

# RACIAL DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL: CONSTRUCTION AND DENUNCIATION OF THE MYTH

Anita Maria Pequeno Soares

a Programa de Pós-Graduação em Sociologia, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Pernambuco, Brazil.

E-mail: anita.mps@hotmail.com

**Abstract:** For about three centuries, Brazil was the country responsible for kidnapping the largest contingent of African people to be enslaved. Slavery left indelible marks on the country's history and, even after its formal end, continued to permeate social relations and the dynamics of social inequality. Despite this, a farce prevailed as a national identity and, for itself and for the world, Brazil sold the image of being a racial paradise. This process goes back to the name of Gilberto Freyre, author whose work was fundamental for the propagation of this fallacy. Several authors, especially from the 1950s onwards, questioned him and unmasked the true face of a profoundly racist society. In this brief article, I will bring the pioneering and fundamental contribution of the sociologist Florestan Fernandes. Invited by Roger Bastide, Fernandes produced a revolutionary study of the country's racial dynamics and theoretically denounced Brazilian racial democracy as a myth.

**Keywords:** Brazil; Racial Democracy; Racism; Black Movement

## 1. Introduction

According to Guimarães [1], the view of Brazil as a society without a “color line” was already widespread, especially in Europe and the United States, even before the Abolition of slavery and the birth of sociology. North American abolitionists, like Frederick Douglas, exposed, in their speeches, how Brazil differed from the United States in relation to racial dynamics. The notion of a society without a “color line” was also present in Brazilian black militancy at the beginning of the 20th century. By contrasting this country with the United States, the idea of racial democracy was believed not as a fact, but as a non-materialized right. Hence the urgent need, claimed by black militants at the time, for a Second Abolition. In this sense, although he was not the creator of the concept, Gilberto Freyre was a pioneer in giving it a scientific guise, a sociological foundation attempt [1]

In the years 1951 and 1952, a project sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), known as “Unesco Project”, developed several researches on race relations in Brazil. The objective was to show the world, after the horrors of the Second World War, how harmonious relations between whites and blacks could be possible. Evidently, the results of the Project, especially the conclusions of Florestan Fernandes, contradicted the initial purposes of the research and exposed Brazilian racism.

## 2. Gilberto Freyre and the consequences of his work

In his main work, “Casa Grande & Senzala” [2], Freyre details his understanding of the daily life of Brazilian slave society based on the domestic and patriarchal environment directed by the plantation owner, that is, the “Casa Grande” (where slaveholders lived). Even when talking about the

enslaved, his emphasis is on those who lived within the family, hostages to all the perverse violence inherent to the slave regime. In looking at the relationships that exist in this space, he will neglect howling disparities to defend the “ambiguity” of sexual relations between white men and black women. He always describes these relationships with an exaggeratedly erotic look. The way he sexualizes black female bodies is, in itself, violent. Freyre, however, even though he deals with a context of maximum perversity, does not condemn it; on the contrary, he potentiates this violence in the way he attributes unbridled sexuality to black women and, further, romanticizes relationships that were evidently not reciprocal. In his view, the Portuguese were more malleable colonizers, more prone to adaptation and mixing. In addition, they also had the full availability of the women they met here. This defense of a democratization of sexual-racial relations in Brazil was fundamental, as it supported the idea of Brazil as a mestizo country par excellence: Freyre affirmed *mestizaje* as a broader and deeper force of social and psychological action than slavery itself [2], [3], [4].

Lusotropicalismo is the name of Gilberto Freyre's concept used to defend the benevolent and malleable character of Portuguese colonization. According to Cláudia Castelo [5], an “archaeology” of Lusotropicalism aligns its origins with the work *Casa Grande & Senzala*. Still in the first pages of this book, Freyre defends, as the three main characteristics of the Portuguese people, mobility, miscibility and acclimatization. Through the “human character of Portuguese colonization”, not only Brazil, but all other hostage countries of the same metropolitan power would have had this tendency towards mixing. Therefore, all Luso-descendants would feel such a similarity, even astonishing, with each other [3]. That is why this theory is used, with the author's connivance, as a political ideology by the Portuguese dictatorial government of Salazar. Lusotropicalism was used as an argument to legitimize the continuity of Portuguese colonization over African countries in

the mid-twentieth century. It is obvious that, like racial democracy, Lusotropicalism was not supported by any honest look at reality. According to Castelo [5], confidential reports describe the abyssal distance that separated the true “Portuguese way of being in the world” from the Freyrean theory. Mário Pinto de Andrade, founder of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, under the pseudonym of Buanga Fele, was the precursor in the denunciation against Lusotropicalism and its political instrumentalization [6].

### 3. Florestan Fernandes and the denunciation of the myth of racial democracy

Invited by Roger Bastide, Fernandes produced a revolutionary study for the understanding of Brazil. His work brought a new vision of race relations opposed to the then dominant model of Gilberto Freyre. In his most famous work, “The integration of black people in class society” [7], Florestan Fernandes seeks to understand the complex and tense dynamics in which the present, the legacy of the past and the future possibilities in Brazilian society intertwine [8]. When discussing the formation, consolidation and expansion of the social class regime in Brazil from the angle of racial relations and, in particular, the absorption of blacks, he states that this population contingent was the one that had the worst starting point in the competitive society after the Abolition. Even with the end of slavery, behavior models, ideals of life and habits of patrimonial domination continued to prevail [7].

The possibilities of inclusion in the new society were sporadic for black men and women. For the most part, class society remained non-egalitarian and closed to those whose history is marked by centuries of oppression. In addition to being relegated to the margins and subjected to an arduous process of impoverishment and social misery,

according to Fernandes, black men and women did not have the material means to enter the competitive order [7].

In the first volume of “The integration of black people in class society”, it is stated that, under the guise of freedom, the black population inherited another servitude, that of the individual who considers himself free, but who finds himself with his hands tied. This contingent of people is faced with numerous barriers even to obtain what, for whites, is considered “as a kind of gift of nature”: the presence in society as its subjects. That is why, in the second volume of his book [7], Fernandes examines, always from the perspective of black people, the ways found to face these many challenges and “return to the historical scene”. It is an objective in line with the first issue that brings, from the outset, the intention to understand how the People emerge in history [8].

The slave order, in Brazil, served as the initial support of the subsequent phase, of transition to competitive capitalism. In other words, in order to sociologically explain the relations between slavery and capitalism, it is necessary to analyze the functions of slavery as a specific factor in the original accumulation of capital. The Brazilian “Bourgeois Revolution” operated in such a way as to maintain the prestige and privileges of those who had always held them. It is a long-term structural process towards the implementation of a class society, but with specificities: instead of being democratic-bourgeois, our revolution was autocratic-bourgeois. Hence the understanding of what Fernandes calls “dynamic polarization”: the simultaneity of the maintenance of the slave order and the “search” for modernization (opening for democratic advancement). In summary, in this polarization, one pole points to the persistence of the past, in ideology, and the other to the future projection, in utopia [9], [8].

His sensitivity to the racial issue and his effort to scrutinize the formation of modern Brazil according to an attentive look at the disadvantages inflicted on blacks led Fernandes to the conclusion

that, in multiracial societies, race tends to be a specific revolutionary factor. The works of Florestan Fernandes bring up extremely useful questions to understand not only the dilemmas of the democratization of racial relations. Furthermore, these are dilemmas of the very fate of democracy in Brazil. Fostered long ago, the idea of Brazil as a racial democracy constitutes the biggest fallacy of our race relations.

## 4. The denunciation of the Black Movement

In Brazil, the founding of the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU), in 1978, also had as one of its main agendas the denunciation of the idea of racial democracy as a myth. Abdias do Nascimento and Lélia Gonzalez are two black intellectuals who were engaged in this struggle. The two exposed the country's true racist face to the world.

In the letter of principles of the Unified Black Movement (MNU), it is stated that they were all “convinced of the existence of racial discrimination, racial, political, economic, social and cultural marginalization of the black people”. It ends, then, as follows: “For an authentic racial democracy! For the liberation of the black people!” [10].

In April 1987, Lélia Gonzalez makes an unforgettable speech in the 1987-1988 Constituent Assembly. She insists on the importance of always having in mind the construction of a project for the nation, “because a people that does not know its own history, its own formation, is incapable of building a future for itself”. From the 1970s, according to his words, there was a rebirth of the black movement in Brazil, inspired by the liberation struggles in Africa and the struggle for civil rights in the United States, but, above all, based on our own history of resistance. After all, “we are always the bases, have you noticed that? Or else we are co-opted to play the theater of racial democracy. We don't want this anymore!” [11].

## 5. Conclusion

The fallacious idea of Brazil as a racial democracy masked the true face of a profoundly racist society and justified the most extreme indifference and lack of solidarity with the black population, even when this sector of the collective did not have the material conditions to face the changes brought about by the universalization of free labor and competition.

The myth of racial democracy, sociologically articulated by Gilberto Freyre, was transfigured into a national ideology and had to be denounced by researchers and activists. The resurgence of the

black movement in the late 1970s is strongly aligned with this denunciation.

In the scientific context, the name of another sociologist stands out: Florestan Fernandes challenged Freyre's interpretations and brought a new interpretation about Brazil. Fernandes presented us with material that allows us to understand how the processes of transition to a class society present continuities with the slave-holding past. Sensitive, above all, to racial dynamics and the suffering inflicted on the black population, his work demystifies the great fallacy of our racial relations. To end with the words of Lélia Gonzalez: "Racial Democracy? None of that!".

## 6. References

[1] GUIMARÃES, Antonio Sérgio. Democracia racial: o ideal, o pacto e o mito. *Novos Estudos*, São Paulo, v. 61, n. 1, p. 147-162, nov. 2001.

[2] FREYRE, Gilberto. *Casa-grande & Senzala*: formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal. 48. ed. São Paulo: Global, 2003.

[3] FREYRE, Gilberto. *O mundo que o Português criou*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio, 1940.

[4] PINTO, João Alberto da Costa. Gilberto Freyre e o lusotropicalismo como ideologia do colonialismo português (1951-1974). *Revista UFG*, Goiânia, v. 6, p.145-160, jun. 2009.

[5] CASTELO, Claudia. *O luso-tropicalismo e o colonialismo português tardio*. 2013. Disponível em: <https://www.buala.org/pt/a-ler/o-luso-tropicalismo-e-o-colonialismo-portugues-tardio>. Acesso em: 10 set. 2021.

[6] CASTELO, Claudia. Uma incursão no lusotropicalismo de Gilberto Freyre. *Bhl - Blogue de História Lusófona*, Lisboa, ano VI, p. 261-280, set. 2011.

[7] FERNANDES, Florestan. A integração do negro na sociedade de classes. Vol. 1: O legado da "raça branca". São Paulo: Globo, [1965] 2008.

[8] COHN, Gabriel. Florestan Fernandes: A integração do negro na sociedade de classes. In: MOTA, Lourenço Dantas (Org.). *Introdução ao Brasil: Um banquete no trópico*, Vol. 2. São Paulo: Editora SENAC, 2002. p. 385-402.

[9] FERNANDES, Florestan. *A revolução burguesa no Brasil. Ensaio de interpretação sociológica*. Rio de Janeiro: Globo, [1975] 2006.

[10] GONZALEZ, Lélia; HASENBALG, Carlos. *LUGAR DE NEGRO*. Rio de Janeiro: Marco Zero, 1982

[11] GONZALEZ, Lélia (org.). *Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano: ensaios, intervenções e diálogos/ organização: Flávia Rios & Márcia Lima*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2020.