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#213: Becoming Brazilian: The making of national identity in the South American giant

VOICEOVER

Welcome to Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL I'm Eric Van Bommel, thanks for joining us. How long does it take a new country to form a national identity and who's allowed to make their voices heard in the nation building process? Especially in states that, by force or attraction, have brought together diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Where do people, now united by nationality and little else, begin to find cultural common ground? For the people of such patchwork nations, what mythologies have been tried and tossed or kept in the quest to build a national consensus on identity? Brazil is a case in point.

Brazilians are the result of the collision of the Portuguese, the West Africans they imported and enslaved and the diverse indigenous Amerindian peoples of this very large chunk of the South American continent. Add to the mix the subsequent waves of immigrants from Europe, the Middle East and Asia. In this episode of Up Close, we ask Latin America Historian, Marshall Eakin, how Brazilians came to see themselves as having something in common with their fellow Brazilians of different culture, racial and class origins. How long did it take to forge a collective sense of being Brazilian?

And, something that can be asked of all such nations, how do such national identity, once established, evolve and decline? Marshall Eakin is Professor of History at Vanderbilt University in the United States. He specialises in Brazilian history and has published numerous historical books on business and industry in Brazil, as well as on the process of nation building, nationalism and the construction of national identity there. His 2013 book on the topic is entitled *One People, One Nation: Brazilian Identity in the Twentieth Century*. Professor Eakin is visiting the University of Melbourne to speak at the 2012 Melbourne Latin America Dialogue. Marshall Eakin, thank you for joining us on Up Close.

MARSHALL EAKIN

I'm glad to be here.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Now Marshall, there are states that emerge before the creation of a nation, and I'm

thinking here of ex-colonial, multi-ethnic states like Brazil or South Africa. And there are those nations that emerge before the creation of a state, old world, largely ethnically cohesive nations like Japan. How does national identity fit in here?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Well essentially what's going on is, in the modern world, post, say, 1750, post-French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, all states attempt to create some sort of sense of national identity. Essentially, their ultimate goal which is unachievable is complete homogeneity. So in this sense, the ultimate objective is everyone shares the same sort of values, beliefs, religion. So if you look at the study of national identity, especially out of Europe which has dominated the discussion, they tend to focus on what's usually called primordial ethnicity, primordial identity, so the Armenians or the Germans or the Slavs. So in those older studies, early twentieth century, mid-twentieth century of national identity, they tended to focus much more on ethnicity, they could trace back for a century if not millennia. Whereas what you tend to see in the Americas is something very different. Here are peoples who arrive, conquer, colonise, bring in millions of Africans, and so when these nations become independent and no longer are colonies, they have the same sort of problem but they can't turn to a discussion of national identity that goes back to some primordial ethnicity. So then it becomes a question of what is it that you construct here? What is it that makes us who we are?

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

And typically, how much of it is constructed, how much of these, perhaps national mythologies, have to be created and shaped deliberately.

MARSHALL EAKIN

Well most historians would say it's all constructed, in the sense that Eric Hobsbawm the famous English historian and Terence Ranger have this famous book about invented traditions. Well in a sense, all modern nations, certainly the modern nations of the Americas, ex-colonial territories, these are traditions that have to be created.

Part of what you see in place is in the Americas, in the ex-colonies across what used to be called the third world, is an effort to somehow create those symbols, rituals, myths. In the Americas, this really begins in the nineteenth century. Once you become independent, who are you? How do you persuade all these people, especially in places like Mexico which are largely indigenous, or Brazil which is largely African, how do you convince these people that they're all part of a single entity, a single identity?

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Turning now to Brazil and independence, indeed they became independent from Portugal in 1822 and they started out as a monarchy and eventually forming a republic established in 1889. Now, at that time, what was the Brazilian population and what did it look like?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Interestingly enough, if you look at the Americas, the United States, which takes

shape at the end of the eighteenth century, and Brazil have roughly the same population, about 3.5 million people. By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States has experienced a population explosion, it's an enormous country, Brazil has about 15 million people. But what's fundamentally different about those two places, that population explosion in the United States is both internal in growth but also European immigration, largely white. If you look at Brazil in the nineteenth century, it's not until the very end of the nineteenth century that kind of massive wave of European immigration takes place and it's much smaller than United States. So the population in Brazil towards the end of the nineteenth century, until 1888 and slavery is abolished. People who are in slavery, who are largely born in Africa, in other cases who are the children of Africans who've been brought over in slavery. Then you have a large poor population of racially mixed background and then you have a smaller portion of the population which is, by European standards, white. So if you look at Brazil in roughly, let's say, 1890, the majority of the population is of African descent.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

And the Amerindian population?

MARSHALL EAKIN

The Amerindian population has largely been pushed into the interior, what's left of it.

So Brazil, which is this enormous place, is regionally very diverse in terms of ethnicity. If you look at Brazil today, the north-eastern coast around Salvador and Recife, the old sugar plantation slave areas are the places which are overwhelmingly of African descent. If you move up into the far north in the Amazonian Basin which is much more sparsely populated, it's largely of Europeans mixing with Indians so that population looks very different. As you move down into the south-east, which today is the core of Brazil; Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Sao Paulo, it's a sort of mix, it's a transition zone. As you move into the far south of Brazil, it's overwhelmingly populated, at the end of the nineteenth century, by peoples from Europe and in particular from eastern and central Europe. So it's a very white-European population.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Now, in those early days of the republic, the Old Republic as it's called, toward the end of the nineteenth century, how equitable were the politics?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Not at all. I mean, typically what happens in Brazil happens in much of Latin America in the nineteenth century after independence. They're no longer colonies but they're still ruled by a relatively small elite of largely people of European descent.

To give you a sense of that scale, Brazil is, distinct from much of Latin America in the nineteenth century, they actually have a long tradition of elections and representative government, it's very much like England in the nineteenth century, there's an emperor, there's a cabinet, there's a parliament and that parliament forms and reforms many times. So in that sense, there are competitive elections and constant changes of the parties in power. But about one per cent of the population is voting.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Now they formed a constitution in 1891 that was modelled on that of the United States.

MARSHALL EAKIN

Yes. Essentially what happened, Brazil's history is a pendulum swinging back and forth between centralisation of power and decentralisation. So under the empire power is heavily centralised around the emperor. What that constitution does is takes a sort of US model of saying, we should be a federal republic and devolve power back to the states and the central government should be weaker. So in this period from roughly 1890 to 1930, what you see in Brazil was the power in Brazil really devolves to state governments and the central government is fairly weak.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

In that period, I guess somewhere between the 1870s and the 1930s, is a key period for the formation of modern Brazil and its national culture. As you say, slavery was abolished and the Brazilian elites, the *inteligencia*, the debated notions, I suppose, of political theory and social organisation, cultural values. But didn't many of them sort of yearn for a European modernity?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Yes, I mean you see that's common all over the Americas. So that if you're living, let's say for example in Argentina, in 1900, what you're living in is a country which is being entirely repopulated by peoples from Europe, primarily Spain and Portugal and Italy. If you're in a place like Brazil or Mexico, the overwhelming majority of your population is of non-European background. The dilemma that they have in this period is the social science that emerges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is explicitly racist in its whole notion of humanity, that there are racial groups, that there's a hierarchy of evolution. What's usually called Social Darwinism but which really is Herbert Spencer in England. And so there's a clear hierarchy, the whiter races are at the top, the darker races are at the bottom. So if you're living in Brazil and you aspire to be European, to have European cities and technology and industry, you look around you and the vast majority of the population are clearly not European. So the dilemma they face, and which most of them don't manage to resolve until the 1930s, is how to be European when your population, ethnically, clearly is not.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

And they took their cues from England and France, primarily, didn't they?

MARSHALL EAKIN

England and France. France is the great cultural capital for the Brazilians until after the Second World War. The second language that people would learn in schools is overwhelmingly French, but economically and politically they look to the English because the English are the greatest economic power on the planet and they admire English parliamentary politics.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So it was not politically equitable, but the demographic reality was that you had this massive non-white population. Surely they had some impact on the national culture - before the 1930s I'm talking about?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Yeah, in the sense that the story of Brazilian history through much of 500 years is this enormous tension that's constantly there between a large population of people who are dispossessed, living in poverty and, in some cases, in slavery until the end of the nineteenth century and a relatively small group of the population that controls all power and most of the wealth. This is true throughout Brazilian history. It's the dilemma that the Brazilians grapple with today, socio-economic inequality.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

On Up Close this episode, we're talking about nation building in Brazil and how Brazilians came to embrace a unique national identity. With historian and Brazilianist Professor Marshall Eakin of Vanderbilt University. I'm Eric Van Bommel. Now Marshall, coming to the 1930s and beyond, along comes sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who perhaps more than any other single individual would come to influence the Brazilian national identity. Who was Gilberto Freyre?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Freyre's a fascinating character. He comes from Recife in the north-east of Brazil, one of the old colonial centres and he's very conscious of being from what is, in some ways, the most traditional colonial region of Brazil. He has an unusual background. He goes to an English speaking Southern Baptist school, so he grows up speaking English as well as Portuguese, and he goes off to Baylor University in Waco, Texas at the age of 17 in 1917, which is really on the fringes of the South and the beginnings of the West. He finished his degree in three years and he becomes and Anglophile. He goes off to New York, does a masters in social science, what he would call anthropology, with one of the most famous figures in modern anthropology, Franz Boas. It's really Boas is the one who pushes this notion that culture and biological inheritance are two different things, they're not connected. So Freyre goes back to Brazil, after a long tour in Europe, he's an English speaker not a French speaker, his time is spent mainly in the United States, and he begins to write a book about Brazilian colonial history. Once it's published in 1933, it's called, in English, The Masters and the Slaves but quite literally, the title in Portuguese is The Big House and the Slave Quarters. This is taking this huge debate about Brazilian identity and saying, look, it is true. We're a racially mixed people, we're culturally mixed, primarily of Africans and Europeans, this does not make us inferior, this makes us better and more distinct than anyone else on the planet.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Now he had this notion of *mesticagem*, or miscegenation we would say in English, usually the mixing, inter-marriage or sexual relations between different races. He saw this as a positive and he said, in fact, Brazilians were made superior by *mesticagem*, how so?

MARSHALL EAKIN

He's taken the long view of history he, especially in his later years when he gets more carried away with this, he says look, civilisation emerged in East Asia and it moved to the Middle East, then eventually to Western Europe and next it's going to be the Americas and this will be our turn. Essentially what he sees when he looks at racial mixture, it's not simply biological, it's also cultural. So he makes the argument which is very persuasive that Brazilians, even those who have no racial mixture biologically, are culturally mixed. It's this cultural mixture that produces all the creativity, the innovative nature of Brazilians, right down to the way they play football.

That this is what accounts for Carnaval and samba and the exuberance of Brazilian music and what's called the futebol arte, the beautiful game in soccer. Freyre essentially says it's that cultural as well as that racial mixture is what makes Brazilians particularly distinct and what also makes them incredible creative.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

And he referred to those activities yeah, the football and the Carnaval?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Yes, he has an enormous influence, by the 1940s, his notion of Brazilian national identity, in retrospect, emerges at the very moment that football emerges as a professional international sport in Brazil. So by the 1940s and 1950s, as Brazilian football begins to be successful, he explicitly writes about this and one of his colleagues writes a book in the late 1940s which sort of says, look at the Brazilian team on the field, this is proof of racial mixture, this is proof of mesticagem, this is who we are and why we're so good.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

This notion at the time of the Povo Brasileiro, the Brazilian people as it's translated, but more than the people it refers to a new ethnicity created out of the collision of these three groups, I suppose; the Africans, the Europeans and the Amerindians. If we take that term to the United States, the American people, as they like to call themselves, they don't see it as an ethnicity, why would the Brazilians see it as an ethnicity?

MARSHALL EAKIN

This is in some ways what's so interesting about - if you look at - going back to where we started, the old world efforts to deal with national identity were based on this primordial ethnicity, that something went far back. The Americas don't have primordial ethnicities, people have only been here for maybe 40,000 or 50,000 years.

What is distinct about all of the Americas is this collision of peoples. So when he looks at this, he says, if we're going to define who we are, we're going to define it through culture. This culture is forged out of this collision of people and in his case, he was really most interested in that collision of Africans and Europeans. So in a sense what he's creating is a new ethnicity. You'll often see this in Brazil, you'll ask Brazilians, so what's your racial background? They'll say, well I'm Brazilian. They mean that as an ethnic category, so in this sense what you're creating is an ethnicity rather than harkening back to some ancient one. This makes it very different from

old world nationalism.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So how do you contrast this ethnicity with a national affiliation or a national identity?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Yeah, well this is - the sort of strange side of this is that in the United States, for example, what we construct is a civic nationalism. It's built around a national mythology, this essentially focusses on freedom and equality, that no matter who else you are, you're no better than I am. We all know that not everyone is equally free and equal, but that's a sort of civic identity. Whereas in Brazil, until very recently, there is no civic identity. What is the core of their national identity is a cultural. This ethnicity is at the core of that cultural identity.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

To what extent did the state direct the process of pushing this ethnicity?

MARSHALL EAKIN

A nice way of viewing this is that what you have here is both from top-down and bottom-up simultaneously driving this process. So in 1930 Brazil has a brief civil war, one of the few moments of full scale violence in Brazilian politics. The political figure who comes to power is Getulio Vargas, who will dominate Brazilian politics for the next quarter-century. He's sort of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Eisenhower all rolled into one. So what you get is the state explicitly, in the 1930s and 1940s, wants to forge a sense of Brazilian identity, wants to define what it is. So in a sense what they attempt to do is create rituals, create holidays, create all sorts of things that are part of this identity and some of them fail miserably. They created a thing called the Hour of Brazil on radio which is broadcast every evening and it's known as the hour that everyone turns off their radio. But on the other hand, Vargas looks at Rio and he says, look at this Carnival thing, this is an incredible opportunity, let's standardise this, let's make this a showcase. So in this sense, Carnival - in that moment, samba is just emerging as Brazilian music.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

These had grass roots origins, of course.

MARSHALL EAKIN

Samba, basically, is a grass roots music that comes out of the slums of Rio, it's not a national music in Brazil. So both as people begin to play this, buy it, like it, listening to it on the radio, it becomes essential to Carnival. So they sort of standardised this cultural ritual. So in a sense, Carnival's a good example that people buy that music because they like it, because they listen to it on the radio and they want to have more of it. So in that sense, it's consumer driven at a grass roots level but at the same time, the government's recognising the power of this and says, let's harness this.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Very much dependent upon the role of technology in pushing this message.

MARSHALL EAKIN

Yes, so I mean, part of my argument is that what you have is waves of technology going. Radio emerges in Brazil in the 1920s and in some ways in the 1930s and 1940s this is the golden age of radio. This is what makes samba possible as a national kind of music. It spread samba across the country as radio spreads across the country. By the 1950s, the 1960s, film makes it possible to reach all of Brazil, although not simultaneously. It's really television, beginning in about 1970 in Brazil, where you, for the first time in Brazilian history, can simultaneously reach literally everyone within Brazil's national boundaries. This is why sport is so important. The 1970 World Cup, which Brazil wins in Mexico with Pele, is the third time they've won the world cup in four outings, is this phenomenal moment in which the country is galvanised by their team, wearing their colours, singing their national anthem and winning the world cup.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So the first time it's been broadcast across the nation?

MARSHALL EAKIN

It's the first time it's really - as television. Before they could listen to it on the radio and often it was not in live sequence. So, in this sense what happens, television makes it even more possible to mobilise all people within the boundaries of Brazil simultaneously to see the same things, to have the same experiences.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Was that largely a middle class audience?

MARSHALL EAKIN

It is initially, but it's amazing. It's somewhat like the United States, television appears about 1950 and by 1960 virtually everyone in the United States has access to television. In Brazil it's not necessarily that you have your own television but you have access to it; the neighbour, the bar. This is why sport becomes so important.

Everyone goes and sits at the local bar and watches the game. It becomes an experience of everyone, male or female, adult, children, watching the game live.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

I'm Eric van Bommel and on Up Close this episode we're speaking with Brazil historian Marshall Eakin of Vanderbilt University about the roots and evolution of Brazilian national identity. Marshall, you have argued that Brazil has only become a nation in recent decades, what do you mean by that?

MARSHALL EAKIN

In studies of nationalism, national identity, especially over the last 30 years or so, in the past what people tended to focus on was states attempting to create a sense of national identity, creating those symbols, rituals and myths, the beliefs that people would share. Beginning of the 1980s, there's this - what has got to be one of the two

or three academic best sellers of all time, Benedict Anderson publishes his book called *Imagined Communities*, and he basically says, look what really binds us together as peoples is that we never see each other face to face but we imagine that we're part of a community. Part of that imagining is sharing a certain set of symbols, rituals, beliefs. The ultimate test is, am I willing to put down my life for those other people who I've never met? So the focus in studies of nationalism tend to become, in the 1980s, more on community, on identity, as opposed to these kinds of notions of mobilising people through organisations, the state and state direction. And so, in this sort of sense, you really are only truly a nation when a substantial number of people within your boundaries in fact actually are aware of each other, share these same set of rituals, myths and beliefs. This is why, if you look at a place like Brazil in the nineteenth century, we say at the end of the nineteenth century 15 million people, many of those people are not even aware that there's a president. They don't know what the Brazilian flag looks like, they don't know the national anthem. So in this sort of sense, many of them don't share the experience of what it means to be Brazilian. So in this sense you have to create this identity. There's wonderful stories - in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, the Brazilian army went into the western Amazon to build telegraph lines and they bring with them Brazilian flags which - they bring with them phonographs, they play the national anthem and when they meet indigenous groups, they play this, they teach them the national anthem. These people in the western Amazon are not aware Brazil even exists. So in this sense, what you're creating is a community. That's why I say it's - in some sense, it's always fruitless. You will never achieve, say, 100 per cent of all the people in the boundaries of Brazil sharing exactly the same set of beliefs. So in this sense, I argue this; there's certain things that resonate - so again, to take the example of soccer, maybe not everyone really likes soccer, maybe they don't all understand it, they may not have all played it, but at the moment you're experiencing the world cup, it's a national event. This resonates with you, even if you don't understand the rules of the game.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

There was a dictatorship that ended in the mid-eighties, what does that have to say about a national identity? That must have divided people?

MARSHALL EAKIN

It works both ways. So when the military comes in in 1964 and they stay in power until 1985, even more so than Vargas, they want a single national identity, and they want it to be theirs, the one they dictate. So in many ways, they use the 1970 World Cup as a showcase. When the team comes back, they all appear with the generals and what a wonderful country we are, this is a place on the move. So in that sense, they're very consciously saying these are the symbols, these are the rituals we'll celebrate, while at the same time there's tremendous political opposition to the generals, especially by young people in the middle class in Brazil. But ironically, in a sense, what it does, it creates a stronger sense of citizenship and civic identity. They look at the military and say, you are not allowing me to exercise my rights as a citizen of Brazil. So much of what happens in the 1980s is the military transitions from power and civilians take back over, powerfully moves forward a sense of civic

nationalism in Brazil, that I deserve to vote for president because I'm Brazilian.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

It actually reinforced Brazilianness.

MARSHALL EAKIN

It reinforces this. But ironically for the military, that strengthening civic nationalism is part of what pushes them out of power.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Does there still exist in Brazil, separate ethnic narratives? You've written about black consciousness, I suppose there are some groups who would reject that notion of a single ethnicity or a continuum of colour, they reject that notion of the Povo Brasileiro?

MARSHALL EAKIN

This is why I think, if you look at this vision Freyre creates in the 1930s of a single people, forged by this collision of cultures races, this gradually, through popular culture, music, film, television, soccer and by efforts by the government who latch upon this and say, yes it's true, because they want to say there is no racism in Brazil, there is a racial democracy, see we're all mixed. By the 1960s and 1970s this has overwhelmingly become the dominant narrative of national identity, even though there are plenty of people who are challenging this. The turning point really is in the 1970s and 1980s that you have the rise of two groups; afro-Brazilian groups who are saying, this is wrong, we are not a colour continuum of people, there are only two kinds of people in Brazil, those who are white and those who are not. It's an effort to create a strong sense of afro-Brazilian identity. It has not been very successful, largely because, in Brazil historically, to be black means to be at the bottom. So only about seven or eight per cent of Brazilians will self-describe as black on the national census, but about another 40 per cent will describe themselves as racially mixed. The challenge for the afro-Brazilian groups is how to persuade those people who do have African ancestry to consider themselves as black. There are other groups - in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, along with the Europeans who come in, a substantial portion of Japanese from Brazil. It's the largest population of Japanese descent outside of Japan is in metropolitan Sao Paulo. Large numbers of people coming from the collapsing ottoman empires, Syria and Lebanon, largely of Christian background coming to Brazil. So you do see in Brazil, in the twentieth century, the emergence of very small ethnic groups who are incredible successful. The Syrian, Lebanese, the Japanese in particular are incredibly successful in all aspects of Brazilian society. But they account for about one per cent of the population, but they are the closest thing to what in the United States would hyphenated identities. So people will actually say Japanese-Brazilian or Lebanese-Brazilian. So that's something that exists but on a much smaller scale than you'll find, say, in the United States.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Which urban centres exert cultural power and why?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Overwhelmingly it's Rio and Sao Paulo. Historically, Rio de Janeiro is the dominant city, it's the centre of the colonies since the eighteenth century, up until 1960 it's the political capital of the country. Sao Paulo is a lot like Los Angeles. In the 1870s Sao Paulo has 35,000 people, today it's somewhere between 18 million and 20 million metropolitan area, depending on what you're counting. Sao Paulo by the 1930s and 1940s is the economic dynamo of Brazil. Even today, when the country is more equitably distributed in terms of economic production, overwhelmingly the centre of financial economic business power in Brazil is in Sao Paulo and Greater Sao Paulo. So in that sense, Sao Paulo across the twentieth century has gradually taken over the roles that Rio used to play. So Rio no longer has the political importance it had since the capital had moved to Brasilia in 1960, all the major cultural and business centres have gradually migrated to Sao Paulo. So in this sort of sense, even though Rio today is a city of 10 million people, an incredibly vibrant city, it has been eclipsed by Sao Paulo as the centre of the country.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

I read recently that Sao Paulo has the worst traffic jams in the world.

MARSHALL EAKIN

It also, apparently has the highest number of helicopters owned by executives because they fly into the rooftops of their offices. So apparently it has an enormous traffic in helicopters to avoid those traffic jams.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Isn't that interesting. Now Marshall, you argue that there has been a relative decline, in a sense, of collective identity in Brazil more recently. Can you elaborate on that?

MARSHALL EAKIN

Yeah, I think this is caused first by the rise of these afro-Brazilian civic groups who are challenging this. Second, essentially by intellectuals who, by the 1980s, declare there is no such thing as national identity, it's impossible to achieve. Many of them also question the very notion of what Freyre's arguing. Because Freyre - the idea of mesticagem and mixture becomes deeply attached to this notion of racial democracy, and everyone in Brazil, all should understand that Brazil is not a racial democracy, that prejudice and discrimination exist. So many of the rejections of Freyre is to try and say he's wrong on racial democracy, but they're not really questioning whether he's wrong on this issue of mixing. So intellectuals begin to look around and say it's impossible to have a single national identity, this doesn't exist, you begin to have afro-Brazilian groups who are challenging and saying Freyre's wrong. So I'd say, in that sense, there are important challenges to that narrative and so if you ask Brazilians and certainly the number of people who would describe themselves that way does begin to decline by the 1990s but it's still overwhelming the dominant narrative of who Brazilians are, even if all Brazilians don't believe this.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

But what does it mean if it is declining? Does it matter?

MARSHALL EAKIN

It's interesting. The heart of the debate in Brazil today is really over this issue of is there such a thing as racial identity? In the 1990s and in the last decade, Brazil has moved towards policies of affirmative action that are somewhat like the United States. But to have affirmative action, you have to say, in fact, there is a separate group, a racial group that we can identify. And this has provoked an intense debate in Brazil that is at the very core of identity. Because if you do believe that there are these racial barriers, that there are divisions, then you don't buy into the notion that Brazilians share racially mixed population in which they all share certain cultural values. If you do believe that there is this division, then you believe Freyre is wrong, you believe that the country is divided racially and those are two very different visions. So what you see is, there's a very deep division across all aspects of Brazilian society, especially at the highest levels of policy makers, intellectuals, over these two positions. You're making a fundamentally different statement about Brazil if you believe, in fact, that racial quotas are necessary in universities.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Now Marshall, finally, coming to very recent times in Brazil, the last decade or so has seen some sustained economic success, an upward trajectory that has brought perhaps tens of millions of people out of poverty in Brazil. What impact is this having on Brazilian national identity, or at least the debate about it?

MARSHALL EAKIN

It has an enormous impact. I've been studying Brazil for about 35 years now, and Brazilians have a sort of, what I would call a dualistic vision of themselves. On their good days, they will look at their country and say, this is the greatest place on earth, nothing can stop us. On their bad days, they go, how are we ever going to be advanced? So in some ways, this moment of economic surge reinforces that optimistic side of Brazilians, but always in the background they're thinking, will this last? So what you have now in Brazil is incredible expansion of the middle class. I'm going to give you one sort of figure. Ten years ago, 15 years ago, two-thirds of all Brazilians were at the poverty line or below, two-thirds. Today, that number is one-third. That means that two-thirds of all Brazilians are in the middle class or above, that's a phenomenal shift within a decade. For the first time in Brazil you have many, many millions of people who have access to credit, buying their first car, their first apartment. But there is this sort of lingering doubt among many Brazilians, okay is this a bubble? Is this rollercoaster we've been on much of the twentieth century where we experience these spurts of growth and then crash. I actually think that Brazil's reached a moment of self-sustained growth. That there are going to be ups and downs just as there are in any developed economy but it's not going to be the rollercoaster of the past. Brazil is, in some ways, one of the most blessed countries on earth. Here's an enormous place of continental dimensions with nearly 200 million people, no serious religious or sectarian divisions, essentially one language. The only serious division within the country is socio-economic and that's something you can work on, you can do something about. So unlike all the other big countries in the world; India, China, United States, Russia, you don't have those serious ethnic, religious, sectarian, linguistic cleavages, so it puts Brazil in a pretty amazing position.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Whether they rise or fall economically, from here on, the Brazilianness will remain.

MARSHALL EAKIN

And it's - what they know now, it's in their hands. This is - unlike a small place in Latin America which is weak, small economy, small population, this is a place which has its destiny in its own hands and so this notion of Brazilian identity is, all right, we can pull this off, we know who we are, we can make this happen. So I think that, in that sense, Brazil is in a very elite group in that sort of sense. Out of a couple of hundred countries in the world, there are not very many of them that have that ability, that capacity to shape their own destiny.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Marshall, we'll leave it there, thank you very much for joining us on Up Close.

MARSHALL EAKIN

Thank you.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

That was Marshall Eakin, Professor of History from Vanderbilt University. We've been discussing notions of national identity and nation building in Brazil. Relevant links, a full transcript of this and all our episodes can be found at our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne Australia. This episode was recorded on 29 August 2012 and produced by Kelvin Param and me, Eric van Bommel, audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. Up Close was created by me and Kelvin Param. Thanks for joining us, until next time, goodbye.

VOICEOVER

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