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***Mestizaje* and Conviviality in Paraguay**

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## **Mestizaje and Conviviality in Paraguay**

Barbara Potthast

### **Abstract**

This paper traces the origin of the powerful *mestizaje* discourse as a marker of Paraguayan identity through the lens of gender and family relations. Rules and practices of family formation and sexuality reflect not only cultural but also socio-political hierarchies, and they allow us to connect the micro- and macro levels. An analysis of the different regimes of conviviality in Paraguay and the role that legitimate or illegitimate birth played in the struggle over group formation and social hierarchy also shows the capacities of a peripheral colonial elite to establish their own standards of social distinction, or the ones of the old elite in early independence period to circumvent a policy directed at their destruction. Finally, we explain the rise of the nationalistic ideology of *mestizaje* as a uniquely Paraguayan characteristic at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the reasons for its persistence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

**Keywords:** mestizaje | conviviality | illegitimacy | nationalism

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## 1. *Mestizaje* and National Identity

*Mestizaje* has become one of the most important, but also most contested concepts in Latin American social history in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. While creole authors like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Garcilaso de la Vega or Guaman Poma de Ayala already manifested their *mestizo* identity in writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, *mestizaje* as a socio-political concept gained importance only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Bolivian author Franz Tamayo (1910) and Mexican José Vasconcelos (1925) were at the forefront of propagating the notion of a “cosmic race” (Vasconcelos) as the outcome of *mestizaje*. With similar reasoning regarding the mixture of Portuguese and African Slaves in Brazil, Gilberto Freyre (1933) laid the foundation of what later became known as the idea of “racial democracy”. They all promoted the idea that through the mixture of the different groups within the population, despite legal separation, an ethnically homogeneous national population had developed in colonial times. In a peculiar adaptation of contemporary European racial theories, Latin American political thinkers turned race mixture into a positive feature. They contested the idea that it would lead to some kind of “pollution” of supposedly pure groups, and stated that it would bring out the best of the implied “races”. In accordance with their respective histories and populations, most Latin American Republics developed specific discourses on *mestizaje* during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> These usually imply biological as well as socio-cultural “mixture” of Europeans and Indigenous peoples; only Brazil and to a certain degree Cuba also took into consideration their large Afro-American populations.<sup>2</sup>

These national discourses on *mestizaje* usually established a vision of relatively harmonious processes of mixing and living together, rooted in colonial history, and were unquestioned until well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only then did Indigenous movements in the political sphere, and postcolonial thinking in the academic sphere, challenge these ideas of national homogeneity. On the scholarly side, the concept was criticised for excluding Afro-Americans (Vinson 2018: III), but more so for denying or neglecting the unequal power relations and colonial oppression underlying *mestizaje* (Chorba 2007). Nevertheless, the concept remains important in academic research and has enriched postcolonial theories (Gruzinski 2002), while modern scholarly research has tried to come to terms with this critique by including issues of inequality and power relations in the concept, and acknowledging that, as Peter Wade stated, “[i]t is this co-existence of racism and conviviality that lies at the heart of *mestizaje*” (Wade 2018: 10).

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1 A good overview of the different definitions of the concept of *mestizaje* see Soto Quirós, Ronald and Díaz Arias, David (2006: 14). For an analysis of the concept in Mexico see Zerméño Padilla (2008).

2 Argentina marginalised its Indigenous and African communities, but nevertheless created an idea of their country becoming a *crizol de razas*, in this case of Europeans.

Among the Latin American countries that have established a *mestizo* national identity, Paraguay is probably the least studied. But it is, perhaps, the country in which the concept has most pervaded the national mentality. Even today the majority of Paraguayans (as well as Paraguayan and foreign historians) do not question *mestizaje*, be it biological or cultural. This has to do with the unique process of state- and nation-building in Paraguay, which underwent early state- and nation-building right after independence, but was then questioned after the defeat of the country in an epic war against its neighbors (1864-1870, “War of the Triple Alliance,” by the allies called “Paraguayan War”). As a reaction to this defeat, the discourse of *mestizaje* as the essence of Paraguayan nationhood was established at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a group of urban intellectuals started a debate about citizenship, identity, and nationhood in line with the ideas in other Latin American countries. Against the (partly enforced) liberal political and economic principles that ruled Paraguayan society after its defeat by its neighbors in the War of the Triple Alliance, a group of young Paraguayan intellectuals began to question the liberal consensus and searched for a reinterpretation of recent history in order to define a new national identity. This line, called revisionist, became the hegemonic and widely accepted interpretation during the 1930s, after the Chaco War against Bolivia, and was later enforced and politicised by the military dictatorships and the Colorado Party (Brezza 2010b). Little has changed since the transition to democracy in 1990, despite some scholarly publications by anthropologists as well as historians that question the harmonious national *mestizaje* myth.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary; although Paraguay has since declared itself a multi-ethnic country, the discourse on *mestizaje* as the foundation of Paraguayan national identity is still powerful and omnipresent (Brown 2010: 18-26). The nationalist doctrine

has proved more resilient, flexible, and durable than expected, reflecting a high level of internalization of national identity. This in turn suggests that the official discourse was [...] constructed on deeply held ideas of geographical, cultural, historical, and linguistic difference” (Lambert 2015: 1).

For this reason, instead of trying to demythologise certain ideas of national identity, an endeavor which is doomed to failure given the strong roots of this discourse in Paraguayan collective memory, analyzing conviviality and ethnic as well as socio-economic inequality might be a better tool to explain the creation and the role of Paraguayan ideas of inclusion and belonging. I will, therefore, give a brief description of Paraguayan forms of ethnic conviviality up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the formation of the “revisionist” view of national history started, in order to explain why this discourse was so successful.

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3 See the works of Bartolomé Meliá from a linguistic perspective (Meliá 1988; Meliá 2003), historians Cooney (2011), Ganson (2006), Potthast (2011), Telesca (2009) and anthropologist Wilde (2016 [2009]).



The cornerstone of Paraguayan national identity is the War of the Triple Alliance (of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay) which almost annihilated the country as a nation. The reconstruction after the war included a (re-)formulation of national identity as follows: before the war, Paraguay was a pacifistic and progressive country, ethnically and socially homogeneous, which existed for several decades in a sort of “splendid isolation.” Then the bloody war, which the Paraguayan government had declared a matter of self-defense, almost led to the extermination of the nation. The Paraguayans were defeated by an army that greatly outnumbered them, and despite or because of their heroic fighting, almost all the Paraguayan men were killed. The belligerent Paraguayan spirit, which is described as a perfect mix of Guaraní and Spanish characteristics, was preserved by the women, who reconstructed the country.

I will not focus on the war and its gendered interpretations in this context (Potthast 2011; Capdevila 2010), but rather on the ideals of conviviality during colonial times and the first decades of independence, since they supposedly formed the Paraguayan exceptionality. However, I will describe not only the ideals of inter-ethnic conviviality as depicted by the national narrative, but also the findings of critical recent historiography on this topic.

The key elements of the Paraguayan discourse of national identity are geographical isolation, a strong sense of difference, and threat from the neighboring states, as well as the idea of a homogeneous *mestizo* population, visible (or, better, audible) through the general use of the Indigenous Guaraní language. These three elements are intrinsically linked to each other. The foundation of the linguistic peculiarity was laid during the first decades after conquest and can be attributed to the region’s geographical isolation. This was intensified during the first three decades of independence, which was based on self-imposed isolation, due to the perception that Paraguay was different from and threatened by Brazil and Argentina, and later led to its violent manifestation during the War of the Triple Alliance.

Since language plays such an important role in the context of Paraguayan national identity and *mestizaje*, some information on the ethnic and linguistic situation is appropriate: scholars of different disciplines have insisted on the importance of the Guaraní language as a central element of conviviality in Paraguay, and stressed the social, cultural, and political consequences of bilingualism (Nickson 2009). From a linguistic perspective, Rubín stated that “Paraguay is unique in the relationship of the aboriginal language to Spanish, the language of the conquerors [...] Paraguay probably has the highest degree of national bilingualism in the world” (Rubin 1968, 22, 116). At the beginning of the 19th century, an estimated 99% of Paraguayans spoke Guaraní, and only 10% were proficient in Spanish. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, two-thirds of the 6 million Paraguayans stated that they speak Guaraní and Spanish, while

another 27% of the population said that they only spoke Guaraní (Verón Gómez cit in. Lambert 2015) – and we must remain aware that we are talking about a population of which only 2% are considered “Indigenous” (DGEEC Paraguay 2003: 30).<sup>4</sup> Official recognition of the Indigenous language as part of the nationalistic discourse came with the Paraguayan Constitution of 1967, issued by long-term dictator Alfredo Stroessner. It declared Guaraní to be one of the national languages, with Spanish being the official one. The Constitution of 1992, which marked the beginning of the democratic transition, declared both Spanish and Guaraní to be official languages, and gave rise to the establishment of various bilingual education programs. This clearly sets Paraguay apart from other Latin American countries, although critics say that the Indigenous language continues to be the less prestigious, associated with rural “backwardness,” and that Spanish is the *de facto* official language (Villagra-Batoux 2008; Melià 2003: 245-445).

## 2. Colonial Conviviality: Ethnicity, Gender, and Class

### 2.1 Conviviality and Conquest

The conquest of what is now Paraguay was initially based less on military confrontation than on establishing an alliance with the local Guaraní population, which received help from the Spaniards in their battles against neighboring Indigenous groups. The alliance was officially made through an offering of Indigenous women to the foreigners. Through the (one-sided) exchange of women, men on both sides obliged themselves to mutually help and support each other (Potthast 2011: 19-30).<sup>5</sup> With the consolidation of the Spanish presence in the region, the establishment of a colonial system, and a society based on estate or *casta*, these personal ties were doomed to lead to abuse and violence by the Spaniards. The Guaraní tried to rebel, but with little success. They were no longer needed as warriors but as a workforce, and with the introduction of forced labor under the *encomienda* system in 1556, the more or less peaceful convivial situation ended, and with it the reciprocity that was based on familial ties.

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4 Unfortunately, the population census of 2012 does not register the use of languages, but that of 1992 provides detailed data, including about region, gender, etc. (República del Paraguay 1994: 19-30). According to the census of 1950 (1992) [2002] language use was as follows:

Paraguay	Total (%)	Asunción
Only Spanish	4.7 ( 6.35) [8]	13.0 (21.40)
Only Guaraní	40.1 (39.25) [27]	10.6 ( 2.39)
Guaraní and Spanish	53.8 (48.90) [59]	76.1 (73.48)
Other	1.4 ( 6.35) [6]	0.3 ( 2.70)

5 See the classic work of Clastres on the subject (Clastres 2010 [1974]), and also Wilde (2011: 28-30) and Potthast (2019) for critiques.



As in other places, the unions between Spanish conquistadors and Indigenous women had occurred outside of matrimony. But, given the absence of any other legitimate European descendants, the Paraguayan *mestizos* formed the new leading group. Due to the lack of precious metals and the precarious living situations, the following decades did not bring any significant Spanish immigration, least of all of Spanish women, which is why the conquistadors were left with no other choice but to confer to their children, whom they had had with Indigenous women, the status of legitimate heirs. These offspring were legally considered Spanish, but their close relationships with their Indigenous mothers were indicated, among other ways, by their everyday use of the Guaraní language and their dietary customs (Ganson 2006; Wilde 2011).

These “hispanicised” *mestizos*, who at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Paraguay were called “Spanish Americans” (and later simply “Spaniards” or “Paraguayans”) (Cooney 2011: 20-22), distanced themselves socially and politically from other *mestizos* and their descendants who lived in the Guaraní social groups of their mothers and relatives, and due to the concept of the “two republics” came to be considered Indigenous. The *mestizo*-Indigenous living in the *pueblos de indios* were subjected to serving in the forced labour system of the *encomienda* until the end of colonial rule. Despite the spatial and legal separation, the ties with the “Spanish” society were close, not least because of the general use of the Guaraní language. Another important factor was the mobility of the Indigenous men, who had to serve as collectors of *yerba mate*, the most important export commodity of Paraguay.<sup>6</sup> Over the years, the barrier between the “Spanish Americans” and the “indios” slowly disappeared. Socio-economic ties between the two groups and cultural similarities brought about a situation in which it was becoming increasingly easy to move between them. Starting at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many Indigenous people began registering themselves as “Spanish-American” or “Spanish,” when the latter groups started to invade the territories of the Indigenous villages (Whigham 1995: 157-188; Telesca 2009: 176-205; Galeano 2014: 357-360). Besides these *pueblos*, as of 1609, Jesuit missions were also being established. These missions have become famous for the perfection of the system of *reducciones*,<sup>7</sup> the great number of the Indigenous people living there (140,000 indios in 30 villages in 1732), as well as the long duration of the missions themselves. In the Paraguayan *reducciones*, Guaraní was the “official” language, and the missionaries put the language into writing, creating a grammar book, dictionaries, and catechisms in Guaraní. Guaraní students also wrote stories and letters, especially in the context of the expulsion of the Jesuits and the enforced displacement of some of the villages due

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6 Until the end of the 19th century, Paraguay practically held a monopoly on the production of the highly popular herb.

7 Missionary territory to which dispersed Indigenous populations are “removed,” and where no other Europeans or *mestizos* were allowed to live.

to an agreement between Spain and Portugal on the frontier in the region (Meliá 2010: 435; Wilde 2001, 2016 [2009]). These events, as well as the subsequent expulsion of the Jesuits, led to violent resistance by the Guaraní of the missions, which was only subdued by the joint armies of Spain and Portugal in the region. Contrary to what was claimed by 19<sup>th</sup>-century historiography, usually hostile to the Jesuit order, the Indigenous population did not “return to the forest” after the missionaries were expelled, but went on to be part of the Spanish-*mestizo* population (Telesca 2009: 161-206). In addition, the Franciscan missionaries, who had taken over, opened the *reducciones* for secular traders and unfavourable labour contracts. The male population subsequently fled to the newly flourishing estancias down the river, in what would later become Argentine territory (Telesca 2009; Whigham 1995).

## 2.2 *Mestizaje*, Family, and Social Hierarchy in the Colony

The first generation of Paraguayan *mestizos* were the principal protagonists in the conquest of the Río de la Plata, including the refoundation of Buenos Aires. These *mestizos* also led the establishment of new cities, thereby claiming for themselves legal status as Spaniards, as only Spaniards had the right to establish new cities (Mora Mérida 1973: 297-298). However, since the term *mestizo* had a pejorative connotation in the Viceroyalty of Peru, Paraguayans opted for the prouder term *mancebos de la tierra* (young men of the soil) (Kahle 2005: 84-92), which indicated the development of an individual group consciousness in which their Indigenous origins were not negated, but lost importance. Later generations formed an elite, which was composed of the offspring from the first conquistadors, who tried to socially separate themselves from the rest of the population by marrying within the same group, or with one of the few Spaniards in Paraguay. They did not constitute a social group with a clear profile, but “the mentality of belonging to a specific estate, inherited by its peninsular predecessors, must have permeated profoundly the mentality of the first generation of *mestizos*” (Krüger 1996: 166).<sup>8</sup>

It would therefore be wrong to speak of a *mestizo* elite from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, since these “*mestizos*” were not only referred to as, but also considered Spanish, although they showed some peculiar characteristics, such as the use of the Indigenous language and certain regional customs (Krüger 1996: esp. 170 , Potthast 2011: 44-48 ).

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8 “La conciencia estamental heredada de los progenitores peninsulares debió impregnar profundamente la mentalidad de la primera generación de mestizos, la que dentro del marco de aislamiento y pobreza de la provincia, se aferró al orden social tradicional de la madre patria, limitando las relaciones sociales, incluso el connubio al círculo de personas del mismo nivel”.

The formation of a Paraguayan elite was thus the result of the establishment of extended familial networks, especially through marriage. The formal criteria for *hidalguía* (nobility), however, had to be different from those in Spain or Spanish America because purity of blood and legitimacy was not important here.<sup>9</sup> In Asunción, there was a small group of *criollos* (Spaniards born in America), but the term was practically unknown, and they did not constitute a well-defined group. About twenty Spanish families of European origin lived in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Paraguay (Mora Mérida 1994), but first tensions among *peninsulares* and *españoles americanos* (as the *criollos* were called here) arose only at the very end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when a new wave of immigrants from Spain changed the social setting in the region, and Spaniards began to play an important role in the local economy, and consequently also to occupy the honourable municipal positions.

Until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the lack of *limpieza de sangre* and legitimacy on the part of the *españoles americanos* in the local elite had not constituted a legal obstacle for appointment to an office or the inheritance of an *encomienda*. In the first decades of colonial rule in Paraguay, there was no documental allusion at all to the question of legitimacy of a person in question, and later the concept was interpreted in a very broad sense. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, virtually all individuals in public positions were declared “legitimate,” without a clear notion of what this really meant.<sup>10</sup> In the core areas of the Viceroyalty of Peru, however, the fact that most offices in the region were occupied by *mancebos de la tierra* aroused the suspicion of the Spaniards.<sup>11</sup> Viceroy Toledo severely criticised the benevolence of the crown with respect to the Paraguayans, who had recently rebelled against the nominations of officers from the Peninsula and asked to be considered for those positions themselves.<sup>12</sup> An inspector sent from Lima in 1598,

9 Although legally the Indigenous were considered a “noble race,” and marriages with Indigenous women did not downgrade a Spanish conquistador, such marriages only took place with members of the ruling group in highly stratified and culturally elaborated Indigenous societies like the Inca or Mexica. In regions like Paraguay where the Indigenous people did not live in hierarchical societies, such marriages were of no use to the conquistador.

10 See the biographical data in Quevedo (1984: 59-102). The most cited example of this procedure is the testament of governor Domingo Martínez de Irala, who named his nine children and their Indigenous mothers. The latter were ennobled by giving them the title “doña”. After a conflict within the group of the conquistadors, however, he married some of his daughters to rival conquistadors, and thus helped to create a mainly Spanish elite.

11 “Tienen por uso y costumbre ser la amior parte Estos manzevos nacidos En esta tierra que se rrepartan Entrellos los / oficios de la rrepublica como son alcaldes / ordinarios y rrejidores y alguazill maior y menores y estan tan enpuestos ya en ello que como son los mas salen con lo que queiren adonde los españoles Vezinos y conquistadores y pobladores de los tales puedblos lo rreciben por agravio / quellos sean sienpre preferidos En los tales / oficios” (Levillier 1915: 373).

12 “No sé cómo se puede satisfacer a la Real conciencia de Vuestra Majestad, nombrando a los gouernos dellas a la boluntad de los que allá biven y están tan cargados de hijos e hijas mestizas y mulatas y que quedarían nuestros súbditos y vasallos con tener a éstos por superiores y ser gouernados dellos. ... Nos desvelamos tanto en buscar medios como se quite el peligro de los mestizos desta tierra, y casi todo del Paraguay es dellos” (cited in Cardozo 1959: 156).

however, opted for the opposite solution. He recommended promoting the sons of the conquistadors to the offices of the province in order to restore peace and obedience to the Crown. In the end, Spain tacitly accepted that the illegitimate *mestizo* offspring of the conquistadors had the same rights as the legitimate Spaniards, as had been the case in this isolated province ever since the conquest (Cardozo 1959: 155). This is, we can conclude, a good example of how conviviality, defined as processes and everyday practices of negotiating identities and regimes, work even in colonial settings. It also reveals the multiplicity of actors and categories that come into play.

In Paraguay, more important as a marker of social distinction than the ethnic and regional background was an individual's descent from a conquistador, and a legal title to an *encomienda*. Practically all Paraguayan petitions to the Crown until well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century speak about the poverty of the region, even among the elite, and insist that their forefathers had conquered the region at their own costs and by their own efforts, "*a su costa y minción*" (Krüger 1996: 114-115; Mora Mérida 1973: 210-211; Potthast 2000). Of course, this argument covers material interests, but it can also be read as an attempt to compensate the lack of *limpieza* or *hidalguía* by stressing the warrior qualities of the inhabitants of this frontier region.

Over time, a new notion of nobility was established based on the *encomienda*, military, and administrative offices, as well as certain other positions (Cooney 2011: 23-24, 32). In this way the elite distinguished itself from the majority of the population, although they shared the same language and certain cultural values not only with the majority group, the "*españoles americanos*," but also with Indigenous people and those of African origin. The latter groups were not discriminated against because of a cultural "otherness," which was difficult to make out, but because they were subjected to particular fiscal and labor obligations (Telesca 2009: 165).<sup>13</sup>

The revisionist history later idealised this process as follows:

In this way, the Guaraní Indian does not figure as a strange and contradictory element in the formation of the Paraguayan nationality. [...] From the first moment on, [the Indio] searched for an alliance with European civilization, but gave it an American aim and the spirit of the mother country. [...] By this process, America began to conquer the conqueror (González 1940: 105).<sup>14</sup>

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13 Telesca even sustains that one cannot speak of interethnic relations in Paraguay unless one considers the relationship between Paraguayans and the Indigenous people in the unconquered Chaco region.

14 "De este modo, el indio guaraní no aparece como un elemento extraño y contradictorio en la formación de la nacionalidad paraguaya [...] Desde el primer instante buscó aliarse a la civilización europea, pero dándole un fin americano y dotándole del sentido de la tierra materna [...] Mediante este proceso, América comenzaba por conquistar al conquistador".

### 3. Independence

The independence of Paraguay was directed much more against the domination of Buenos Aires than against a distant Spain. Buenos Aires, which due to its geographic position had a monopoly on relations across the Atlantic, initiated a commercial boycott against Paraguay, and the junta of Buenos Aires sent a “liberating” army. The Paraguayan militias defeated the troops from Buenos Aires, removed the Spanish governor from office, and installed a Regency Council, of which the lawyer Dr. Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia was the head political figure.

In 1811, Paraguay became *de facto* independent from Spain and Buenos Aires, but due to the possibility of a blockade of the fluvial system by Buenos Aires, outside trade remained problematic. Furthermore, Paraguayan trade was dominated by people from Buenos Aires or Spain who had immigrated to Paraguay in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and they had no interest in cutting ties to the port. These political differences brought about crises within the junta, and the lawyer Dr. Francia came out as the strong person. It was in October of 1813 when a Paraguayan General Congress, with around 1,000 representatives who had been elected as representatives proportional to the populations of their respective districts – a formula that restricted the influence of the urban merchants – declared the “Republic of Paraguay”, and designated Dr. Rodríguez de Francia and Fulgencio Yegros as consuls (according to the classical Roman system) to govern the country. A subsequent Congress named Dr. Francia “Supreme Dictator of the Republic” for a period of five years, and in 1816 he was named “Supreme and Perpetual Dictator of Paraguay.” Still today, the government of the “Supreme Dictator of the Republic” and the interpretations of it are the object of great discussions, not only among researchers, but also in the field of politics and among the general public. But there is a certain unanimity of agreement that the fundamental objective of Dr. Francia’s politics was to protect Paraguayan independence. In order to do so, he revoked the power of the new (peninsular and creole) business elite and the Catholic Church, refused to participate in conflicts with neighboring states, and suspended almost all economic and political exchange with them.

Dr. Francia’s political support came from peasants, ranchers, military men, and some medium-sized business owners; his political rivals were primarily landowners and business elites, many of whom had immigrated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During his administration, Dr. Francia began stripping the Spanish-born new elite of their influence with a series of economic and social measures (Potthast and Telesca 2012). There was, however, one decree of Francia’s, directed at the Spanish population, which has been qualified as one of the key moments of Paraguayan *mestizaje*. The consul stipulated the following:



No marriage whatsoever of a European man with an American women, known and recognized as Spanish in the country (folk), from the first to the last class of the state, as low and humble as it might be, will be authorized, on pain of punishment with the estrangement and confiscation of the belongings of the priests or pastors who authorize the marriage, and the exile of the European who contracts [the marriage] for ten years to the Fort Borbón and the confiscation of his property. [...] But the Europeans can marry Indian women from the Indian villages, recognized mulato and negro women (Baez 1907: 397).<sup>15</sup>

Modern authors have considered this decree to be a conscious attempt to increase *mestizaje* among the Paraguayan population. They stress the homogenizing intentions in a period crucial for the state-building of the country. In the words of Günter Kahle, the decree imparted a “vigorous impulse” to the already quite advanced national consciousness (Kahle 1992: 287).<sup>16</sup>

An argument against this is the fact that the decree did not apply to the Paraguayan elite, although this might be explained by the fact that it was no longer powerful. Furthermore, Dr. Francia did not revoke the special status of Indigenous peoples (although he did revoke the tributes in 1812). If he had actually wanted to foster the mixture of Indigenous people and “whites”, the abolition of the *casta* system would have been sufficient. But during the government of Dr. Francia, colonial rules about the conviviality of the different *castas* were maintained, although they increasingly lost importance (Whigham 1995: 157-188).

Likewise, if Dr. Francia had intended to “mix the races”, as has been claimed later, his project completely neglected the black population (Wisner de Morgenstern 1996: 137). One of the Spanish decrees, the *pragmática* of 1776 on “unequal marriages”, which forbade weddings of white or Indigenous people with persons of African descent,

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15 Decreto del 1.3.1814: “1.º Que no se autorice matrimonio algun de varon europeo con mujer americana conocida y reputada por española en el pueblo desde la primera hasta la última clase del Estado, por ínfima y baja que sea, so pena de extrañamiento y confiscación de bienes de los párrocos ó curas Autorizantes de tal matrimonio; y de confinamiento en el Fuerte Borbon del europeo contrajente por diez años y confiscación de sus bienes. [...] Pero los europeos podrán casarse con indias de los pueblos, mulatas conocidas y negras” (Baez 1907: 397). In the beginning, the decree only applied to Europeans who had moved recently to Paraguay, but it was extended, in 1828, to all foreigners, even those of other Latin American countries.

16 See also White (1978) and Fournial (1985). Other authors interpret this decree to be in line with Dr. Francia’s “levelling” politics, and only implicitly consider the ethnic homogenization (see Burns 1980).



were left in place and sometimes enforced by the Dictator (Cooney 2011: 34).<sup>17</sup> With this, he reinforced traditional prejudices towards mulattos, as Jerry Cooney confirmed in his study on marital dissent in “unequal” marriages based on colonial marital laws. Cooney continued, stating “the decree was dictated with the intention of punishing the *peninsulares*, reduced to the level of an inferior caste in a society that was jealous of the privileged castes” (Cooney 2011: 35).

I would like to emphasise this point because I think it is the starting point for the misinterpretation of the decree on the part of many historians. Apart from symbolic degradation, this decree’s primary intention (like that of all measures against foreigners) was to limit the economic and social hegemony of the elite from Spain and Buenos Aires. It was a way to prevent the accumulation of wealth through marriages within this class. However, this does not mean that it tried to promote *mestizaje*, nor that the “mixing” happened at all.

During Dr. Francia’s administration, the “foreign” (and, to some extent, the Paraguayan) elite lost their economic supremacy, but the Spaniards maintained their *esprit de corps* and did not mix with the Indigenous population, much less with those of African descent. Instead of marrying people from other social groups, be it poor Paraguayan *mestizos*, Indigenous people or mulattos, the upper class preferred to “live in sin” with people of their own social standing. Those who did not get into severe trouble. Such was the case of Hilario Recalde, who asked permission to marry a young woman from Buenos Aires who had lived in Paraguay for quite some time. The dictator not only denied permission but put Recalde and some other men who had supported him in jail (although only briefly) with the accusation that they lacked “patriotic feelings” (Vázquez 1975: 317-318).

Due to this policy, from 1814 onwards most children in the former elite were born out of wedlock, as the children of the popular class had been for a long time. The strategy of the elite – to stay “low-profile” in social and political terms and wait for better times to come – was clearly seen after the dictator had died in 1840. His successor, Carlos Antonio López, a member of the traditional Paraguayan elite, immediately suppressed

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<sup>17</sup> The hostile attitude of Dr. Francia against the black population in his country is sometimes explained by rumours that his father, who came from Brazil, had a mulatto background (Wisner de Morgenstern 1996: 19-20).

Petitions for marriage permissions, and oppositions to marriages with “pardos,” are to be found in Archivo Nacional Asunción (ANA) – Sección Histórica (SH) 1866 (Pedro Alcántara Galván, 1816 y Pedro Pablo Arce 1820/21), ANA-SH 2108 (Maria Ana Oliambre, 1815), ANA-SH 2156 (José Ignacio Rojas 1814), ANA-SH (Eugenio Penayos, 1815), ANA-SH 2156 (Juan Bautista Mora, 1815), ANA-SH 220 (León Medina, 1815), ANA-Nueva Encuadernación (NE) 2906 (José Ignacio Catiñanez, 1814), ANA-NE 2909 (Tomás Aquino, 1815), and various others from the year 1816 in ANA-NE 2911, ANA- Sección Judicial y Criminas (SJC) 2220.

the marriage ban on “foreigners.” As a consequence, numbers of marriages, and petitions for marriage, increased significantly (Cooney 2011: 42-43).<sup>18</sup>

Instead of fostering *mestizaje*, Dr. Francia’s decree contributed to the propagation of cohabitation and its social acceptance among a class that, up until that point, had been the representatives of European Catholic norms.

All of Dr. Francia’s measures in this respect, from the legislation about marriages with “foreigners” to his policy against the Church (Potthast 2011: 72-75; Cooney 2011), had a deep impact on the social structure of Paraguay. It was not only the economic and social structure that was affected, but also what at that time was referred to as the “public moral” (*moral pública*). The Swiss travellers Rengger and Longchamps were of the opinion that this decree legitimised the already existing “moral disorder” (Rengger and Longchamps 1827: 31). And indeed, marriage lost its importance for distinguishing the elite from the lower classes, and the number of illegitimate children, called “natural” children in Paraguay, increased significantly. From an already high rate of almost half of the registered births in the urban parishes of the capital, it reached almost 80%. In the second-biggest Paraguayan city, Villa Rica, it climbed from more than a third to over half of the births, and only in *pueblos* in the countryside did numbers remain below 50% (Potthast 2011: Appendix, Table 5 and Figure 2).

High rates of *hijos naturales* can be interpreted as an indicator of more relaxed sexual mores than the Catholic ones, and must also lead to a different interpretation of female honour. While it is true that at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Spanish officials like Félix de Azara were already scandalised by the mores (or the lack thereof, as they saw it) of the gaucho population in the countryside (Azara et al. 1941: t. II, 188) in Paraguay, during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this indignation by European travellers was extended to the “good families.” The Swiss doctor J. R. Rengger, for example, was surprised that even in the upper-class families, unmarried women tried to hide pregnancies.<sup>19</sup> Other visitors offered similar opinions, and some decades after Rengger, an Irish author and newspaper editor declared that “[p]ublic morality does not stand high, and it is said of Francia that he enforced all the Commandments except the sixth (anglicé the seventh)” (Robertson 1839: 145; Mansfield 1856: 352-353; Mulhall 1864: 108; Masterman 1870: 50).<sup>20</sup>

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18 In ANA-NE, vol. 712 there is a “Legajo de 21 espedientes de extranjeros para contraer matrimonio con paraguayas, año de 1841,” see also other marriage petitions from 1842 in ANA-NE 1932, 1954, 1969, 2002, 2007, 2140, 3008, 3022, 3313. See also Tables 3 and 4 in Potthast (2011: 402-404).

19 “[U]na chica soltera de buena familia, no encubría su parto llegado el momento y se mostraba después públicamente, sin la mas mínima vergüenza” (Rengger 1835: 409, 411, 415; Rengger et al. 2010).

20 The French chargé d’affaires Laurent-Cochelet was of the same opinion, as cited in Rivarola (1988: 110). On the other hand, travellers always stressed the beauty of the Paraguayan women (Rengger 1835: t.1 311; Robertson 1839, Mulhall 1864: 88).

The general acceptance of sexual relations outside of holy matrimony, and feminine codes of honour that did not insist on rigid sexual abstinence by the women, as the Catholic doctrine had dictated up until then in Paraguay as elsewhere, became common even among the upper class, and thus more strongly rooted in the population as a whole. Attempts by Dr. Francia's successor Carlos Antonio López to erase *amancebamiento* – that is, living in a more or less stable partnership without being married – were not very successful (Potthast-Jutkeit 1991). Hence, during Dr. Francia's government there was no great increase in *mestizaje*, understood as a biological process, but the classes grew closer in their social and moral behaviour.

Furthermore, we need to remember that the idea of state unity based on racial or ethnic homogeneity was not a common concept in Latin American countries until the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Stepan 2015). It was not until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that racist and positivist ideologies started being propagated, and in Paraguay ethnic homogeneity only became an important element of national identity during the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870). The first to try to interpret Dr. Francia's policy in this way was an Austrian engineer and military man who arrived in Paraguay a few years after Dr. Francia's death. In 1863, President F.S. López put him in charge of writing a rectification of the accusations made about Dr. Francia's government, which mostly stemmed from Argentina. The start of the war the following year prevented him from finishing the book; the manuscript was only published in 1876. At that time, Europe and Latin America were strongly influenced by positivist and racist ideas. It was only within this context, which was very different from the early years of the Republic, that one comes across the theory that the two consuls had the intention of racially homogenizing Paraguay.<sup>21</sup>

#### **4. The Rise of the Ideology of the *Mestizo* Nation**

When Wisner wrote his book on Dr. Francia, it was not only at a time when romantic 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas of the nation as a culturally and ethnically homogeneous people prevailed, but also when Paraguay was struggling with the consequences of the terrible war against Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. This war cost the country a great part of its territory, about half of its population, and, most important in this context, it led to the imposition of a new liberal ideology and political system by the victors. In addition, the intense propaganda from both sides during the war had intensified the idea of cultural differences between the belligerent countries. The Paraguayan propaganda press,

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<sup>21</sup> Wisner de Morgenstern attributes this intention to Yegros, while at the same time he stresses that all decrees signed by him were initiated and prepared by Dr. Francia: "Yegros se vanagloriaba haber firmado tal Decreto, pues sostenía que había necesidad de dictar tal medida para establecer el cruzamiento de la raza" (Wisner de Morgenstern 1996: 137). On the person of Wisner see Kahle in Wisner de Morgenstern (1996: 25-76).

edited in Spanish and in Guaraní, partially adorned with pictures of popular artists, depicted the allied soldiers as ethnically diverse, and heavily drew upon gendered and racial stereotypes in order to ridicule the enemy. The Paraguayans, in contrast, were depicted as white or *mestizo*, but more importantly as homogeneous. Especially in “*Cabichuí*,” Paraguayans were visually increasingly represented as *mestizos*. The beginnings of the ideal of the *mestizo* nation can be traced back to this period, although the discourse on *mestizaje* is not explicit in the texts (Capdevila 2008). The allies, on the other hand, had described the Paraguayans as a barbarous Indigenous people, and the use of the Guaraní language was seen as a sign of backwardness and lack of (European) culture. Accordingly, the newly installed liberal post-war governments tried to ban the use of Guaraní from all public spaces; without much success, however (Potthast 2011: 336-337). Generally, politicians intended to “modernise” the country according to the Argentine model, which for most Paraguayans intensified the notion of military and political defeat, and even more so of cultural subjugation. The official discourse of the allies, who blamed the war on the Paraguayan president and declared him a “monster,” contradicted the memories of the veterans and of the mostly female survivors, who had to come to terms with the massive loss of lives during the war (Capdevila 2008).

Foreign investment and capital, the creation of professional cultural institutions such as a university as well as new cultural institutions, brought “progress” and “civilization” to some Paraguayans, but the formerly rather narrow cultural gap between urban and rural, educated and uneducated, poor and not-so-poor Paraguayans began to widen. In this context, a new generation of Paraguayans, educated in these institutions, began to discuss how to interpret their national history, especially the dictatorship of Dr. Francia and that of President F. S. López during the war (Brezzo 2010b). This polemic laid the basis for a peculiar new interpretation of national history, also much needed in view of the upcoming *Centenario* of independence in 1910. The most important intellectuals of the time, among them one of the sons of F. S. López, united to publish an *Álbum Gráfico de la República del Paraguay: 100 años de vida independiente*. The book was intended to present a “national biography.” It was in this book that Paraguayans constructed for the first time a comprehensive vision of the *mestizo* nation, but, according to the thinking of the time, it was conceived as a process in which the Indigenous people were assimilated and gave way to a new “race,” which was considered white, though with Indigenous roots (Telesca 2010). All contributors exalted, nevertheless, the Paraguayan process of *mestizaje* as something unique, absolutely original, and it was this idea that subsequent ideologists of the *mestizo* nation took up. The main aim of these intellectuals, who were writing in a turbulent time of reconstruction of the state and nation, albeit under strong vigilance from and dependence upon Brazil and Argentina, was not only the political reconstruction of the nation, but “under

the influence of nationalism, whose most common terms were ‘*reconstruction*’ and ‘*historical reparation*’, some of the historiographical products of these years turned into veritable epic and patriotic tales” (Brezzo 2010a: 25, emphasis in the original).

This new nationalist vision of the *mestizo* nation informed the revisionist history formulated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The nation sought its new identity in the heroic resistance to the outside aggressors, which would not have been possible without the homogeneity of the nation (Capdevila 2009). The discourse of the war newspapers, which was mainly intended to promote unity and resistance in times of war, resurfaced in the collective memory, now enriched with the racialised discourses on *mestizaje* that were so common at the time.

This nationalist view of the past as a completely unique convivial “historical experiment” (Kahle 1984), in terms of ethnic relations, became the official historical narrative. This *historia oficial* not only served nationalist ideals, but was thought to have a therapeutic effect on the poor and conflict-driven country. Looking back to a glorious past, which then had been maliciously destroyed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would help to compensate for the shortcomings of the present and the deprecation of Paraguay by the neighbouring countries, and also unite the increasingly unequal and divided Paraguayan society. The long-lasting military dictatorship, which followed a civil war in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, imprinted this vision of the past even more deeply into collective memory, and this is why, in contrast to other Latin American countries, the idea of the *mestizo* nation is so deeply rooted in Paraguayan society, and the recent constitutional recognition of plurinationalism is not much more than lip service.

## 5. Conclusion

Instead of idealizing *mestizaje* and its supposedly homogenizing consequences, a more balanced historical analysis of the convivial regimes, the conflicts and adjustments, has allowed us to criticise the ideology of *mestizaje* without negating some of the underlying processes and their influences in the Paraguayan identity formation. We traced the process of forming a *mestizo* elite within a highly hierarchic and Eurocentric regime, the conflicts over the political position of this elite, and the ability of this peripheral group to establish their own standards for social distinction within their society. During the dictatorship of Dr. Francia, the elite’s capacity to negotiate was rather small; however, they found a way to minimise some of the consequences by the circumvention of some of the decrees. It is noteworthy to state that illegitimacy was more than once at the centre of the convivial regime and of struggles regarding the social and political structure in Paraguay. During colonial rule, when the Paraguayan elite had to defend its position against Spanish rulers who banned illegitimate persons from powerful



institutions and offices, the rather poor and powerless Paraguayan elite managed to impose its own standards of social distinction and hierarchy. The new elite of Spanish origin, on the other side, was forced during the first decades of the republican regime to accept and live precisely in illegitimacy if they did not want to fall even lower in social standing. Studying discourses and politics of *mestizaje* under the perspective of family formation and gender relations allowed us to intertwine macro and micro levels of conviviality, since the rule of legitimate descent is not only significant on the personal and familial level, but also an important tool for group formation and identity politics.

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