

## **Jesuit Engagement in Brazil between 1549 and 1609 – A legitimate support of Indians' emancipation or Eurocentric movement of conversion?**

Stefan Knauß<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Even after almost 500 years we are not sure how to judge about the missionaries activities during the colonization of South America. Was the Engagement of Jesuits in Brazil for example an extraordinary project to support the emancipation and the development of autochthon people or just another imperialistic enterprise of Eurocentric cultural homogenization? Individual or collective self-determination is considered as 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 it can be justified. This requires the notion of the supported party as a subject of self-sufficient action. Jesuit religious mission instead saw the value of people in their potentiality to be Christians and not only in their ability to be self-sufficient reasons of action. In this perspective 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.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Jesuit Mission, Scholastic Philosophy, Emancipation, Conversion, Identity, Authenticity, Bartolome Las Casas, Manuel da Nóbrega

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 for 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 Indians' culture with the aim of an Europeanization. The second, more optimistic reading of the conquest of Brazil is provided by the Jesuits themselves, parts of 'official' history of Brazil as well as new studies concerning the development of subjective rights. According to these modern studies the Jesuits' mission represented a strong intellectual and ethical counterpart against 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 human rights theory. (Eisenberg 2004), (Eisenberg 2000), (Eisenberg 2007). In

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<sup>1</sup> / SCM Halle (Saale)

a more pragmatic sense the Jesuit laws declared the liberty of Brazilian Indians – albeit to varying degrees. This interpretation is also supported by the Jesuit historian Serafim Leite (Leite 1965). To make the contrast here clearer, I will call this last thesis the *liberation through law* thesis.

To briefly summarize: At first glance the discussion regarding the moral quality of Jesuit engagement during the first years of Brazilian colonization offers 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 an act of *liberation* of the Indians.

Even if there is strong dissent about the moral quality within the different studies about this part of colonial history and the systematic approach of missioning, the various positions start from a common ground: All of these evaluations involve – implicitly or explicitly – a standard of legitimate political action on the part of the Indios themselves. In other words, they more or less presuppose an ideal concept of cultural autonomy or development of the Indians 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 Jesuits' 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 actor's liberation by himself and the liberation of an actor by another party. After the development of the normative framework for my analysis, I'll come to the empirical data.

As a basis for judging the Jesuit engagement it is helpful to explore the *judicial discourse* during the initial phase of the Portuguese settlement in Brazil. Let me explain why it seems to me more fruitful to do an analysis of judicial discourse than a discussion of the most significant thinkers in Europe, like Francisco Vitoria and Domingo de Soto. The judicial texts and the process of their development involve some of the Jesuit's ethical and theoretical convictions as well as their aims. On the other hand, the laws try to combine the special interests of the Jesuit mission with the reality of colonial Brazil and in particular the battle with other political actors. I argue that we have to take into account the theoretical framework of scholastic philosophy and practical implementation of the European ideals in the colonial reality. I claim that 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.<sup>2</sup> 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. So the second step means 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 quality and the situation of oppression can follow 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 which describes the political actor discovering himself. 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. 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.<sup>3</sup> This is exactly what personal or political autonomy means, the self-determination of the subject or if we put it in the language of democratic thought: the identity of the governor and the governed.<sup>4</sup> Even the standard of authenticity theoretically is difficult, because it

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> This idea is well-known in the history of political thought. See Kant and Rousseau.

<sup>4</sup>,Ohne religiöse oder metaphysische Rückendeckung kann das auf legales Verhalten zugeschnittene Zwangsrecht seine sozial-integrative Kraft nur dadurch bewahren, dass sich die

seems to require a certain kind of essentialism (Spivak 2008, S. 34). Politically speaking, it is a necessary part of liberation strategy and democratic thought.

In the problem of authenticity in morality and politics we can easily recognize the difficulties created by actions of support for emancipatory processes. Every action undertaken by one actor to assist/help/support another does not appear as an action of help and support by another actor 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. Far from the performance of help just the intention of help creates a moral problem. To help another actor to emancipate himself would be, at the same time, a burden of emancipation and authentic self-definition, because it necessarily treats the potential actor as someone who isn't 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.

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 principle 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 philosophy<sup>5</sup>, I think that we can justify paternalistic determination. This, of course, leads to the position that I don't 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, when we consider situations in which an actor is prevented or inhibited (in some real sense) from achieving self-determination.

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einzelnen Adressaten der Rechtsnormen zugleich in ihrer Gesamtheit als vernünftige Urheber dieser Normen verstehen dürfen" (Habermas 1992: 52).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Levinas and Rorty.

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. Only if the Jesuits were in this sense 'legitimate protectors' of the Indians, could their invasive cultural strategies be deemed justifiable. We know that the self-description of missionary praxis was exactly this: saving the Indian's souls via catechism. Yet, we are confronted, on the other hand, with the accusation that this praxis led to ethnocide.

## II.

Now I come to the second part focusing on the political and juridical influence of the Jesuits in Brazil. The Jesuits arrived together with the first Brazilian Governor Tome de Sousa 1549 in Salvador da Bahia. Manuel da Nóbrega was the leader and most famous 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 the aim: "Esta terra é nossa empresa".

Nóbrega and his colleagues reflected and synchronized 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) On the other hand, they had a hermeneutic function for the interpretation of the holy will. (Torres Londoño 2002) The interpretation of the holy will by the Jesuits led to the political strategy of mission, to convince/convert the local populations conquered by the Portuguese of/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 infieis 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 thinks in literary form about the conditions and goals of the conversation.

While this is not the proper place to analyze Nóbregas 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 católica acerca do valor e da eficácia dos trabalhos missionários dos jesuítas junto aos índios brasileiros, obedece evidentemente à mesma lógica política e cultural que inspirou Nóbrega e a Companhia em sua atuação no Brasil. (Massimi 2003, 75)

Formally this action of conviction<sup>6</sup> can be defined as a strategy of Europeanization because it tried to shape the ways of indigene life in Brazil according to an European ideal (Schwartz 2005). The main goal of the Jesuits wasn't either to enslave them, nor to integrate them as workers into the society. Like Manual da Nóbrega mentions already on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1558 in a letter to Miguel de Torres, 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).

A lei qua ilhes hao-de da é: [1] Defender ilhes comer carne humana e guerrear sem licenca do Governador, [2] fazer ilhes ter uma só mulher, [3] vestirem-se, pis tem muito algodao ao menos depois de cristaos; [4] tirar ilhes os feitixeiros; [5] mante-los em justicia entre si e para com os cristaos; [6] faze-los viver quietos, sem se mudara para outra parte se nao for para entr os cristaos, endo terras repartidas que ilhes bsate, e com estes Padres da companhia para os doutrinas (Leite 1954, 445–459).

Firstly, the Jesuits tried to aggregate the Indians in their *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.

O que permanece logo após uma atenta leitura do Regulamento é que os missionários elegeram um lugar em que pudessem colocar em prática uma espécie de utopia de sua ética cristã, confirmação máxima de sua identidade como jesuíta pertencente a uma Ordem religiosa com características marcadamente expansionistas. Esse lugar – a aldeia – comportava no mesmo espaço (social e físico) homens e mulheres que ao longo do tempo vivenciaram experiências diversas e, portanto,

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<sup>6</sup> Conversion can mean either conversing by force or conversing by argument.

construíram significados bem diferentes do que normatizavam para si e para os outros, os companheiros de Jesus. Para os colonos, moradores de arredores, a aldeia significava a possibilidade de uma mão-de-obra indígena de baixo custo e disponível; para a Coroa, a certeza de sua soberania numa região desprovida de elementos urbanos com suas formas representativas de poder através de câmara, justiça e fisco, além, de trabalhadores índios para serviços reais; aos índios, a aldeia significava um espaço seu, de vivência comum que apesar de novos elementos introduzidos com os portadores da Cristandade eram cotidianamente re-elaborados de maneira que pudesse comportar espaços de liberdade, uma estratégia de ação e resposta indígena diante das incertezas mesmo que, em última instância, continuassem sob dominação (de Maia 2008, 199).

For the Indians the aldeias meant a new and inhabit living space. The customs as well as structural layout of the village must have been very strange for the Índios (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 which they already formulated in Europe. (Krumpel 1992) The missionary movement was strengthened in the counter-reform to fight Evangelization, so the Jesuits saw in the peoples, who were discovered during the Portuguese expansionist movement, an opportunity to shape Christianity and form a catholic community free from the problems which suffered 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. Like the priest Antonio Viera said, they dreamed 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 searched for the monopoly of the Indians administration. (Thomas 1968) In order to influence the 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 fixed a special kind of free will for the Indians. From a historical point of view this debate influenced the European discourse of subjective rights, as we can see in Luis de Molina's *Justia et Iure* (Molina 1582). I don't want to concentrate on the theoretical issues of the laws and the discussion, which refers to the practice of Indians who were selling themselves or their relatives. I just want to mention that the Jesuits tried to stop the settler exploitation of Indian workers and the sequent enslavement of autochthon folks by the miners and the farmer. The

1566 law reduced the legitimate causes of enslavement and tried to minimize the conditions of voluntary slavery. The following laws from 1595 and 1609 declared the freedom of the Indians. Against the political counterpart 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 engagement for the freedom 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* mission matters and searched for strategic alliances to promote their project. Because of this 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. Yet, 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 accept the marriage of more than one wife.

By focusing on the demonstrated importance of mission, it is easier to understand the Jesuit criticism against Indian slavery. The most important proponents of Indian slavery were the settlers. They 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.

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 weren't regarded merely as objects or 'living' tools as the Aristotelian argument for slavery does. On the other hand, the Indians weren't seen as self-sufficient persons with the right to personal and cultural autonomy. The value of the Indians resulted from the perspective of mission in their potentiality to become Christians. (Osterhammel 2007) My point here is that the perception of the Indians by the Jesuits is better to understand if we refer to political and practical discourse of mission.

As Lukas K. Sosoe points out in reference to Dominican Bartolome Las Casas, who today is still glorified as the first Spanish protector of the Indians,

this is still a instrumental view of the other. (Sosoie 2007) Because 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 isn’t 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 of 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 against the settlers and promoted laws securing their political liberty. In reality this wasn’t fully reached, nevertheless, even the Jesuit ideal wouldn’t have caused what we can refer to as a legitimate 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 presentation, 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 itself is 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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