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Thirty Years Later: The Actuality of Gilberto Freyre to Think Brazil

Trinta anos depois: A atualidade de Gilberto Freyre para pensar o Brasil

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Abstract: The work of Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) is recognized as one of the most original and relevant interpretations of Brazil. His works, notably *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933), are continually revisited through countless critical balances, especially with regard to the issue of race relations in Brazil. Thirty years after his death, I seek in this article to analyze the actuality of his thought, seeking to point out which issues he throws at us that are still relevant to think about Brazil.

Keywords: Brazilian studies, racial relations, miscegenation, Latin American studies, Brazilian social thought, Gilberto Freyre.

Resumo: O trabalho de Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) é reconhecido como um dos mais originais e relevantes de interpretação do Brasil. Suas obras, com destaque para *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (1933), são continuamente revisitadas através de inúmeros balanços críticos, especialmente no que tange à questão das relações raciais no Brasil. Passados Trinta anos de sua morte, procuro nesse artigo analisar a atualidade de seu pensamento, buscando apontar quais questões que ele nos lança que ainda nos são relevantes para pensar o Brasil.

Palavras-chave: estudos brasileiros, relações raciais, miscigenação, estudos latino-Americanos, pensamento social brasileiro, Gilberto Freyre.

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Introduction

Brazil is undoubtedly a great intellectual enigma, continuously analyzed from various social, political and cultural aspects. The numerous and significant social transformations that took place throughout the 19th century – including the arrival of the Portuguese royal family (1808), the independence of Portugal (1822), the abolition of slavery (1888) and the end of the empire and the beginning of the republic (1889) – will unfold in important questions for Brazilian intellectuals of the 20th century, who even though they did not possess exactly the same guiding questions on their horizons (Botelho, 2010), they carried out an intense problematization at that moment especially around national identity.

These debates became even more intense during the first decades of the 20th century, a period in which essayism is used as an intellectual tool for Brazil's interpretative process. According to Bastos:

I found in these essays two main elements – the question of culture and the search for national identity – as elements that give them unity. In other words, the authors seek answers to the question: after all, what country is this? The texts

are marked by the need to discuss the problem of formation, characteristics of the intellectual production of the regions of recent national constitution.

These works assume, in the context in which they are produced, an imaginary character: they seek to “invent” culture to legitimize the “invention” of national identity. The author who can articulate these two elements will have deciphered the dilemma and will make the leap to a new stage of social studies. I raise the hypothesis that such a feat will be performed by Gilberto Freyre (Bastos, 2006: 61).

Although I agree with Bastos’s hypothesis, we should not rush, since the way that Freyre adopts in order to arrive at his ideas are never a straight path. As Motta (2009) indicates, the mode of the production of knowledge present in Freyre is very far from the paradigm of social science that became hegemonic in Brazil from the University of São Paulo (USP).

As Cardoso (2013) states, Freyre was not adept at what he termed scientism; that is, a positivist view of science. However, this does not indicate that we should dispense with some questions about the path chosen by him:

(...) did his basic concepts capture the fundamentals of the historical process? Was his culturalist approach accurate or extrapolated, encompassing the whole of the country to what he had lived and analyzed in a region? Did he justify his generalizations, though not statistically? (Cardoso, 2013: 101).

In a recent work, Lima (2013) points out that there would be at least three distinct moments of reception of Freyre’s work. First, there is the period from the publication of *The Masters and the Slaves*[2] in 1933 to the mid-1960s, when there would be more positive evaluations than negative about the book, although there were attacks by the conservatives regarding the use of colloquial language, criticism of the Jesuits and apologies for Afro-Brazilian culture. The second was from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, when the work is attacked for its supposed lack of scientificity and by the assumed interpretation of Brazilian society, but Lima points out that many criticisms were made without the work being read. And finally, the third moment begins in the 1990s, and accelerates with the celebrations of the centenary of his birth in the 2000s, when new publications appear that seek to deepen the analysis of his work.

Considering the 30 years following his death, as well as the growing academic production in Brazil and abroad on his intellectual legacy (Lehmann, 2008), I propose in this brief article to raise some elements to think the actuality of Freyre’s thought, especially in relation to a broader interpretation of what Brazil is.

For a better understanding of the elements that will be explained here, I will briefly contextualize the author and his work, which allows the reader to enter more emphatically in the ideas elaborated by Freyre, and then to enter more directly into his interpretation of Brazil.

Gilberto Freyre: an intellectual beyond his time

Freyre was born in the last year of the 19th century, the son of a traditional family, whose grandmothers were sugar cane plantation owners[3]. The

fact that he was born in Recife is also not a mere detail in his intellectual trajectory. It is a region that had already been the cultural and economic epicenter of the country, but which had lost prestige in the last centuries with the geopolitical yaw that Brazil has experienced, which has become increasingly concentrated in the Rio-São Paulo axis.

Despite being a city boy, Freyre spent summers in the São Severino dos Ramos sugarcane plantation, which was owned by the family's maternal branch (Larreta, Giucci, 2007). No wonder his work will be characterized by a deep nostalgia for a patriarchal and rural Brazil, decadent in some ways, but still present, which is even more explicit in the dedication of his most celebrated book *The Masters and the Slaves*, published in 1933, which he dedicates to the memory of his grandparents. Villas Bôas (2006) goes so far as to say that saudade is a methodological resource for Freyre, which he plums in order to delve into his interpretation of the country.

Aside from its social origin, one of Freyre's biographical questions that appear as decisive for the elaboration of his ideas has to do with his intellectual formation. Introduced very early to English language literature by his father, Alfredo Freyre, Gilberto studied during his childhood at the American Baptist College in Recife, which was an important way to get to his studies at Baylor University in Texas, where he graduated.

However, rather than just obtaining formal studies in the United States, this country will be a continuous benchmark in terms of comparison with Brazil for Freyre, especially the southern United States (Pallares-Burke, Burke, 2009). For the fact that this region also based its social constitution on a monoculture, latifundia and slave labor, enabled Freyre to recurrently compare it with Brazil, pointing out both convergences and divergences, especially in relation to race relations.

Later, Freyre went to Columbia University, where he studied for a master's degree in the area of Social History[4]. It is in this institution that he contacts the renowned anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942), whose influence on his work is continually highlighted at countless moments. According to the author himself:

I consider myself more anthropologist than sociologist. More disciple of Boas than of Giddings: two of the great masters, whose lessons were very competing to make of my Master and PhD student days at Columbia University – student, repeat, since Bachelor's studies, disdainful of grades, which have been given to them more by consecration than by postulation – an unforgettable series of adventures of discoveries: intellectual discoveries (Freyre, 1968: 83).

This affiliation so emphatically asserted by Freyre is questioned by Motta and Fernandes (2013), who point out that there would be other intellectual influences so decisive in the formation of Freyre's thought. However, for these interpreters, assuming Boas as a great intellectual influence enabled Gilberto Freyre to more clearly approach anthropology and sociology, sciences that had not yet been institutionalized in Brazil at the time of his return from the United States in the 1920s making him stand out in the intellectual field.

In later writings, he continues to affirm the intellectual convictions he had since this time, as in the famous passage from the preface to the first edition of *The Masters and the Slaves*. “It was as if everything depended on me and my generation. Our way of solving secular issues. And of the Brazilian problems, none that troubled me as much as the miscegenation” (Freyre, 2005: 31).

And in fact, the racial question in Brazil was at the center of the debate of its generation and of the previous ones, being one of the axes conducting the discussion over the question of the whitening. Oliveira Viana (1883-1951), author of *Southern Populations of Brazil* book published in 1920, was certainly one of the bastions of eugenic ideas in Brazil, theses to which Freyre diametrically opposed his work. No wonder Freyre portrays Oliveira Viana’s reaction to his work as follows:

Oliveira Viana was, like almost every intellectual who boasts, vain and, besides vain, intolerant of criticism. We are, in fact, almost all authors of books: vain and intolerant of criticism. Viana reacted to my, respectfully, novice criticisms of his master theories, ostensibly returning the publisher Augusto Frederico Schmidt – the first publisher of *The Masters and the Slaves* – the copy of the book that Schmidt had kindly sent him. More: he kept to the end of his life the most complete silence in relation to the book and the daring author (...). However, he never published – after the appearance of *The Masters and the Slaves* – his announced *The Aryans in Brazil* (Freyre, 1968: 138).

Certainly, Freyre ended up elaborating one of the most original interpretations about Brazil, which is also one of the most controversial in the field of race relations. What I want to emphasize at this moment is that his ideas are inserted in a broader debate about the binomial race and nation, of which no author of his time manages to escape, although this contextualism does not completely redefine certain questions elaborated by him.

The Ambiguous Brazil of Freyre

In the 1940s, Freyre held a series of six conferences in the United States, which were originally published in 1945 under the title of *Brazil: An Interpretation*, which merges with his efforts not only to interpret Brazil but also to disseminate this interpretation and to present Brazil as a possible model for the world. In 1959, he published a new book titled *New World in Tropics*, in which the six conferences held in the 1940s were republished and four more chapters were added. It is interesting to note that these works were originally published in English, and only later in Portuguese, which indicates that they are works that seek to synthesize their main interpretive ideas about Brazil.

There is a line that Freyre shares with his contemporaries that certainly marks his work: he recognizes the weight of the past over the present and the future of Brazil. What differentiates the authors of his generation becomes, on the one hand, the interpretation of this past and on the other, the weight that it would have in the current reality. Living aside a sequence in his Introduction to *Patriarchal History in Brazil*, formed by

The Masters and the Slaves, 1933, *Mansions and the Shanties*, 1936, and *Order and Progress* of 1956, it is no wonder his books do not internally follow a chronological order, since, as he himself says referring to *The Masters and the Slaves*, but can be extended to other books, it is not the things that are relevant, but the connections between them (Freyre, 1968).

Looking at the past Freyre sees something singular in the Portuguese people, recognizing their dual character that would put them in a middle of the way between Europe and Africa, and between East and West (Oliveira, 2015). If, on the one hand, Holanda (1995) in his also classic *Roots of Brazil*, published in 1936, gives great emphasis to the adventurous spirit of Portuguese, and how this element was fundamental to the process of colonization of Brazil, then Freyre, on the other hand, will give greater emphasis to the predisposition towards miscegenation that they would have based on previous social experiences, such as the Moorish presence in the Iberian Peninsula. Because of this, these people would possess a set of characteristics, among them the miscibility, the mobility and the acclimatization. And this resulted in:

An agrarian society in structure was formed in tropical America, enslaved in the technique of economic exploitation, hybrid of Indian – and later of black – in the composition. Society that would be defended less by the conscience of race, almost none in the cosmopolitan and plastic Portuguese, than by the religious exclusivism unfolded in a system of social and political prophylaxis. Less by official action than by the arm and sword of the individual (Freyre, 2005: 65).

It goes so far as to say that it is due to the singular characteristics of the Portuguese that they triumphed where other Europeans failed, and they were the first modern society in the tropics. The plasticity of the Portuguese would allow the emergence of a mixed society, not only in racial terms, but also in cultural terms. For Freyre, the characteristics of the race were shaped by the environment, by the social, cultural, economic and ecological constraints. Notably, it is by turning to the racial question that one of the most controversial points of Freyre's analysis of Brazil comes into play: he goes so far as to say that there was a certain "sweetness in the treatment of slaves" in Brazil, which would be largely an inheritance so that the slaves would be "(...) more people from home than a working beast" (Freyre, 2005: 299).

For Souza (2003), Freyre thinks about the issue of miscegenation also as a strategy of domination that made possible the settlement of large territorial masses.

This strategy of domination, if at the negative pole implies subordination and systematic social reproduction of low self-esteem in the dominated groups, at the positive pole opens an effective and real possibility of social differentiation and social mobility. It is from this positive pole that Freyre builds his thesis of *mestizaje* as a Brazilian social peculiarity. This construction, by subordinating the element of oppression and systematic subordination, is ideological and conservative in the bad sense of the term (Souza, 2003: 69).

I have to agree partially with Souza's interpretation, since I understand that the history of ideas is always understood in a continuous tension

between text and context. I see that Freyre's ideas were profoundly revolutionary in the context of the 1930s, opposing the Aryanist ideas that were widely diffused in the intellectual cycles at that time, but that does not preclude us from recognizing that ideas that were revolutionary in that context, can be interpreted as conservative in another. The set of research about racial relations in Brazil in the following decades, especially from the 1950s, pointed in a different direction, indicating that miscegenation did not amalgamate race relations in Brazil as Freyre had understood.

Of course, this is not the same as saying that Freyre did not notice the existing inequalities in Brazil, but he perceived peculiarities in the way they were here. In his words:

The ethnic difference does not impose itself in Brazil in a violent way. Not that there is no color or race prejudice with prejudices against class mixing in Brazil. They exist. But no one would think of having churches for whites alone, nor would he think of laws against interracial marriages; Or banning blacks from theaters or residential quarters of a city. The generalized spirit of human fraternity is stronger among Brazilians than the prejudices of race or color, class or religion.

It is true that racial equality is neither perfect in Brazil nor made absolute by the abolition of slavery in 1888. But it is also true that even before the law of 1888 the relations between whites and blacks, between masters and slaves, already attracted the attention of the foreign observers for being particularly cordial. Even before the aforementioned law, miscegenation already existed, practiced freely among the people in general and, on rarer occasions, in the upper strata of the population: when a member of an important white or Amerindian white family happened to marry out of their caste or their color.

According to the famous Brazilian historian and sociologist, our solution to the racial question was certainly smarter, more promising, and, above all, more humane than any based on segregation or racial discrimination (Freyre, 2011: 36-37).

If, on the one hand, Freyre distanced himself from the reflections developed in the "Paulist School of Sociology" with regard to the understanding of race relations in Brazil, then on the other hand, he is also far from a simple affirmation of a "racial democracy" attributed to the author. Freyre assumes the *morenidade* paradigm, because by activating the *moreno*[5] category, a very ambiguous and flexible term, Freyre would eventually reveal the limited importance of racial classifications in Brazilian society. In the words of Freyre (2003: 3010):

(...) in Brazil, the use of the word *moreno*, now very flexible or elastic, is becoming one of the most expressive sociological semantic events that have characterized the development of Portuguese America as a society whose multiracial composition is increasingly in what an Inventor of words could, with some boldness, describe as metarracial. That is, a society in which instead of sociological concerns about minute characterizations of racial types or intermediate nuances between these types – between white and black, white and red, white and yellow – the trend begins to be for those members of the Society, or community, not absolutely white, or absolutely red, or absolutely yellow or black, to be described, and they themselves consider themselves, without any other discrimination of color, as *morenos*.

It seems to me, then, that the question is not simply the absence of racial classifications for Freyre but rather the predominance of ambiguous

and flexible classifications such as *moreno*, which would better represent the types of social relations existing in Brazil. This ambivalence would be present, as already stated, not only at the racial level but also at the cultural level. Not surprisingly, when he begins the fourth chapter of *The Masters and the Slaves*, entitled “The Black Slave in the Sexual and Family Life of the Brazilian”, it indicates that every Brazilian, even the whitest, brings in the soul, if not in the soul and in the body, an African influence. He means by this that even the unmixed on the biological level shares a deeply mixed culture, whose constitution had the central role of the contribution of the black slave, which would have been, in Freyre’s interpretation, also, in a way, Colonizer of Brazil. This is evident when he refers to the African influence in the constitution of the Brazilian Portuguese variant language:

The black wet nurse often did with words the same as with food: she hurt them, took away the spines, the bones, the hardness, leaving only the soft syllables to the white boy’s mouth. Hence this boy Portuguese in the north of Brazil, especially, is one of the sweetest speeches in the world. Without rr nor ss; The final soft syllables; Words that only need to break up in our mouths. The Brazilian children’s language, and even the Portuguese language, has almost an African flavor: *cacá, pipi, bumbum, tentém, neném, tatá, papá, papato, lili, mimi, au-au, bambanho, cocô, dindinho, bimbinha*. Softening that was in great part by the action of the black wet nurse next to the child; of the black slave next to the son of the white lord (Freyre, 2005: 414).

Perhaps this is precisely one of Freyre’s great merits: to be able to intuitively grasp the national ethos. For undoubtedly what we recognize as a Brazilian culture is something difficult to imagine otherwise than as a hybrid, mixed culture, marked by an interpenetration between races and cultures.

This does not mean that existing hierarchies are not recognized here, on the contrary. If, on the one hand, Freyre strikes brilliantly by capturing the movement that models the national culture, then on the other hand, he subordinates a series of tensions that are involved in this process, which imply in hierarchizations, that have a greater or lesser degree of race as a reference.

Another recurrent criticism of Freyre’s work is that he would, to some degree, generalize questions from one region of Brazil (the Northeast) to the others, some even claim that he generalizes the state of Pernambuco to the rest of the country (Pallares-Burke, Burke, 2009). These criticisms are even more striking in the “patriarchate” category, and the idea of the patriarchal family, which in the interpretation of the author would be the fundamental cell of the Brazilian social formation, since from the beginning the engine of the colonization process would not have been neither the State nor the individual, but the family (Freyre, 2005). These criticisms will be emphatically answered in the preface to the second edition of *Mansions and the Shanties*, when he explains that:

The patriarchal society in Brazil – this seems to be the truth – instead of a single beginning, it had several spaces and diverse dates. Instead of developing linearly or uniformly, in time or space, it developed in both unequal and even contradictorily, maturing in areas earlier than in others, declining in the North, or in the Northeast – formerly for ecological reasons than pure or mainly economic, when it was only

rounded up, for equal reasons, in adult forms in southern Brazil; thus varying in substance from the extreme north to the southern end of the country, to the point of scholars who, in sociology, are guided more by content than by the form of events or facts lose, in the face of this ethnographic, geographical or economic diversity rather than sociological - the pastoralist, here, the extraction of rubber, there, coffee, in São Paulo, or gold and diamonds, in Minas Gerais, sugar, tobacco, cotton or cocoa in the North – the sense of sociological unity Form and process. Uniqueness in our view, characterized in various areas and spaces by the organization more or less patriarchal or tutelary, not only family, economy, politics, sociability; by monoculture; by latifundio; and by the slave or servile work with all its consequences or correlations, including the transportation technique, the kitchen, the sanitary. Therefore, a true complex (Freyre, 2006: 43-44).

It is evident from this passage that Freyre understood the existence of certain markers that shaped national culture and Brazilian sociopolitical formation, although this did not imply the disappearance of characteristics peculiar to the different regions that make up Brazil, since there would be:

Differences of Content, but not in the form of a social domain: always the domain of the family, of the economy, of the patriarchal organization that rarely had any other type of family, economy or organization that disputed its predominance over Brazilian formation (Freyre, 2006: 61).

This is another question that I understand that remains valid in his work, the tension between national and regional, between unity and multiplicity, to think of Brazil as a nation. I do not believe that this is a debate closed in the Brazilian social sciences. Quite to the contrary, the lines that Freyre launches allow us to weave different interpretive possibilities about what characterizes Brazil, about what brand, which always occurs in a deeply ambivalent way in the author's reading.

As Cardoso (2013) tells us, Freyre is one of the authors who invents Brazil, and this Brazil of Freyre is deeply miscegenated, and marked by antagonisms. Here it is important to remember that the category of the "balance of antagonisms" is fundamental for this author, and in his interpretation, the main antagonism that is present in our social formation is that between master and slave (Freyre, 2005).

Synthetically, it can be said that the core wires of Freyre's work to think Brazil (miscegenation and antagonisms) we remain valid, and still drive a significant part of the interpretations of our social relations, seeking to demarcate the Brazilian cultural uniqueness, through a movement of approach or distance from this interpretation. As Motta (2000) elucidates, the oppositions to Freyre's theses are more or less explicitly linked to an "ortho-history", which presupposes a single model of progress. In one way or another, interpretations of Brazil have assumed Freyre continuously as a referent, either to ratify their assumptions or to oppose them, but both perspectives end up recognizing the issues that he posed as fundamental.

Final Considerations

This brief article, far from seeking to exhaust the debate, raises questions that touch on not only the revisitation to Freyre's work, but also a broader review of the works that sought to interpret Brazil, especially those that emerge in the first decades of the 20th century, in the transition from the Old Republic to the New Republic.

I agree here with the questions posed by Bastos (2002: 183), stating that "without understanding both the ideas and the social place of these intellectuals it is impossible to grasp the general movement of Brazilian society". Therefore, the exercise carried out here is not only a matter limited to the field of the history of ideas, but the execution of the possibility of rethinking the general foundations of a broader interpretation of Brazilian society.

As explored in the article, I recognize that Freyre places too much emphasis on racial and cultural miscegenation as an element that has made possible the amalgamation of social relations, putting in the foreground the tensions, exclusions and even the question of racism itself. This is a critical point in his work, which has been widely debated and questioned, but again I draw attention to the fact that ideas considered conservative in a given conjuncture and temporality can be considered revolutionary in another, and I believe that this is the case with Freyre.

One must also open space for a critique of his work, insofar as some of his statements are not clearly grounded, based more on inferences than on empirical demonstrations, which relates to his own keenly intuitive understanding of science.

My intention here was to highlight, nearly 30 years after his death, the originality and timeliness of the issues posed by one of the most renowned Brazilian social thinkers, whose interpretation that Brazil would be a mestizo country full of contradictions does not seem have been completely overcome. On the contrary, new questions are emerging from the issues he raised, and although we disagree with part of his interpretation of race relations, we certainly arrive at the understanding that there is a profound cultural singularity situated in Portuguese America, Brazil.

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Notes

- [2] The original title in Portuguese is Casa-Grande & Senzala in a literal translation is Big House & Slave Quarter refers to the slave owner's residence on a sugarcane plantation and the dwellings of the black working class, where they originally worked as slaves.
- [3] The Portuguese word that Freyre uses in his books is engenho which means sugar cane mill, but also describes the area as a whole including land, a mill, and the people who farmed. I will use the sugar cane plantation in this article to describe this reality.
- [4] In spite of having obtained a master's degree in Social History, Freyre also carried out studies in other Departments of the same University, including courses realized in the Departments of Anthropology and Sociology.
- [5] A term that in the original sense indicates someone white with dark hair, but in Brazil it assumes more the sense of someone whose skin color is neither white nor black.

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