because it tried to shape the ways of indigenous life in Brazil according to an European ideal (Schwartz 2005). The main goal of the Jesuits was neither to enslave them, nor to integrate them as workers into society. As Manual da Nóbrega mentions in a letter to Miguel de Torres already on May 8th, 1558, the Indian lifestyle stood in contradiction to that of the Jesuits in at least two important ways: (1) their habit of consuming human flesh (cannibalism) and (2) the tradition of polygamy. (Leite 1954, 154).


5 Conversion can mean either conversing by force or conversing by argument.
Firstly, the Jesuits tried to aggregate the Indios in their \textit{aldeias} in order to convert them to the catholic faith. The aldeias were small, European like villages which created a very particular living space for Portuguese settlers, Jesuits and of course Indians.

For the Indians the aldeias meant a new and unfamiliar living space. The customs as well as structural layout of the village must have been very strange for the Indios (given their previous living environment). Besides the living conditions, the aldeias created a new identity for the people. The all-encompassing concept ‘Aldeia-Indian’ was created and applied to Indians from different tribes with different cultures and languages. For the Jesuits the aldeias represented spaces for realizing a utopia already formulated in Europe. (Krumpel 1992)
Since the missionary movement was strengthened in the counter-reform to fight Evangelization, the Jesuits saw in the peoples discovered during the Portuguese expansionist movement an opportunity to shape Christianity and form a catholic community free from the problems which plagued the church at home in Europe. Because of this plan to create a purer and better Christianity abroad, the Jesuits in Brazil tried to keep a strategic alliance with the Portuguese Crown. As the priest Antonio Viera once said, they dreamt of creating a worldwide realm of Portuguese Catholicism. (Guerra Filho 2007) The Jesuits found an ideological congruence with the crown; one which supported their politics in an administrative and juridical way. As Georg Thomas put it, the Jesuits sought for the monopoly on the Indians administration. (Thomas 1968) In order to influence Portuguese politics in favor of the Jesuits, they made juridical proposals and decisions. (Leite 1965)

The well-known Caxa-Nobrega debate, for instance, referred to a law from 1566, and had to declare from a theoretical point of view the limits of free will. The question at the heart of their discussion was the legitimacy of voluntary slavery. If we follow José Eisenberg (Eisenberg 2000, 2004), this presupposed a special kind of free will for the Indians. From a historical point of view this debate influenced the European discourse on subjective rights, e.g. Luis de Molina’s Justia et Iure (Molina 1582). I do not want to concentrate on the theoretical issues of the laws and the discussion, referring to the practice of Indians those selling themselves or their relatives. Here I will simply to mention that the Jesuits tried to stop the exploitation of Indian workers by the settlers and the sequent enslavement of autochthon folks by the miners and famers. The 1566 law limited the legitimate reasons for enslavement and tried to minimize the conditions of voluntary slavery. Subsequent laws from 1595 and 1609 declared the Indians free. Against the political will of the settlers and after 1609, the Portuguese crown the Jesuits reached the installation of at least de jure freedom for the Indians even if de facto their enslavement could hardly be controlled.

If we follow the Jesuit self-interpretation of this initiative on behalf of the Indians, it is possible to read their actions as a form of heroic support for Indian emancipation.
In my opinion we can see the treatment of Indians by the Jesuits more clearly if we refer to the importance of missionary thought in the Jesuit ideology. The principal ‘mission matters’ is one of the main sources of the subjective motivation of every missionary. For the Jesuits, the idea of missioning gave them the chance to reach personal salvation. The Jesuits really insisted in their *Leitmotiv* that mission matters and searched for strategic alliances to promote their project. As a result of their missionary conviction, they were partners as well as critics of the politicians. The same thing can be seen in relation to the Indians as potential Christians. When necessary, the Jesuits accepted individual forms of belief to present their Catholicism in an acceptable way. However, on some points the Jesuits were not willing to compromise their convictions. The problem of barbarism caused one of the main issues for the pedagogical program of the Jesuits. Furthermore, they could not tolerate the practice of polygamy.

By focusing on the demonstrated importance of mission, it is easier to understand the Jesuit criticism of Indian slavery. The most important proponents of Indian slavery were the settlers, who tried to exploit the Indians as cheap laborers. In order to convince the Portuguese crown, the settlers often argued that both the practice and expansion of slavery was a matter of the economic necessity. However, the Jesuits – who were more or less in this respect in competition with the settlers – also tried to gain the support of the crown, in order to keep their administrative powers as well as the possibility of educating the Indians.

While I am no claiming that they are all the same, the logic of mission as well as every educational process or any act of support requires that subjects can be changed in a positive way. In the Christian terminology this means that the Indians were regarded as *a tabula rasa*. (See Massimi 2003, 71) They were in some sense recognized as human beings possessing an immortal soul. From this follows that they were not regarded merely as objects or ‘living’ tools as the Aristotelian argument for slavery does. On the other hand, the Indians were not seen as self-sufficient persons with the right to personal and cultural autonomy.
From the perspective of mission, the value of the Indians was connected to their potential to become Christians (Osterhammel 2007). My point here is that the perception of the Indians by the Jesuits is easier to understand if we refer to political and practical discourse of mission.

As Lukas K. Sosoe points out in reference to the Dominican Bartolome Las Casas, today still glorified as the first Spanish protector of the Indians, this view of the other is still an instrumental one (Sosoe 2007). As a result of this religious instrumentalization of the other, Castro called the work and the thinking of Las Casas “Another face of empire”. (Castro 2007)

In this imperialistic paradigm the other is not recognized as a source of self-sufficient reasoning and action. So the missionary strategy involves a strong paternalistic structure which presupposes the instrumental form of autonomy for the other as objects of the educational process. The idea of modern human rights, on the other hand, refers to persons as values in se, i.e. without the need for a speaker or supporter in order to reach the status of fully-fledged human.

I conclude: The strategy of the mission uses a strong paternalistic structure. According to the description put forward by the Portuguese Jesuits, their aim was to educate autochthon people to become good Christians. This meant regarding them as objects of catechism and not as people. This paternalistic strategy protected the Indians from the settlers and promoted laws securing their political liberty. In reality this was not fully reached. Nevertheless, even the Jesuit ideal would not have caused what we could refer to as a legitimate form of assistance toward emancipation. The Jesuit narrative of religious education could never have led to emancipation because it presupposes the Indians as a kind of victim in need of help. As I mentioned in the theoretical framework of this paper the only legitimate source of paternalistic determination can be the assurance or the help to make self-expression of an individual or a group possible. Therefore the self-determination of the other must be considered as the aim of politics, it must be indeed the aim of the politics and it must be possible to reach this goal with a program of support.
If the so-called act of help or emancipation is itself just a rhetorical figure to hide the oppressive character of conviction according to the supporters’ ideals and/or to create enduring dependencies, it is of course a non-justifiable act of paternalism.

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