

**Race, nationalism and social theory in Brazil:  
rethinking Gilberto Freyre**

**David Cleary**

**WPTC-99-09**

David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies  
Harvard University  
61 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

### **Creole nation: race<sup>1</sup>, nationalism and social theory in Brazil**

Forms of nationalism in nineteenth century Latin America were generally nativist and paradoxically tied in with notions of *crioulo* ethnic or racial purity, with very combustible results when the political tensions between colony and metropolis were added to the mix. Tens of thousands died across the continent in wars of independence and provincial rebellions which often assumed the form of race wars, hostility to the metropolis easily eliding into indigenous and slave hostility to *brancos* in general<sup>2</sup>. However, by the late nineteenth century it is possible to discern the beginnings of alternative understandings of national identity operating at the level of both political praxis and social theory, which stressed the inevitability of race mixture and the hybrid nature of national culture and identity. By the 1940s this creolisation of nationalist thought had become politically hegemonic in a number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, where national culture was reconfigured as *mestizo/mestiço* and syncretism celebrated as the characteristic national genius. This was not without its ironies, since the period also saw frequent police persecution of Afro-American religious cults for being altogether too African, a process in which the authorities enjoyed the unconscious collusion of many cult leaders, who established their credibility by emphasising their African-ness and viewing syncretism as a synonym for contamination<sup>3</sup>.

The celebration of *mestiçagem* in nationalist thought assumed its most developed form in Brazil, where it resonates very deeply to the present day, but was also very striking in Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba and Mexico<sup>4</sup>. These countries stood in contrast to others in the region where nationalism developed in a very different way: Argentina, where nationalist ideologies of both left and right insisted on a monoracial understanding of the nation's past and present, and Surinam and Guyana, where independence would come much later and whose very different history led to a fracturing of social and political institutions along ethnic and racial lines in the modern period. Surinam's tortured modern history, with civil war pitting the largely indigenous

and black population of the interior against the neo-Europeans and *mulatos* of the coast, is a tragic demonstration of the political and human costs of the failure to construct more inclusive forms of national identity. It is a modern conflict in which the weapon of choice is the AK-47, but the pattern of violence - coast vs. interior, Amerindians and Africans vs. others – harks back to the eighteenth century, with the depressing difference that a series of treaties in the late eighteenth century ended violent conflict for 150 years, but no comparable political accommodation appears likely in Surinam at present.

It goes without saying that the political and cultural dialectics of race and nationalism in each country are complex: the scholarly literature is enormous and made more so by the North American fascination with the apparent contrast between the racial inclusiveness of some forms of Latin American nationalism and the exclusive, fractured racial history of the United States<sup>5</sup>. In this article I want to examine the Brazilian case, and propose to do so by looking at the arch-ideologue of Latin American *mestiço* nationalism, and not just in Brazil: Gilberto Freyre. However, while a brief summary and a little background detail is necessary for the readers unfamiliar with him, I do not intend to provide an extended analysis of his work and its intellectual context, a task which has already been very effectively accomplished in English by others<sup>6</sup>.

I am more interested in the way in which his reputation has fluctuated in political and scholarly circles in Brazil, as an angle of approach to the underlying question of how Brazilian nationalism, and the intimately associated representations of national culture and history by Brazilian intellectuals, has developed during the course of the twentieth century. This may seem a rather esoteric exercise, especially as the notion of Brazil as some kind of simple national model of racial tolerance and inclusiveness has been meticulously discredited since the early 1950s. Nevertheless, while the existence of race as a significant dimension of inequality in Brazil is undeniable, I believe that there is a sense in which even having creolisation and the celebration of syncretism involved in constructions of national identity at all is a constraining influence. It

constrains the violent exclusivity of certain forms of European nationalism we naively characterised as atavistic before Yugoslavia disintegrated, but it also constrains the (generally) more benign but still divisive insistence on ethnic and racial exclusivity on both the left and right of the political spectrum in the modern United States. In this sense I think Brazil can fairly be seen as a model, despite everything. For all its grotesque internal inequalities and political problems, it is a society where at the end of the twentieth century the hegemonic forms of erudite and popular culture accept and celebrate the most fundamental truth of postmodern politics and politics: that all states are creole nations. From my own perspective, that of a diasporic European writing in the United States, this seems an enviable achievement.

### **Before Freyre**

Portugal was never able to match other European countries in numbers of New World colonists, and practically its first act of colonisation in 1500 was to leave behind single male convicts to intermarry with Amerindians. The great cities of nineteenth century Brazil were slave cities: slaves probably made up a majority of the population of Rio de Janeiro in the 1830s, and at least 40% of the population of Salvador in the 1840s<sup>7</sup>. Higher slave mortality in Brazil meant somewhere between three and four times as many Africans were transported there as to the United States, and European and North American travellers routinely commented on their impression they were arriving in Africa. Around the time of independence in 1822, a short journey from most Brazilian cities was enough to bring new arrivals into much more direct contact with indigenous peoples than was possible on the eastern coast of north America at the time; the Botocudo, for example, were able to maintain their independence into the 1830s and controlled the coast and interior within a hundred miles of Rio to the north, rather as if hostile Amerindians controlled Connecticut and blocked the overland route from New York to Boston. Catholic in religion and choice of sexual partners alike, the country could have been designed to blow the mental circuits of the generally Protestant, generally prudish and generally eugenicist

foreign scientists who produced a significant proportion of the travel literature of the late nineteenth century. Gobineau was actually French Minister in Rio from 1869 to 1871 and unsurprisingly detested both the city and the country; the several great figures of European and North American science who spent periods of time in Brazil in the second half of the nineteenth century – Louis Agassiz, Alfred Russell Wallace – all contributed their variants of a trope in which authentic manifestations of African and Amerindian culture are often admired, but miscegenation is read as “mongrelisation”, the European at the top of the racial hierarchy betrayed by his vulnerability to the polluting power of Indian and, especially, African blood<sup>8</sup>.

Thus Brazilian intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were faced with an exquisite dilemma. Charged with producing modernising and unifying ideologies of nationhood to go with the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the overthrow of the monarchy and proclamation of a republic in 1889, saturated in the peculiarly evangelical form of Comtean positivism which was the dominant intellectual influence on the first generation of republican leaders, the scientific outlook which was a synonym for the progressive in other spheres boiled down to eugenics and racism when it came to thinking about national identity<sup>9</sup>. Ambiguity therefore became the defining characteristic of the response of Brazilian intellectuals to the question of national origins and direction in the first decades of the twentieth century. Euclides da Cunha, in his meditation on the contending influences of environment and race in northeastern Brazil in *Os Sertões*, translated into English as *Rebellion in the Backlands* and occupying a central place in the Brazilian literary canon to this day, oscillates between conventional denigration of the *mestiço* and *miscegenação* and admiration for the toughness of the *mestiço* peasantry, which he comes to recognise as the “bedrock of our race”. Indeed, it is the unresolved tensions in da Cunha’s ambiguous portrayal of the Canudos campaign which make it a great book: the stunted *mestiço* monarchists heroically defend their primitivism, and it is the Republic and its representatives who behave barbarically, in their abandonment of the interior to poverty and ignorance and their disproportionately violent response to a religious movement. The

harshness of da Cunha's account of the Northeast, and his polemical assertion of the centrality of violence in the birth of modern Brazil, stands as a counterpoint to Freyre's very different, although equally polemical meditations on regional and national identity, as we shall see.

The standard response of the essentially second-rank intellectuals responsible for much of Brazilian social theory between da Cunha and Freyre's rise to prominence – Oliveira Vianna, Paulo Prado, Plínio Salgado, Cassiano Ricardo – was equally ambiguous. The argument was put in its classical form by Oliveira Vianna in *As Populações Meridionais do Brasil* [The Southern Populations of Brazil], published in 1920: Vianna accepted the racial hierarchies and scientism of late nineteenth century eugenics but made a new reading of Brazilian racial history, arguing that declining African fertility and increasing European immigration – he was writing as mass immigration from Europe was transforming southern Brazil – were contributing to “Aryanise” the country. This argument became known as the *embranquecimento*, or “whitening” thesis, and was not unique to Brazil: it was a standard response of Latin American intellectuals to eugenicist orthodoxy, with local variants in Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina and elsewhere<sup>10</sup>. The contradiction here, that increasing diversity and miscegenation could result in racial uniformity over time, was typical of the mental gymnastics intellectuals of the period were obliged to perform in order to reconcile the tenets of scientific racism with Latin America's patently multiracial reality<sup>11</sup>.

One of the striking things about early Brazilian social theorists of race is how they were practising politicians rather than academics, involved very directly in political struggles over the formulation of national ideologies within and without the state apparatus. Vianna would become Minister of Education under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas in the 1930s, and presided over the design of the first national history syllabus for secondary schools. Cassiano Ricardo was one of the most prominent journalists of his day, and in *Marcha para Oeste* [Westward March], first published in 1942, produced an enormously influential reading of Brazilian history which simultaneously stressed both racial hierarchy and co-operation, explaining the formation and

geographical expansion of Brazil as the product of Portuguese organising genius, Amerindian knowledge of the natural world and African strength and docility<sup>12</sup>. Plínio Salgado founded the Integralista movement, usually described as the Brazilian version of fascism, but things were a little more complicated than that: *integralismo* did indeed bear some resemblance to European fascism in iconography and uniforms, but to the Iberian rather than the German or Italian variants. Salgado was deeply involved in Catholic mysticism and actually emphasised intermarriage as a positive, unifying force in Brazilian colonial history, reserving his hostility for industrial capitalism, which he saw as disrupting the agrarian harmony of pre-industrial Brazil and forcing the industrial proletariat towards communism<sup>13</sup>. *Integralismo* was remarkable in the overall context of the Fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s for the absence of racial rancour, outside the first generation German towns of the extreme south; Salgado stressed a spiritual revolution rather than a literal one (although this did not save him from exile when Vargas decided *integralismo* had become a political threat), and the *Integralistas* even boasted a few Afro-Brazilian members.

However, the political activism of figures like Vianna, Salgado and Ricardo merely underlined the extent to which concern with the supposedly negative effects of miscegenation was an exclusive concern of social elites. Political participation in Brazil was minimal during the first half of the century. The franchise was hedged about with property and literacy qualifications; only 1.9% of the total population voted in the election of 1920, and 5.7% in 1930, when popular frustration finally boiled over and a revolution toppled the First Republic<sup>14</sup>. With Vargas' authoritarian regime culminating in dictatorship between 1937 and 1945, it was not until 1945 that a true mass election was held in Brazil for the first time. Meanwhile, independently of politicians, the bricolage of popular culture during the first half of the century was busily creating what by the end of the century would be seen abroad as the defining motifs of modern Brazil. Between 1910 and 1940 *samba* and carnival assumed their modern forms in Rio de Janeiro (the first generally recognised samba, *No Telefone*, was recorded in 1917), the first organised football

leagues were organised in Rio and São Paulo, and the first radio networks began to forge a truly national popular culture<sup>15</sup>. In literature the 1920s saw the first frontal attacks on scientific racism, with explicit celebrations of syncretism and *miscegenação* as the defining elements of Brazilian national identity by the founders of Brazilian modernism, Oswald de Andrade and Mário de Andrade<sup>16</sup>. Their characteristic form of attack was vicious parody of the arguments and symbols of positivism. Macunaíma, the hero of Mário de Andrade's eponymous novel, is the black son of an Indian mother, turned partly white by a magic fountain. His defining traits - sexual omnivorousness, laziness and gluttony - are the eugenicist's nightmare, and his motto, repeated throughout the book, is the yawned '*ai, que preguiça*' ["too lazy!"], an ironic counter to the positivist motto "*Ordem e Progresso*", Order and Progress, emblazoned on the national flag. This was the charged social and intellectual context into which Gilberto Freyre would explode in the 1930s with the most powerful myth of national origin produced by any Brazilian intellectual, one which still reverberates within Brazil and beyond.

### **Freyre**

Gilberto Freyre was born in Recife in 1900 and died there in 1987; this most cosmopolitan of intellectuals was an ostentatious provincial who spent his life outside the Rio-São Paulo axis that dominates Brazilian culture and politics, and took an elaborate revenge upon it by polemically generalising the history of his native Northeast to the country as a whole. Author of between thirty and forty books and hundreds of scholarly articles, not to mention thousands of pieces of journalism and other ephemera, it is interesting that he does not yet have a full-scale intellectual biography in any language. In part this is due to the daunting task such a long and prolific life offers to biographers, but I think it also reflects a certain difficulty on the part of both Brazilians and foreigners in locating his work securely in an historical and intellectual context. Few social theorists have endured the fluctuations that have characterised Freyre's reputation, which can be divided into three general phases: an initial honeymoon period lasting from the early 1930s into

the early 1950s, when he was generally regarded as a groundbreaking radical; a period of increasing questioning and contestation, including many denunciations of him as a political reactionary, which lasted from about the mid-1950s to the late 1970s; and a period of rehabilitation from the 1980s on, which has restored him as a central figure in Brazilian intellectual life.

His reputation rests largely on three books, all of them translated into English and widely available in North America, where they had a very significant and continuing impact: *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933), *Sobrados e Mocambos* (1936) and *Ordem e Progresso* (1959)<sup>17</sup>. All fall in the grey area between social history, anthropology and sociology, and are all self-consciously polemical meditations on modern Brazilian culture and society, viewed through the prism of their historical origins and development. Summarising this dense body of work in a few sentences is an impossible task, but Freyre is basically concerned with tracing out the origins and development of Brazilian character, sensibility and social institutions, which he sees as originating in the colonial plantation complex and its subsequent decline in the modern period. It is above all a *mestiço* culture, well adapted to the tropics, and the locus of *mestiçagem* is the plantation house, a sphere of sexual liaison, of the blending of European, African and Indian culture, and the development of a peculiarly Brazilian version of slavery, where the harsher aspects were attenuated over time by the intimacies of proximity, shared daily routines and erotic attraction. With time, as Brazil became an independent nation and then a Republic, the patriarchal mode of plantation life carried over into family structures and political life in the modern period, marked by hierarchical, often violent authoritarianism within the family and an attempt to reproduce these familial-type relationships within broader societal institutions. Freyre is often represented as an apologist for Brazilian slavery, but this is an over-simplification: he does not deny the importance of hierarchy and violence in Brazilian culture, but sees patriarchy rather than the institution of slavery as its most important axis, an enormously resonant and productive idea. It is, however, in permanent tension with the very Northeastern nostalgia for the past and hostility to the present which also

permeates his work, grounding it in the kind of fertile ambiguities which lie behind Euclides da Cunha, in so many other respects his structural and stylistic opposite, a chronicler of the backlands rather than the plantation coast, an intimate of violence rather than the erotic<sup>18</sup>.

*Casa Grande e Senzala* was a sensational success within Brazil as soon as it was published, for a number of reasons: its stylistic virtuosity, its frank treatment of sexuality, revolutionary for the period and ensuring it permanent cult status among late adolescent readers ever since, but most of all for its turning of positivist race theory on its head with the assertion that *miscegenação* and race mixture was the core of national identity and evidence of successful adaptation to the tropics, not a pathological condition. A particularly interesting description of its impact was given in 1967, when attitudes towards Freyre were far more hostile than they are today, by the Communist leader Antônio Cândido, a man whose opinions are given weight by his rare distinction of having been imprisoned both by Vargas in the 1930s and the military dictators of the 1960s:

*It seemed intuitively true that the intelligence driving the book must be anti-authoritarian, with the extraordinarily free writing style, its frank treatment of sexuality, and the decisive importance attributed to the slave in the most intimate aspects of our culture. The young reader of today, especially remembering the subsequent political directions taken by its author<sup>19</sup>, perhaps finds it difficult to understand the revolutionary, liberating impact of this great book. Maybe it was the volume of information and detail, his expository talent, his way of bombarding you with interpretations, his organisational skills, which brought data together and organised them in a way which was totally unknown in Brazil up to that point. I see him as a bridge between the earliest interpreters of our society in the beginning of the century, like Euclides da Cunha and Oliveira Vianna, and the more sociological style that would dominate after 1940. I say this based on Freyre's preoccupation with what are at bottom biological issues (race, sexual life, nutrition, the family, the environment), which serve as the basis for a theoretical treatment derived from North American cultural anthropology, which was applied in Brazil for the first time by Freyre<sup>20</sup>.*

Ironically, Freyre's command of his sources and confident authorial voice concealed the fact that they were usually secondary rather than primary: memoirs, letters and travel books often written by foreigners interwoven with personal and family reminiscences, with archival sources remarkable for their absence. There was something of a methodological revolution in this expansion of source material for the social history of the country, which had little precedent in

Brazilian historiography, but also something regressive about it: João Capistrano de Abreu, the most competent social historian of Brazil prior to Freyre, had already demonstrated how archival research could illuminate the daily life of the past, and one suspects Freyre's temperament was not suited to the kind of long-term primary research typical of the orthodox academic world he kept at arm's length all his life. He refused many offers of professorships in Brazil and abroad, although he was a regular visiting speaker, and devoted his energies to running his own research foundation in Recife, the Instituto Joaquim Nabuco. For all his disagreements with his contemporaries and interlocutors Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Caio Prado Junior, he shared with them a wealthy background and significant private income which allowed him to do whatever he pleased: he wrote about aristocracy, patriarchy and decline from the inside<sup>21</sup>.

Almost as soon as they were published Freyre's books became a subject of intense intellectual debate within Brazil. As they were translated and became widely known in North America, fuelled by Freyre's frequent visits to the USA and his fluency in English, his reading of Brazilian history and identity acquired a momentum of its own and became embroiled in the particular *conjuntura* of the immediate post-war period: the final discrediting of eugenics and scientific racism with the defeat of the Nazis, the North American interest in models of race relations in which prejudice, segregation and violence seemed to be absent, and the fact that the first director of UNESCO, Artur Ramos, was both Brazilian and a distinguished scholar of Afro-Brazil. At the same time the newly democratic regime in Brazil was anxious to encourage an international perception that Brazil was a country which had somehow got race relations right and managed to overcome the legacy of slavery. One sees this fascination with race in Brazil – by no means uncritical, contrary to the stereotype of starry-eyed white Americans imagining a racial paradise - underlying the wide range of work produced by North Americans in Brazil during the 1940s, much of it by women, from the extraordinary anthropological memoir of Ruth Landes in Bahia to the photography of Genevieve Naylor<sup>22</sup>. The result in the short term was the commissioning of a series of ethnographic studies of race in Brazil by UNESCO; in the long

term, in combination with a re-examination of Brazilian history by a newly critical generation of Brazilian intellectuals, it would result in the transformation of Freyre from progressive defender of *mestiçagem* to reactionary apologist of a fictitious racial democracy.

### **After Freyre**

Partly as a result of the UNESCO studies, it was widely accepted by the end of the 1950s that Brazil was not a racial democracy, as Freyre had foolishly gone on record to argue in English at the height of the UNESCO interest in the country<sup>23</sup>. For the next forty years historians and anthropologists would demonstrate the existence of marked racial inequalities in Brazilian society<sup>24</sup> and systematically dismantle many of the empirical assertions Freyre had made about Brazilian history: the relative mildness of Brazilian slavery compared to North America (Brazilian slave life expectancy was very considerably lower than in the United States during the nineteenth century); the frequency of manumission compared to other American slave societies (not proven); the centrality of planters in the early history of Brazilian urbanisation (untrue). As history and the social sciences consolidated themselves intellectually and institutionally in Brazil in the postwar period, they did so to a large extent in reaction to both the conclusions and the style of Freyre, who always managed to project an air of amateur dilettantism into even his most systematic work.

On the purely empirical level the response to Freyre was devastating. An early riposte to his reading of the colonial period was Caio Prado Júnior's *A Formação Económica do Brasil Contemporânea: Colônia*, first published in 1942<sup>25</sup>. It almost completely ignored issues of race and culture and concentrated, in good *Annales* history fashion, on how geography and external economic relations determined Brazil's evolution, with the country seen in structural terms as the product of a set of historical relationships, not in the essentialist Freyrean vocabulary of national character and cultural essences. But it would take another decade and a series of immensely detailed monographs examining slavery and its legacies in regions other than the Northeast,

especially São Paulo and southern Brazil, to demonstrate the superficiality and naivety of many of the sweeping historical generalisations which pepper Freyre's work, in particular the notion that slavery in Brazil was relatively benign. The key figure in this new wave of studies, justly regarded as the first concrete indication of the large-scale professionalisation of Brazilian social science in the postwar period, was Florestan Fernandes, one of the UNESCO team leaders and supervisor of the doctoral thesis of a bright young Paulista historian called Fernando Henrique Cardoso, later to go on to greater things but not before assuring himself of a footnote in the historiography of race and slavery with the publication of his first book in 1960, on race and social mobility in the southern city of Florianópolis during the nineteenth and early twentieth century<sup>26</sup>.

The most important text of the period was Fernandes' monograph *A Integração do Negro na Sociedade de Classes* [lit. The Integration of the Negro in Class Society, translated as The Negro in Brazilian Society<sup>27</sup>] which destroyed Freyre's academic and political reputation in progressive circles for a generation, despite the fact that it never explicitly engages with his work and only mentions him once, albeit devastatingly<sup>28</sup>. To any Brazilian intellectual of the time and since it was immediately obvious who and what the book was written against, not so much for what it said – important though that was - but for what it was: an analysis of the persistence of racial inequality in Brazil and a deconstruction of the power of the myth of racial democracy, a careful relating of the decline of slavery, abolition and racial disadvantage to early industrialisation, labour markets and class formation, a painstaking weaving together of primary sources, both archival and ethnographic, a detailed quantitative study using census and other data – everything Freyre was not, in other words. If this were all there was to it, it would remain an academic dispute centred around differing interpretations of slavery and its legacies, and Freyre could – although he never did – have made academic counter-arguments, such as the fact that urban São Paulo was no more representative of the country as a whole than the plantation complex of the Northeast. The argument, however, was much more than academic. Fernandes'

selection of “the prejudice of having no prejudice” as his central theme, the myth of racial democracy in the face of clear and quantifiable discrimination, did not quite leave unsaid the phrase “as Gilberto Freyre says”. It was an indication of the neat dovetailing between certain elements of Freyrean historiography - nationalism nothing if not selective in its readings of history – and the political needs of Brazilian conservatism in mid-century.

Freyre’s reconfiguration of the dynamics of national origin was politically progressive in the context of the 1930s, but changing political circumstances in subsequent decades altered the picture. As academic and political discussions of race in mid-century deepened and became more sophisticated, it was inevitable that what twenty years previously had been an argument for the importance and vitality of non-European contributions to Brazilian culture would seem increasingly obvious and perhaps a little patronising. One relatively benign factor was the natural delight within nationalist circles and beyond at having a dimension of supposed superiority over the United States articulated, but much more serious in its political implications was the need to find stabilising national ideologies at a time of unprecedented social change.

In the 1950s more than half the population of Brazil lived in cities and industry accounted for over half of GNP for the first time. Vargas committed suicide in 1953, democratic institutions had trouble establishing themselves, and increasing political polarisation culminated in a coup in 1964 and a decade of military repression: democracy would not return until 1984. At a time of increasing disunity and political turbulence, when the basic political and economic organisation of the country was in question, Freyre became an immensely attractive figure to the conservative right. He appeared to confer academic respectability on the popular notion that there was no racial inequality or race prejudice in Brazil. His concentration on the colonial period and the nineteenth century, his nostalgic tone and obsessive interest in the folkloric, were all immediately appealing to those troubled by the present. His insistence on the relative peacefulness of Brazilian history and social evolution was a comfort, given the violent backdrop of the times. Most importantly, his elaboration of the peculiar fitness of Luso-Africo-Indian creolisation to the tropics<sup>29</sup> lent itself to

a Panglossian reading that stressed the ideal nature of the present. This is, it goes without saying, a highly selective reading of Freyre, but it also has to be said that it was one which Freyre himself did little to discourage, ensconced in his research institution and a celebrated figure on the international conference circuit, more than a little disconnected from the controversies of the period and happy to accept baubles irrespective of their provenance.

The consequence, as Fernandes anatomised to such damaging effect, was that Freyre was absorbed into the most retrograde varieties of popular and erudite nationalism, and subsequent generations have had to struggle to reclaim his work from racists and conservative hacks, as well as come to terms with the fact that Freyre was alive throughout the process and allowed it to happen. It is difficult to over-emphasise the extent to which Freyre was despised in Brazilian universities after 1964 for his acceptance of honours from military governments and nominated state governors. There was also the cruel irony that he shared both his surname and his northeastern origins with the popular educator Paulo Freire, whose engagement in struggles for social justice and almost equal international prominence in the 1970s seemed a permanent reproach whenever the name Freire came up and clarifications as to which Freire was being referred to were needed. The period also had a very direct effect on the intellectual assessment of his work, since the political context and the nationalist agenda funnelled both Brazilian and international readers towards *Casa Grande e Senzala* [The Masters and the Slaves] and Freyre's work on the colonial period, to the relative neglect of *The Mansions and the Shanties* and *Order and Progress*, which bring the story forward from the colonial period to the First Republic. This was unfortunate at a number of levels, since it convinced a generation of intellectuals in Brazil and internationally that Freyre could simply be written off as an apologist and myth-maker, whose principal arguments had been disproved by the São Paulo school: there was thus an intellectual rationale for the hostility towards him, as well as political antipathy.

It would take some time for the pendulum to swing back. When it did, a great deal of the re-evaluation centred around Freyre's reading of patriarchy, in particular of the sociology and

psychology of the patriarchal family and its cultural and political implications. Freyre's analysis of Brazilian patriarchy in *The Mansions* and *the Shanties* is a salutary reminder that his readings of the past were not necessarily apologies: few more dystopian accounts of Brazilian culture have ever been written:

*The administration of justice by the patriarch to his own family... took on at times a sadistic character. A sadism which was very slightly modified when the patriarchal system of the Big House was transferred to the city mansion, where the old men continued their almost absolute rule over the young. With the decay of the rural patriarchy this sadistic pedagogy... took on a new and terrible lease of life in the religious and State schools. The parents delegated to teachers and priests the authority to punish with quince switch and ferule*<sup>30</sup>

These final two books of Freyre's trilogy are the ones younger Brazilian intellectuals have been drawn to since the 1980s, and one can see why<sup>31</sup>. They deal more explicitly with the country as a whole, and with the formation of national culture in a period – the Empire and the First Republic – more closely connected to the present. Moreover, Freyre's concern as the trilogy progresses is with the decline of the plantation complex and patriarchy, its cultural synonym, together with the often dysfunctional survival of certain archaic cultural features into the modern period, most importantly the extended family and its associated hierarchies and gendered inequalities.

In this respect Freyre was echoing and elaborating the earlier identification of this theme by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in his book *Raízes do Brasil*, especially in what was to become the most influential short essay in Brazilian social theory, “O Homem Cordial”<sup>32</sup>, first published in 1936. Buarque de Holanda argues that the continuing strength of kinship ties and the extended family throughout Brazilian history have resulted in the formation of what he terms the *homem cordial*, a personhood which instinctively operates through affective ties and the kind of unrestrained emotionality bound up with masculinity in the agrarian, patriarchal context out of which modern Brazil grew, which he specifically opposes to Weber and the Anglo-Saxon model of bureaucratic rationalism:

*In Brazil, only in exceptional cases have we had an administrative system and public servants dedicated to and founded upon objective interests. On the contrary, it is possible to discern throughout our history the constant predominance of private wills and interests which operate in closed circuits and are not subject to external regulation. Of these closed circuits, the family is*

*the abiding and most developed form. And one of the decisive consequences of the absorbing and incontestable supremacy of the family nucleus – its primary ties of blood and the heart – is that the relations created in domestic life were always the model of any form of social composition among us. This occurs even where democratic institutions, founded upon neutral and abstract principles, attempt to regulate society along particularist lines.*

*It has already been said, and it is well said, that the peculiarly Brazilian contribution to civilisation is cordialidade – that we have given to the world the figure of the cordial man. Affability in personal relationships, hospitality, generosity, the virtues which so impress the foreigner among us, represent a defining element of the Brazilian character, at least to the extent to which they represent the continuing vigour among us of ancestral patterns of human relationships, formed in a rural and patriarchal context. But it would be a mistake to assume that cordiality merely means good manners, civility. It is above all a manifestation of an overwhelming emotionality<sup>33</sup>.*

What Buarque de Holanda outlined in the abstract, Freyre documented in enormous detail in *The Mansions and the Shanties* and *Order and Progress*, without ever managing to state as succinctly. But it is important to note the shift which occurs in the later books of the trilogy, especially in relation to the earlier concerns of *The Masters and the Slaves*. First, the concern with national origins and sensibility becomes less explicitly to do with race and more explicitly to do with culture and the person, viewed not in the essentialist terms in which Freyre casts his earliest discussions of race and culture, but as the historical product of an imperfect transition from the patriarchal to the modern. Secondly, Freyre's reading of both the past and the present is actually rather dark: as he moves towards the present he appears to be presenting more of an indictment of Brazil than an apologia, emphasising the extent to which historical legacies act as a drag on the present, rather than freeing it: the implication is that the transition to modernity and industrial capitalism destroys the attenuating aspects of patriarchy while leaving its more negative manifestations, such as authoritarian families and personalist ties in politics, largely intact. The existential dilemma of Brazilian culture, as Freyre sees more clearly than Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, is that imperfect modernism is worse than no modernism at all: the end result is a society with the institutions and trappings of Weberian bureaucracy, but which revolves around informal personalist networks – the rhetoric of citizenship without its reality. Holanda assumed that modernity would win out in the end, while Freyre, with his much more intimate knowledge

of patriarchy's centrality in Brazilian culture, took a more cynical and, as it turned out, more accurate view. While Freyre never retreats from his original contention that Brazil has and had a relatively harmonious racial order, his view of national origins and development is more ambiguous and critical than an exclusive focus on the question of race in his work would imply.

### **Conclusion: Freyre today**

Freyre's rehabilitation and the ubiquity of his influence among contemporary Brazilian (and Brazilianist) intellectuals and scholars is remarkable, and would have been unimaginable as little as twenty years ago. Nobody writing on such fundamentally important topics as race, slavery, the family, the Northeast, sexuality and the erotic, or Brazilian social history in general, can avoid engaging with Freyre, and the more that is written on them the more important Freyre seems<sup>34</sup>. This requires some explanation, given the systematic destruction of his academic reputation in the 1960s and 1970s, and leads into the more general question of the political context of modern Brazilian nationalism and Freyre's place within it.

Part of the answer is clearly to do with political change and the demography of Brazilian academia. With the re-establishment and consolidation of democracy after 1984, the issue of Freyre's relationship to the military became not exactly irrelevant to Brazilian intellectuals, but at least receded into the background, allowing a more measured assessment of his work. The 1990s also saw the death or retirement of the generation of Brazilian scholars who had been most hostile to Freyre, a process symbolised by the death of Florestan Fernandes in 1995. But another part of the answer to how Freyre has re-emerged as a central intellectual influence in Brazil is to do with the dialectic between the changing political context of Brazilian nationalism in the late twentieth century and – ironically enough – the absorption of the critique of Freyre into mainstream nationalist thought. Among the organic intellectuals who are central to modern Brazilian nationalism – the university professors, the foreign service professionals, some politicians, the members of the Academy in every sense<sup>35</sup> – there is an understanding that one cannot seriously

argue that Brazil is a racial democracy, and a general recognition of the existence of racial inequality and disadvantage: the president of the country, after all, cut his academic teeth writing a detailed rebuttal of Freyrean interpretations of Brazil's racial history. While there is still an elite perception that Brazil is and has been a less racist society than the United States, the existence of racism in Brazil and its role in Brazilian history is no longer disputed, although its nature and extent are<sup>36</sup>.

In the thirty years or so that it has taken to absorb a more critical view of Freyre into nationalist thinking, the political context of Brazilian nationalism also changed. The consolidation of democracy ended the dangerous polarisation of Brazilian political life in the decades preceding the 1980s, and was itself an important precondition for the more critical evaluation of the past which was part of the rejection of the racial democracy myth. At the same time, globalisation in all its manifestations broke down the parochialism which marked Brazilian nationalism in the early postwar period, and simultaneously projected Brazilian popular culture - *novelas*, music, football - into the international arena in a way unmatched by any other industrialising country. All this has contributed to an increasingly sophisticated and cosmopolitan dialogue within Brazilian society as to national origins and direction, and the end of the period with which this paper has concerned itself; the time when race and essentialist concepts of culture linked to race played a central role in conceptions of national identity and the political manifestations of nationalism which grew out of them<sup>37</sup>.

This requires clarification. One thing the arguments over Freyre resolved was the issue of race in Brazilian history and contemporary Brazilian culture, and the resolution among intellectuals involved the acceptance of the Fernandes critique and the recognition of the persistence of racism in Brazil. This in itself, of course, did little or nothing to end racial disadvantage or the expression of racism in everyday life in Brazil, well documented by ethnographers<sup>38</sup>, but it did mark an important discursive shift in Brazilian nationalism, symbolised by the domination of Brazilian politics in the 1990s by Fernando Henrique Cardoso,

its political personification. Brazilian statistical bodies routinely gather and publish social data stratified by race; Brazilian demographers and social scientists routinely quantify racial disadvantage, no Brazilian diplomat or politician abroad can employ Freyrean interpretations of Brazil's racial history without being challenged. This offers the promise of what we could term the mature creolisation of nationalist thought: the construction of a national identity which is simultaneously unitary and racially plural, without the mystifications involved in Freyrean readings of the role of race in Brazilian history. Ironically enough, the main beneficiary of the discrediting of the racial democracy thesis has been Freyre himself. Freed from the need to rebut his interpretation of race, more recent scholars have rediscovered his extended anatomy of patriarchy and his concern with popular culture in all its manifestations, coming in the process to a more nuanced assessment of his work. At the core of this assessment was the key to his rehabilitation: the discovery by a new generation of Brazilians that once the racial baggage is discarded, Freyre as a historian and social critic is very much in the mainstream of modern Brazilian social theory.

Within the inevitable constraints of a short article, I hope I have demonstrated how contemporary Brazilian intellectuals are heirs to a distinguished tradition of theorising about their country. There are a number of striking things about this tradition to an outsider: its quality when at its best, the easy and productive dialogue between anthropologists and historians, and its central concern with national identity, in contrast with Britain and the United States, where anthropologists have more or less abandoned the field to historians with damaging results for both disciplines. But perhaps the most distinctive feature of Brazilian social theory is its critical pessimism, the yearning for modernity and an end to the weakness of societal institutions, the disgust with personalism in political and economic organisation, a longing for proper, substantive citizenship and the institutions of civil society; a political and social agenda absolutely constant since the 1930s and eternally unrealised. Paulo Prado's famous description of Brazil would perhaps have been more accurate, albeit less resonant, if he had begun his *Portrait of Brazil* with

“In a radiant land lives a sad intelligentsia”<sup>39</sup>. At the end of the twentieth century it seems easier to place Freyre with Caio Prado Júnior, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Florestan Fernandes as theorists of the past as a means of critiquing the present, of anatomising Brazil’s imperfections and its cultural and political problems, and thus a thinker with a more complex and ambiguous relationship to Brazilian nationalism than seemed possible in mid-century. It is fair to say that Freyre has never been more influential within Brazil than he is at the end of this century. And he is much more than a famous academic. He is the only Brazilian intellectual to have attained the status of popular icon, if not always as one might wish: one still hears “as Gilberto Freyre says” in exactly the context deplored by Florestan Fernandes nearly forty years ago. At least three times in the last fifteen years, he or his work were the themes for a samba school parade in Rio<sup>40</sup>. Far more than a scholar of popular culture, in the ultimate apotheosis of the organic intellectual he eventually became it.

---

<sup>1</sup> An inevitable problem in the comparative discussion of race is semantic disjunction: *raça* in Portuguese and *raza* in Spanish do not mean the same as “race”; *mestiçagem* has connotations beyond the usual “race mixture” translation, which reflects the centrality of descent and genetics in Anglo-Saxon conceptions of race. Here as elsewhere I use italicised Portuguese and Spanish terms rather than English, to do justice to the greater plasticity of Latin American racial terminology. The whole point of the words is that they typically do not have an English equivalent, and a great deal of unnecessary trouble would be saved if this were the usual practice.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., D. Cleary, “‘Lost altogether to the civilised world’: race and the *Cabanagem* in northern Brazil, 1750-1850”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40/1 (1998): 109-135 – an example of a large-scale race war in a country supposedly remarkable for their absence.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Lorand Matory, “The English professors of Brazil: on the diasporic roots of the Yorùbá nation”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41/1 (Jan. 1999): 72-103.

<sup>4</sup> The relevant literature is enormous and there is no space for more than a brief summary here. Readers are referred to the excellent general bibliography in P. Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997). For Mexico, Argentina and Cuba, see R. Graham, *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940* (Austin: Texas UP, 1990). For Venezuela, see W. Wright, *Café Con Leche: Race, Class and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: Texas UP, 1990). For Colombia, see P. Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> For the latest example, eagerly reviewed well beyond academia, see A. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa and Brazil* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998). It goes without saying that the non-academic reviews were lamentably ill-informed about Brazil as opposed to the United States or South Africa, but then the same could be said about the book.

<sup>6</sup> See especially T. Skidmore, *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), ch.6.

<sup>7</sup> First-rate studies of slave society and culture in nineteenth century Brazil abound: for Rio, see M. Karasch, *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808-1850* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), for Salvador see J.J.

Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), and for a general treatment K. Mattoso, *To Be A Slave in Brazil, 1550-1888* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> “Let anyone who doubts the evil of this mixture of races and is inclined from a mistaken philanthropy to break down all barriers between them come to Brazil. He cannot deny the deterioration consequent upon an amalgamation of races, more widespread here than in any country of the world, and which is rapidly effacing the best qualities of the white man, the Negro and the Indian, leaving a mongrel, nondescript type..”, L. Agassiz (actually probably written by his wife, Elizabeth), *A Journey in Brazil* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1868), p.293.

<sup>9</sup> See N. Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1991) for a detailed exploration of science and early twentieth century nationalist thought in Latin America.

<sup>10</sup> Detailed in Graham (ed.), *The Idea of Race in Latin America*.

<sup>11</sup> Detailed entertainingly in D. Borges, “ ‘Puffy, ugly, slothful and inert’: degeneration in Brazilian social thought, 1880-1940”, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 25/2 (1993): 235-256.

<sup>12</sup> C. Ricardo, *Marcha Para Oeste: A Influência da Bandeira na Formação Social e Política do Brasil* (Rio: Livraria José Olympio, 1942), 2 vols.

<sup>13</sup> For Salgado, see R.B. de Araújo, *Totalitarismo e Revolução: O Integralismo de Plínio Salgado* (Rio: Edições Graal, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Figures on electoral participation from E. Burns, *A History of Brazil* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), ch.6.

<sup>15</sup> Radio played a crucial role in breaking down regionalism in popular culture in Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century, as it did in the United States, Argentina and Canada during the same period. The early history of radio and its cultural impact on Brazil has been sadly neglected by scholars.

<sup>16</sup> They were unrelated.

<sup>17</sup> Freyre became a personal friend of the New York publisher Alfred Knopf, who commissioned unusually sensitive translations into English. *Casa Grande e Senzala* was first translated as *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* in 1946, the first major work of Brazilian social theory to be translated into English after da Cunha’s *Sertões*, which the University of Chicago translated and published in 1944. Both translations were by Samuel Putnam, and are unsurpassed. *Sobrados e Mocambos* was translated in 1962 as *The Mansions and the Shanties: The Making of Modern Brazil*, and *Ordem e Progresso* in 1970 as *Order and Progress: Brazil from Monarchy to Republic*.

<sup>18</sup> As was demonstrated by the manner of his death; he was shot in self-defence by his wife’s lover.

<sup>19</sup> A reference to the fact that Freyre accepted honours from the post-1964 military regime and made some public pronouncements supporting pro-military politicians in Pernambuco.

<sup>20</sup> From his introduction to Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s *Raízes do Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995), pp. 9-10, my translation.

<sup>21</sup> Florestan Fernandes (1920-1995), the son of poor Portuguese immigrants, was the only exception to the rule that the great Brazilian thinkers of the twentieth century had family fortunes even greater than their intellects. Fernando Henrique Cardoso is the most recent example.

<sup>22</sup> R. Landes’ *The City of Women* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994 [1947]) has been belatedly recognised as a classic; see also *The Brazilian Photographs of Genevieve Naylor, 1940-1942* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998). The latter are usefully viewed in conjunction with Levi-Strauss’ equally stunning collection of photographs from the same period, *Saudades do Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1994), also available in British and American editions.

<sup>23</sup> Notably in *Brazil: An Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1951). “Brazil stands today as a community from whose experiment in miscegenation other communities may profit. Probably in no other complex modern community are problems of race relations being solved in a more democratic or Christian way than in Portuguese America. And Brazil’s experiment does not indicate that miscegenation leads to degeneration ...” [pp.98-9].

<sup>24</sup> This literature is enormous, but one source encapsulates it: the demonstration by demographers C. Wood and J de Carvalho that even after controlling for income, class, region and other variables, significant differences in infant mortality between Afro-Brazilians and others exist for all income groups in the postwar period. See chapter 6 of their *The Demography of Inequality in Brazil* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), pp. 135-153.

---

<sup>25</sup> Translated into English by S. Macedo as *The Colonial Background of Modern Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

<sup>26</sup> F. H. Cardoso, *Cor e Mobilidade Social em Florianópolis* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1960).

<sup>27</sup> F. Fernandes, *A Integração do Negro na Sociedade de Classe* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1965), first translated as *The Negro in Brazilian Society* (New York: Columbia UP, 1969).

<sup>28</sup> “Those whites most identified with the ideology of racial democracy go so far as those quoting the proverb above [“You are worth what you have: if you have nothing you are worth nothing”], declaring ‘Every time the Negro succeeds he becomes whiter, as Gilberto Freyre says’. Analysis of this viewpoint reveals that it presupposes neither belief in nor the existence of any equality between the two races”, *The Negro in Brazilian Society*, pp. 347-348.

<sup>29</sup> The untranslatable *lusitropicalismo* and *lusitropicalogia* are the terms Freyre uses.

<sup>30</sup> *Mansions and Shanties*, p.64.

<sup>31</sup> I am thinking of the work of Luiz Mott, Laura de Mello e Souza, Ronaldo Vainfas and Roberto da Matta, among others.

<sup>32</sup> *Raízes do Brasil* [lit. Roots of Brazil] has never been translated into English, for no reason other than ignorance and provincialism on the part of European and North American publishers as far as I can judge. It is a much more natural candidate for translation than Caio Prado Jr.’s work, for example: short, beautifully written, and enormously influential in Brazil. It is especially remarkable that it lies untranslated while much less influential authors like Capistrano de Abreu make it into English. Translations are my own and are from the 1995 reprint by Companhia das Letras. “O Homem Cordial” is an untranslatable pun on *coração* [heart], as I hope the discussion below makes clear.

<sup>33</sup> *Raízes do Brasil*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>34</sup> Some examples, necessarily selective: from North American anthropology, Robert Parker’s brilliant *Bodies, Pleasures and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), and Daniel Linger’s equally provocative *Dangerous Encounters: Meanings of Violence in a Brazilian City* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992); from Brazilian anthropology, Roberto da Matta’s *Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis: Para Uma Sociologia do Dilema Brasileiro* (Rio: Zahar, 1983); from any number of possible citations by Brazilian historians, F. Novais, L. de M. Souza and L.F. de Alencastro (eds.), *História da Vida Privada no Brasil: vol.1, Cotidiano e Vida Privada na América Portuguesa, vol 2, Império: A Corte e a Modernidade Nacional* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Brazil has an *Academia Brasileira de Letras* on the French model, complete with comic-opera uniforms.

<sup>36</sup> Many Brazilian intellectuals, notably Carlos Hassenbalg and Jacob Gorender, would argue that dominant ideology still minimises the extent of racism and its historical importance in Brazil, which is often true. But my argument revolves around the fact of the admission of the existence of racism by dominant ideology, which is also true.

<sup>37</sup> An argument made in more detail by T. Skidmore, “Biracial USA vs. multiracial Brazil: is the contrast still valid?”, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 25/2 (1993): 373-386.

<sup>38</sup> See F. W. Twine, *Racism in a Racial Democracy: The Maintenance of White Supremacy in Brazil* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998) for a recent example.

<sup>39</sup> “In a radiant land lives a sad people” is the much-quoted opening sentence of Prado’s *Retrato do Brasil: Ensaio Sobre a Tristeza Brasileira* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1929).

<sup>40</sup> Pedants might cite Pierre Verger’s appearance in effigy in Rio in the 1998 Carnival, to which the equally pedantic response is that Brazil might have been Verger’s adopted home, but he was French.

Download Citation | Becoming Brazilians: Race and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Brazil | This book traces the rise and decline of Gilberto Freyre's vision of racial and cultural mixture (mestiçagem - or race mixing) as the defining | Firstly, it summarises some of the official efforts to portray Brazil in a positive light in the early twenty-first century, period in which it appeared that this nation had fulfilled its long-term aspirations of becoming modern and a major global power. It outlines pertinent theories of nations and nationalism, particularly in relation to Latin America, which stress conflict and transformation as essential characteristics of the nation, in an age when globalisation and populism have amplified external and internal struggles. Cleary, David. "Race, Nationalism and Social Theory in Brazil. Rethinking Gilberto Freyre," Seminar Paper, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University. Needell, Jeffrey, "Identity, Race, Gender and Modernity in the Origins of Gilberto Freyre's Oeuvre," American Historical Review Vol. 100 (1995): 51-77. Young, Robert C. "Atlântico Lusotropical: Gilberto Freyre e a Transformação do Hibridismo," in Gilberto Freyre e os estudos latino-americanos, ed. Joshua Lund and Malcolm McNee. (Pittsburg, PA: Série Críticas, Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Un Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) was born in 1900 in Recife, the principal city in Pernambuco, the oldest region of colonial Brazil. His upbringing in the northeast of Brazil where, from the sixteenth century, plantation society had taken root, would be important to both the focus of his work and the nature of his assertions. Having been influenced by the cultural anthropology of Franz Boas while studying as a postgraduate at Columbia University, Freyre sought to chart the melding and borrowing that had taken place in Brazil along cultural lines. However, he didn't limit himself to discussions of c