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13 - 15 JULY 1994

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

HISTORY WORKSHOP

BEHIND BRAZILIAN 'RACIAL DEMOCRACY'
RACISM, CULTURE AND BLACK IDENTITY IN BRAZIL

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BEHIND BRAZILIAN "RACIAL DEMOCRACY"
Racism, Culture and Black Identity in Brazil

Michel Agier[1]

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we trie to understand the recent transformations of racial and cultural fields in Brazil, specially in Bahia, the most black city in Brazil. Firstly, the historical formation of racism is examinated, through relations and values issued from slavery, scientist theories, whitening policy and the myth of racial democracy. Then, the usages of cultural african heritage are discussed to understand the current formation of new identity models among afro-brazilian people.

Paper to the conference

Democracy: Popular Precedents, Popular Practice and Popular Culture

Johannesburg, 13 - 15 / 07 / 94
History Workshop / University of the Witwatersrand

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Status, Power and Racial identity

For many years, an evolutionist paradigm dominated the studies of socio-racial relations in Brazil; that of the contradiction between a society of *status* (inherited from the past) and a society of contract or class (in formation). This latter would be implanted by the processes of industrialization and urbanization, and would necessarily eliminate the former. This paradigm has led the incapacity of conceiving blacks' question in another way than residual and out of contemporary economic and political realms. Bastide tried to overcome this difficulty, turning to the idea of the "cut principle". Alluding to, actually, the individual dramas of blacks in social ascension (and, in a certain way, to the fragmentation of schizophrenic identities), the "cut principle" allows one to think of the permanence (autonomous or – why not ? – intentional) of Afro-Brazilian cultural practices, in a context where *status* associated with blackness would not make sense anymore. The old racial stratification would be contradictory to new social classifications (Bastide 1970: 66, Bastide and Fernandes 1959). A black social identity would not fit into a theory of modern social relations. Into this last would enter only dramas, dilemmas and psychological maladjustments, always transitory, generally observed among blacks out of their "place", that is, in a situation of social ascension (Pierson 1971, Azevedo 1955, Fernandes 1968, 1978).

In spite of their theoretical and ideological variations, these analyses (prevailling in the 1940's-1960's) shared two presuppositions. Firstly, the fact of theoretically subordinating racial identity to social position. Secondly, the fact of separating, as Bastide did exemplarily, the sociological analysis of blacks in urban and industrial society (studies realized, in this case, in Sao Paulo), and the anthropogical analysis of Afro-Brazilian cultural practices (investigated, by Bastide, in Bahia).

The idea of a relative autonomy of racial identity would come later, in the 1970's, in particular with the studies of Carlos Hasenbalg. Thus, the question of racism was opened within the scope of social sciences in Brazil. Nevertheless, marked by a unique social negativity, and still without reference to cultural history, black identity appears in these studies as merely a depreciated status in the labour market. Racism is pointed to in functionalist terms, as an instrument manipulated by capitalism in order to maintain the subordination of black workers (Hasenbalg 1979, 1985). It seems, them, necessary

to analyse in detail the historical constitution of the racial dimension of social life, as part of brazilian culture.

In current Afro-Brazilian practices and institutions, be they of a religious, cultural, social or political character, a discourse of black difference has been developed. This is sufficient to suggest the need to re-examine past analyses - some excessively functionalist, others immoderately culturalist - that foresaw, implicitly or explicitly, the disappearance of racial differences and the dissolution or extinction of a diacritical Afro-Brazilian cultural reference. We shall see, first, in which social and political contexts such discourse is developped.

Just as there exists a clash, in Brazil, between heterodox forms of work and labor relations (Lautier 1987), it can be said that there exists a clash, at the collective level as well as within individual trajectories, between various manners of social identification. On the one hand, new classes - the middle class and the new working class, principally - are clearly present in the field of Bahian political and social struggles. These classes produce the local standards of modernity in terms of work, consumption, political discourse, living conditions and leisure. On the other hand, social positions are reproduced in day-to-day urban relations, using the backdrop, codes and metaphorical language of family relations in order to qualify and classify individuals and their social conditions (Agier 1992a). Social pseudo-categories (the "poor", the "middle class") are recreated within great idelogical cleavages, and allude more to the problems of humanity, modernity and citizenship than to mere social condition (Telles 1991). In this situation, poverty is synonymous with family dependence and with political invisibility. It is also presente, as a set of negative social representations, in the struggles for *status* carried out within working class families or in the lower middle class.

In examining the spectrum of present social statuses, we find "politicaly informed social identities" (Da Matta 1985: 57), or rather, identities defined in relation to the acess to social and political recognition of the individual. This citizenchip, which is not given and always needs to be achieved, is distributed unequally among the various professional categories and social strata. Experienced in the daily life of the individual, this problem is translated through political and social movements into the opposition between the ideas of exclusion and citizenship.

The reorganization of urban space in Bahia in the period 1965-1985 (transference of *favelas*[2] to the periphery of the city; new middle class neighborhoods along the city's ocean drive; an extensive area of housing complexes in the northern zone of the city) evidenced and reinforced the differences between a visible society, the poor masses that should remain invisible, and flows of modern social mobility, in a city that in 1950 had 400,000 inhabitants, and that today has a population of approximately two millions, an extensive petrochemical pole, various Petrobrás units, the Aratu Industrial Complex, etc.

Social, urban and economic changes have been particularly important during the past forty years in Bahia. Nevertheless, with respect to the social production of identities, they have not been greatly significant when compared with the great dream of democratic redemption that from the late 1970's, suceeded the toughest era of the military dictatorship. Slowly, tension betweem the democratization of civilian life and the selective character of urban life and economic transformations has been established. This has resulted in a greater political visibility for the excluded, frustated and exploited of all kinds (blacks, women, slum dwellers, homosexuals, proletarians, etc.) that, institutionalizing themselves[3], could demand of the state, in an aggressive manner, those social rights which belong to an economic and political modernity.

This introduces the question of identities in modernity. In a society where the state does not act as a direct and general coordinator of the social order, social movements (and the new identities that they bring to life) are channels used by citizens as they attempt to achieve citizenship. To feel oneself, present oneself and have oneself represented as middle class, slum dweller or working class, or yet, to affirm oneself as black, means at the same time to manifest positions in the order of status (which implies immediate social "rights"), to search for legitimizing cultural differences, and to define true interest groups. Sociabilities and movements are thus formed in which are born

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[2]Slum communities on the outskirts of the major brazilian cities.

[3]By means of numerous labor unions; professional, neighborhood and mother's associations; and by means of cultural, political and community movements, etc.

dreams and resistance projects, alongside hegemony and struggle for power.

Comprising one of the elements of the recent economic and political changes, the emergence of new black practices and discourses has resulted in a movement that has gone on in Bahian society.

Immediately, it would be fitting to question what part of the population is concerned with this movement. The definition of this population, however, already constitutes a problem in itself. According to census categories, "negroes" (*pretos*) represent a little less than 20% of the population of Salvador. However, in the various black circles, all persons who are non white are considered "black" (*negro*), which percentage is close to 80% of the population.

The question, for the social scientist, is not to choose between two conflicting principles of racial classification – both referring to the same racialism, as we shall see. But it is important to explore the margin created by this symbolic conflict. Within such margin, relational identification is developed. The various mechanismes of *negra* identification operate in a population which is undeterminedly black and mestizo, within a tendency that pass from the racial dimension of identity to the ethnic dimension or, using Michael Banton's expression, to pass from the negative to the positive[4].

Slavery, racialism and racism

The reinvented identity of black Bahians can be characterized, firstly, as the symbolic transformation of a group that has previously been defined by the racism of the other. Ethnic problematic is thus a product of race relations (Banton 1979, Balibar 1988). In order to analyze the formation of current Bahia racism, it is necessary to point out four cumulative historical moments.

The status of slaves

A primary element of status is the political invisibility of the slave's condition. In effect, the radical invisibility of slaves in the nascent ideology of an independent Brazil must be acknowledged in order to understand how, in

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[4]Michael Banton (1979:153) counterposes the concept of ethnicity "reflecting the positive tendencies of identification and inclusion", to the concept of race, which refers to the "negativist tendencies of dissociation and exclusion. On racial classifications in Brazil, see Maggie 1991.

1824, the liberal *inteligentsia* could write in the country's first constitution that "liberty is an inalienable right of man", while 48% of the population was still enslaved.

This same question of political invisibility is found in present problems of citizenship, experienced individually or expressed collectively in social movements. Between the present category of the "excluded" and the old category of the slave, there exists a theoretical analogy (the association of a social condition with a political position) and, at the same time, a direct, historical affiliation.

In the absence of individual juridical status, the slaves exercised their social identity through their relationship with the master, attempting to negotiate, within the context of white power, individual or collective spaces of autonomy or social promotion, or even their freedom (Mattoso 1979, Reis and Silva 1989).

In master-slave relationships, intimacy, cordiality and the master's protection of the slave were maintained as long as the slave stayed in his "place". This compensatory and conditional familiarity continues to constitute a characteristic of racial domination. Today it is verified directly in the labour relations within the greater part of domestic employment, for example. It also manifests itself in the childhood remembrances of black adults, in which a "protective white family" is frequently found and is often an object of nostalgia and rarely of rancor.

The racialist theory

Parallel to the development of movements favorables to the abolition of slavery (and among the abolitionists themselves), there forms, in the mid-19th century and some years after Independence (1922/1923), a liberal and nationalist form of thought. In order to create a Brazilian identity, it was necessary to classify the various social and cultural groups that existed: Native Amerindians, colonists of Portuguese origin, and blacks – slaves or ex-slaves.

Turning to the theses of European racialism of the time – naturalist and evolucionist –, the Brazilian *intelligentsia* consolidated the system of domination formed during slavery, exchanging juridical subjugation for racial theory. Indians, blacks and the whites were observed, and classified according to the combination of their physical appearance and social position.

Gobineau, one of the principal inspirers of Brazilian racialism, was also the French ambassador to Brazil in Rio de Janeiro from April 1869 to May 1870. It is worth noting that, if on the one hand the state of Brazilians'racial "degeneration" (an allusion to their racial mixing) angers him, on the other hand, he is sensitive to the fact that the emperor Pedro II, recognized as a liberal and an abolitionist, is aware of his ideas with respect to race. Together, they discuss "the emancipation of the slaves, that [Dom Pedro] intends to grant at the earliest possible instance, and in the best possible manner, in order to head emigration in the direction of Brazil, particulary the emigration of Catholic Germans" (Readers 1934: 48). Later, Gobineau would make projections for the suppression, in "less than 200 years", "of the pitiful elements of the contemporary ethnic composition [of Brazil], fortifying them with alliances of higher value with European races" (Gobineau 1873-1874: 148).

A racialist, Gobineau is also an adept of the naturalist thought prevailing at the time. Thus, still in Brazil, he cannot help but be moved by the dazzling beauty of the tropics: "This Brazil is a wonderful country and I believe that the old world does not present anything like it in terms of its wildness". (Readers 1934: 32). He is happy to receive as a present from the emperor himself "a graceful indigenous oar and bow" (ibid: 48), or yet, to have with him a worldly conversation about the *guarani* language. In the molds of the scientism of the time, racial classification consisted of, above all, a naturalizing process of observation. The positivists thus give equal attention to nature and the purity of vegetation, as to nature and the purity of populations. A similar approach can be found, almost a century later, in Gilberto Freyre's project envisioned to create a body of knowledge specific to the tropics, the so-called "tropicology".

The "fable of the three races" (Da Matta 1987) would associate the set of indigenous ethnic groups - unified by outside eye to the category "*Indio*" - with savagery and the marginality; black skin and negroid features with social inferiority; and the European appearance with power and rationality[5]. Within this train of naturalist thought, blacks were labelled with features drawn from observation of their social condition and position, and from aesthetic and moral values that, until that time, constituted the common thought of white domination. Carelessness, irresponsibility, dishonesty, Dionysiac tendencies, dirtiness,

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[5]The trilogy of superiority, marginality and inferiority that the poet Caetano Veloso points out, in a precise formula of Brazilian racism: "The white adult *macho* always in command / (...) Cross out the indians / Don't expect anything of the blacks" (*O Estrangeiro*).

ugliness, coarseness, the incapacity to reason, etc., were thus explicitly and systematically associated with the black "race", forming what today are called black'sterotypes[6].

The systematic policy of whitening

The policy of whitening (*branqueamento*) of the Brazilian population, and the modernizing discourses that accompanied it, prevaleid during the end of the 19th century – which was the Abolition era (1888) and the era of the first Republic (1889) – and the beginnig of the 20th. It was no longer possible to pass from racial hierarchizing to eugenism, as the pure logic of racialism thought dictated. Consequently, in a society where the mixing of races was already well advanced, a policy of whitening of the Brasilian "race" was initiated. This was enalted by way of public measures encouraging European immigration – a policy that was inspired by an explicit principle of aryanization of the country, and that had as its aim the extinction and dilution of the black "race", which would result in the ascent of a Prometheic society (Skidmore 1976).

The progressive miscegenation of Bahian society is a cultural fact, not a natural occurence. It cannot be separated from the official imposition of aryanization (by the political and intellectual elites). This aryanization has left its marks on the evolution of the racial composition of the population of Salvador[7]. And ideological mark is found in expressions such as "clean up the

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[6]A proliferation of proverbs, stories and sayings about blacks have sedimented these stereotypes in the common mind. It is, however, a "shameful" knowledge : each one pretends that it is others who use racist verbalization - which is secularized but hardly socialized. The "implicit" character of Bahian racism, often emphasized, is a result, in fact, of a peculiar learning process that teaches two elements : racial classification, and the non-verbalization of the principles of classification.

[7]Taking as reference four important years, which pertain to the various phases of racial relations (1807, 1897, 1940, 1980), one can observe that the proportion of the black population of Salvador presents a progressive decline, from 52% in 1807 to 38,4% in 1897, 20,1% in 1940 and 17,3% in 1980 ; and the rate of mestizos presents a progressive rise : 20,1% in 1807, 29% in 1897, 51,1% in 1940 and 58% in 1980. It is verified that, in the period 1900-1940 (when the political imposition of aryanization dominated), the decline in the number of blacks was more accentuated (-47,6%), the progression of the number of mestizos as well (+76,2%). These evolutions would slow down sensibly after 1940. [Note: the data from 1807 and 1897

race" or "improve the race", used in the 1930's by black mothers reffering to their children born from an union with a man of lighter skin (Pierson 1971: 182).

The ideology of racial democracy

As the fourth step of the brazilian racial thought, the ideology of racial democracy was developed beginning in the 1930's, during the era of the *Estado Novo*[6] and the formation of Brazilian nationalism. It takes up again and reformulates the previous constructions: the intimacy of racial domination, the meeting and dissolution of the three races in a national project, the tropical peculiarity of the Brazilian nature and culture, the nationalist ideal of whitening.

This ideology is supported by two principal arguments. On the one hand, it is based on an appearance: the cordiality of Brazilian social life. This character is constantly remembered in the foreigners' recollection. It was due to this that, in the 1930's, confronted with a timid and unfruitful effort to organize a black movement in Bahia (the *Frente Negra*, Black Front), the Bahian press replied in the following terms :

> *« It has always been a motive for surprise and admiration for the foreigner, the lack of distinction that he finds in Brazil, among all men (...). It was thus before 1888 and thus it has been since. In the world, we are a people born and raised outside the hateful backdrop of racial prejudices, in this respect superior to other peoples. Bahia (...) has no need for "black fronts", copied from other climates, in order to present to Brazil the perfect fraternization of its sons »*
> (A Tarde, Salvador, 12/06/32, in Brandao 1987: 41).

It is, indeed, enough to look through a stranger's eye at Bahian society to perceive the peculiarity of social customs and ways of self-presenting and of relating to others. These customs and ways are overflow with embraces, hands on others'shoulders, the attribution of loving nicknames, the use of dimunitives, congratulations, flattery, and other forms of charm in inter-personal relations. These characteristics attempt to, and usually succeed in, eliminating the effects (tensions and conflicts) of social differences and domination within the public

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are estimates, those from 1897 inferred from the death registers ; the data from 1940 and 1980 come from censi].

[6]"New State" : the term refers to the period of Getúlio Vargas'government and his populist and nationalist agenda.

domain. It is the universe of the "cordial man".

> The "cordial man" is a notion used by the historian Buarque de Holanda, in his book Roots of Brazil, first published in 1936. As a response to the criticism of his interpretations of brazilian cordiality, Buarque de Holanda would be careful to note, in 1948, that cordiality was not to be confused with kindness and that, as a reference to the emotions involved in social life, these last could mean friendship as well as enmity. "The discipline of pleasantness", the cordiality referred to by Buarque de Holanda, "is the generalized socialization of the codes of intimacy, family and privacy."[9]

The second principle of the ideology of racial democracy is the theory of miscegenation. It is significant that this argument was extracted from a work of social anthropology, Casa Grande e Senzala by Gilberto Freyre, published in 1934. Gilberto Freyre's reasoning is the following: Brazilian society could hardly be racist, due to the intimacy of relations maintained, since the era of slavery, by the Master's sons (and by the Master himself) with black servants, particulary the women. This domestic intimacy in inter-racial relations would generate a reciprocal habit of living with racial difference, favoring the mixture of the population, notwithstanding the strong differences and social dependencies contained within these racial relations (Freyre 1974, Bastide 1970: 77-87).

Founded on these two evidency's arguments, the myth of racial democracy in Brazil progressively took hold as an imposition: the social, or even institucional, prohibition of speaking about racism or racial prejudice. It is what Florestam Fernandes called "the prejudice of not having prejudice", or yet, that which a French sociologist, in the 1950's, praised as "the great wisdom of Brazil": the fact of knowing how "to avoid discussing this" (Lambert 1953: 61). The ban on speaking of racism was even written into one of the Institutional Acts of the military regime which began in 1964.

Racial and unracial self image of Blacks

The Brazilian racism of today is made up of a complex system of domination, which has incorporated these various phases. Four successive stratas – composed by the master-slaves relationship, the racialist theories, the policy of whitening and the ideology of racial democracy – formed the brazilian racial thought and practices. It is thus a system formed by the co-existence of:

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[9] Buarque de Holanda 1987 : 101-112 and 143-146. Later, Roberto Da Matta would develope and enrich these analyses (1983, 1985).

(i) an important set of racist stereotypes; (ii) the secularized assumption that the place of blacks is in the lower layers of the social hierarchies and outside the holds of power; (iii) a discipline of inter-personal relations whose purpose is to avoid conflictive situation; and finally (iv) the prejudice that affirms that it is not convenient to speak of racism in the land of all the mixtures.

A primary dimension of the self image forged in the Bahian black movement consists of remaining in this complex terrain of racialized social relations, simply inverting the values attributed to the old terms. In this way, the term "black", disparaging according to the values forged during slavery, has become a banner for blacks and mestizos engaged in the movement, or "assuming" their physical appearance. The very word race was recuperated, with inverted meaning, as praise for the physical, mental and artistic qualities of the "black race". *In this way, for example, the stigma of Dionysiac tendencies, until that time* counterposed to competitiveness and to work, is transformed into a festive competence of a "race" that is a natural creator of culture and commercializable pastimes. The physical features of blacks, which the stereotypes of Bahian history associated with barbarity and rudeness, have become positive values created in the name of a purity and force arising from Nature itself. It is the case of the myth of "pure beauty", that can be read as a form of cultural resistance, as well as an inverse recuperation of the romantic aversion to miscegenation.

This inverted usage, by black Bahians, of the notion of a "black race" has the same power and drawbacks as the use of the methaphor of the "pariah" by 19th century European feminists (Varikas 1990). In both movements, forms of inversion and naturalization of identity permit the same minimium level of resistance. Nevertheless, this practice consists of no more than a rehandling of the substance of a group whose boundaries and identity have already been delimited by a system of racial domination. For the "black race" in Bahia, as well as for "pariah" women of 19th-century Europe, it is better to be excluded (radicaly outside of society) than dominated. The invention of a black identity *per si* can hardly integrate into the constraining situation of predefined racial relations: Brazilian racism in Bahia does not have a form of exclusion and segregation, but rather a diffused and unconfessed form of integration and domination. As a pseudo-racial identity, being black became a shameful identity within the social and political order. It needs, thus, to be related to other dimensions of social

urban relations. The usage of cultural heritage – a new political africanism – is thus a way to enable Brazilians of African descent imagine their origins in distant Africa, reinterpret the social and racial differences that have developed in Brazil, and create a positive identity suited to today's realities.

Culture and Identity Models

The religious sphere, the usual means of differentiating black Bahians, is where African consciousness (principally, but not exclusively, embodied in references to yoruba ritual) enables the redefinition, in cultural terms, of the "black identity" previously defined in racialist ways to justify black social and political inequality.

This same African consciousness is well socialised, at the cost of various simplifications, into the discourses and activities of the socio-cultural groups (carnival associations, *capoeira* groups, painting and sculpture, theatre, dance, etc.) whose references derive principally from religion, even if this involves the lengthy apprenticeships of those adults not socialised into the world of the *candomblé*.

Finally, it's in the milieus of religion and cultural associations that political groups and politicians try to mobilise a black community that is socially, racially and culturally distinct.

The political uses of culture appear to be the most logical recourse - as a form of resistance and self-assertion - in a context of social competition and inequality. The Afro-Brazilian identity is being redefined in a society that is under growing strain, balancing increased social and political separation against selective socio-professional integration (not necessarily synonymous with advancement)[10]. Its diacritical character seems to result from select, even exclusive, social changes, while at the same time being essential to the creation of a field of ethnic relationships that confers legitimacy to a different usage of the cultural heritage regarded now as "African". It is as a result of this dual character that it is, within its proper boundaries, organised on a principle

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[10]This is particularly the case in Bahia, which has experienced rapid economic changes within the last thirty years, as well as significant social mobility tied to industrialisation and the development of a service industry catering to industry and to the city.

that joins purity and power.

Each domain of black cultural and political activities has thus made 1) its "pure" centre and point of reference in one part, 2) its "impure" midpoint in another part and, 3) its boundaries with the "white world". The three cultural models of Afro-Brazilian identity represent, respectively, the fundamental reference, the closer "others" and the more distant "others". None of the three can, today, be made sense of without reference to the others. Each person knows very well how to orientate themselves, automatically identifying (even without acknowledging them in speech or appearance) the reference point and its "decharacterisations" - that come "from the street" and that of the white influence.

This approach enables us to identify the precise homologies between the component parts of this milieu. In religion, the Yoruba worship is the reference point, the others (Angolan *candomblé*, *umbanda*) are judged according to its standards. The Angolan *capoeira* is at the centre of the schools of *capoeira* (a mixture of dance and fighting), followed in importance by the "regional" and then, what is known as, "street" *capoeira* (distinguished from the others in being danced on the street). In the carnival groups, the "African" reference which acts as guardian of its "purity" is the Ile Aiyê. The Olodun is said to be "decharacterised" (too "regional", in some ways) and Muzenza is a version of "the street" (violent). Lastly, in the political milieus the MNU embodies the black political model, other groups being notable for their party affiliations and traditional religious influences (in some ways, white influences). Still others are criticised by these first groups for the lack of rigour in their language and behaviour.

We see that the purity model, the street model and that of white influence properly belong in each of the three fields presented at the beginning of this text: religious, socio-cultural and political). It shows us the creation of a specific ideology, and it suggests the importance of the transformations that the referent Afro-Brazilian culture (particularly the religious) may be subject to. The social problems of contemporary Brazil require that the referent culture play a prominent role in establishing places and values that can help coloured people maintain and improve their positions in social competition, "as blacks". Such a role involves the work, within the ideology, of selecting, hierarchising and labelling cultural and ancestral practices. These are, in the same global

process, further popularised and exposed to other views and interpretations, thus also becoming themselves subject to competition".

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[11]This paper is a summarized form of two articles (Agier 1992b, 1993).

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