

# BRAZIL'S MYTH OF RACIAL DEMOCRACY

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## The myth of racial democracy and its discontents

In 1930s and 40s, Brazilian intelligentsia and society shared the view that many centuries of racial mixing rendered their nation uniquely free from the racist feelings and conflicts that have plagued most parts of the world. Soon endorsed by intellectuals from Europe and the United States, such as Stephan (Zweig 1941), Brazil's self-image as a "racial democracy" became widely known at the period, marked by the Second World War and the Holocaust. So much so that, in the 1950s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) funded a research on Brazil's racial relations, expecting to find "an alternative model for the racial conflicts found worldwide." (Maio 2001, p.126)

While identifying in Brazil an unparalleled culture of tolerance and harmony between the races, these researchers, however, declared the image of racial democracy unrealistic, as they gathered evidence of race-based discrimination and of the socioeconomic gap between whites and nonwhites Brazilians. The discrepancy between perception about race and actual racial relations in Brazil became, since then, the focus of subsequent generations of specialists in this field.

In 1965, sociologist Florestan Fernandes defined the image of racial democracy as a "myth"—for him, a synonym for "ideology" in the sense of "false consciousness." Fernandes and his circle were essentially concerned that celebration of racial tolerance in Brazil camouflaged the actual socioeconomic exclusion of blacks, since unqualified to get jobs in the emerging industrial sector.

In the 1970s, a new generation of specialists have introduced the claim that the "myth of racial democracy" is a *racist* ideology, disguised as "a fundamental component of Brazilian nationalism." (Anthony Marx 1998, p. 175) Despite creating the *appearance* of unity and inclusiveness, this ideology was in fact a crucial element of an "unofficial racial policy," forged by the elites and backed by the State, to assure "white hegemony" in Brazilian society. (Hanchard 1994) In their view, this ideology has only fostered peaceful racial relations insofar it has masked white elites' racism and concealed the association between race and life changes. (Nascimento 1978; Hasenbalg 1978; Skidmore 1993; Winant 1994; Burdick 1992; Brown 1997; Twine 2001; etc)

This assessment, still dominant among the Brazilian intelligentsia, has also led to a vast production of statistics-oriented research attesting to the discrepancy existent between whites and nonwhites in terms of income, employment, access to education and health care, life expectancy, social mobility, housing, etc. (Hasenbalg 1979; Rosenberg 1990; Lovell 1991, Barcelos 1992, Telles 2003, etc.). Thus, it became also a truism that the struggle against racism and inequality required nonwhite Brazilians to develop a "racial consciousness," a precondition to their engagement in political action. The strength of Brazil's black movement is posited by these academics as the only means to overturn racism and race-based inequality in that country.

## The myth lives on

But if these scholars have definitely established the reality of racial prejudice and discrimination in Brazil, they have failed so far to discredit the myth of racial democracy or to promote an "Afro-Brazilian identity" beyond restricted intellectual circles. Polls and surveys on the issue have consistently shown that Brazilian society still perceives itself as essentially anti-racism, even if also admitting that race-based prejudice and inequality are facts of life.<sup>1</sup> Brazil's black movement,

notwithstanding its recent political achievements – e.g.: the creation of a Secretary for the Promotion of Racial Equality and the implementation of affirmative action type of public policies – has remained quite undersized, and mainly constituted by educated middle-class blacks and *pardos*.<sup>2</sup>

As a matter of fact, the introduction of such policies, especially the racial quotas for admission in state-funded universities, has sparked off vehement opposition, especially from public opinion, through letters and messages sent to the media. While supporters of the quota system in universities – most intellectuals and black movement activists – have credited such opposition to elites' fear of losing their privileges, we have rather interpreted most of these letters and messages as evidence that the image of Brazil as a racial democracy remains deeply ingrained in the social imaginary<sup>3</sup> of its people, even if this expression has been rarely mentioned in this debate. In fact, most criticism has targeted on the introduction of “race” as criterion for public policies, given that it could lead to the “racialization” of Brazilian society. Far from ignoring the problem at stake – that only a few nonwhites attend public universities – these critics have suggested instead the implementation of quotas based on the criteria of social class, which would automatically increase the number of black students, “as poverty and blackness are so scandalously related in Brazil.” (Maggie, 2012) Some have even invoked the belief that the racially mixed constitution of the Brazilian people is an obstacle to affirmative action type of policy. Echoing Bourdieu and Wacquant, many have condemned the application of “an American model to Brazil’s much more complex reality of racial relations.” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, ...)

But why is the image of racial democracy so valuable to a society which has acknowledged the reality of race-based discrimination and inequality? This puzzle, to be sure, remains the focus of most specialists on racial relations in Brazil. Indeed, contemporary scholars of race have systematically blamed the myth of racial democracy as the major obstacle to the expansion of a black consciousness in Brazil and the reason for the weak attraction Brazilian black movement exerts among Brazilian non-whites.

In this article, we attempt to illuminate such a critical question by proposing a divergent account for the emergence and role of the myth of racial democracy. Instead of treating this narrative as a *racist* ideology camouflaged as a nationalist discourse about social inclusion, we trace its genesis in the light of theories on nationalism and national identities, particularly on the model and concepts formulated by sociologist Liah Greenfeld. This approach allowed us to demonstrate that the image of racial democracy was constructed, and is still perceived by society, as a genuine myth of national identity – a product of the resented type nationalism developed in Brazil.

### **Liah Greenfeld: nationalism as pursue of dignity**

According to recent studies on the origins of nationalism, building a nation requires imagining a community (Anderson 1983). Myths of nation-building, especially those involving ethnicity, are seen as powerful instruments for the construction of such imagined communities, as they foster the development of shared memories and collective motivations. (Smith 1991) Some theorists of nationalism have also understood these myths as products of selective reinterpretations of cultural and historical legacies, generally put forward by intellectuals, not meant to reflect societies' actual behaviour, but to convey images of desired social orders and/or representations of their fears and anxieties. (e.g., Smith, 1991; Greenfeld 1992)

For Liah Greenfeld, whose views have especially guided us in this study, national myths grant people feelings of self-respect and personal gratification. National identity, she emphasizes, ‘*is fundamentally, a matter of dignity. It gives people reasons to be proud.*’ (Greenfeld 1992, p. 487, emphasis in original)

As Greenfeld has revealed in *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992), nationalism originated from the concept of “nation” as *sovereign people*, a concept which first emerged in sixteenth century England, along with the notion of individual rights and other democratic values. Formerly, the

word “nation” referred to high-status groups only, while the rest of the population was referred to as the plebs.

This change in the meaning of “nation,” Greenfeld demonstrates, was consequence of great structural transformations in England, particularly the rise of a new aristocracy of university-trained individuals from the minor gentry and even the plebs. These prosperous and influential Englishmen, but insecure about their status vis-à-vis the traditional hierarchies, promoted the idea of the nation as *sovereign people* to symbolically elevate the position of the entire population of England and, thereby, ensure their own social standing. The emphasis on “the people” in this new conception of nation provided dignity to all individuals, as they became the new source of sovereignty and authority.<sup>4</sup>

Greenfeld’s *Five Roads* then describes how this new idea of nation was soon “imported” by distressed elites in other countries experiencing great structural changes, e.g., powerless aristocrats in eighteenth century France and Russia, and intellectuals struggling for recognition in early nineteenth century Germany. To acquire or recover their social status and sense of dignity, these groups invoked the concept of nation as a sovereign people, articulating therefore their own personal goals with those of their communities.

Such a phenomenon, Greenfeld explains, was unpredictable and even odd given elites’ habitual contempt for the masses. At any rate, it became a major factor in the dissolution of the medieval “societies of orders” and the construction of a new social order, in which the people was considered “the basis of solidarity and the supreme object of loyalty.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7) Ultimately, all communities around the globe had to follow those “central” nations, by defining themselves according to the principle of national/popular sovereignty.

Yet, Greenfeld explains, the idea of nation adopted in societies deprived of the socio-political structures reflecting the sovereignty of their people, emphasized instead territorial, historical, and ethnic qualities that could distinguish each particular society from all others. The word “nation,” thus, became also associated with the idea of the *uniqueness of a people*, validated by particular narratives and myths of national identity.

According to Greenfeld, national ideologies and myths are constructions involving early nationalists’ aspirations, frustrations, and interests as well as perceptions about their nation’s position in the world scenario. (*Ibid.*, p. 14) In this sense, she claims, nation-builders in “peripheral” countries have often dealt with the feelings of “*ressentiment*” inevitably developed by their elites towards the most economically or militarily advanced nations. (*Ibid.*, pp. 16, 496) Greenfeld’s concept of *ressentiment*<sup>5</sup> refers to “a psychological state resulting from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred, and the impossibility of satisfying these feelings,” (*Ibid.*, p. 583) but also a “remarkably creative sentiment (...) constantly generating and fermenting new sentiments and ideas.” (*Ibid.*, p. 15) This ingenious aspect of *ressentiment* led nationalists to engage in a process Greenfeld calls “transvaluation of values,” that is, to reject the values attached to the country or countries nation-builders once admired and sought to imitate, accompanied by an obstinate defence of their own indigenous culture.

Moreover, the author of *Five Roads* suggests that original definitions of national identity were largely perpetuated in the institutional practices and patterns of culture of societies. To be sure, Greenfeld’s work has persistently shown the relevance of nationalism and national identity in contemporary world.

### **The myth of racial democracy as transvaluation of values**

Brazil conquered its independence from Portugal in 1822, in an episode which precluded both a nationalist rhetoric and popular participation. Oddly, the former colony became a Constitutional Monarchy, ruled by a Portuguese prince. For decades, the new country was symbolically represented by the figure of the Emperor and his Royal family.

It was only during the Second Kingdom (1840-1889), led by Emperor Pedro the Second, that

the quest for Brazil's national identity became a concern for the country's educated elite. At first, Brazilian intellectuals endlessly debated whether Brazil could be represented as an extension of Europe in the tropics or whether they should seek its roots in the traditions of indigenous people. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, after the abolition of slavery, in 1888, and the "proclamation" of the Republic, in 1889, the intelligentsia could no longer ignore that blacks and the mixed-race constituted a large segment of Brazil's population. As a matter of fact, many of these intellectuals were mixed-race individuals of African descent.

Yet, the intelligentsia of Brazil's First Republic (1890-1930) faced an enormous dilemma: while devoted to the vision of a modern and prosperous Brazil they felt also attracted by the theories of scientific racism, so much in vogue in American and European universities – a paradox, according to this very paradigm. Most of these theorists defended that miscegenation deteriorated the physical and mental health of entire populations, leading societies to anomie and economic decay. Actually, Brazil was seen by these scientists as an emblematic case of underdevelopment resulting from a long history of racial mixing. (Agassiz 1868; Gobineau 1874) E.G., Count Gobineau himself suggested that Brazil's population "would disappear completely (...) within 270 years at the maximum." (Gobineau 1874, p. 366)<sup>6</sup> In sum, miscegenation had condemned Brazil to backwardness.

But the inevitable pessimism caused by such a gloomy view of Brazil's future was soon replaced by hope: in early twentieth century, Brazilian scientists came up with a new "theory:" racial mixing, rather than breeding a degenerate population was actually "whitening people's blood." Consequently, Brazil's population would become progressively whiter in a century or so. (Lacerda, 1911) Regardless of its scientific value, the so-called "whitening thesis" was immediately embraced by most of the Brazilian intelligentsia at the time. Ironically, a main advocate of such thesis was Oliveira Viana, a distinguished social scientist of African descent who maintained that "the superiority and strength of the white blood" was gradually eliminating the African and Indian physical and cultural traits" of the Brazil's population. (Viana 1938, pp. 178-90) For this reason, he enthusiastically supported the immigration policies that brought white Europeans peasants to replace slaves in coffee plantations, hoping these immigrants would speed up the whitening process.<sup>7</sup>

As American historian Thomas Skidmore has already suggested in *Black into White:.....*(1933), the whitening ideology allowed the Brazilian elites to reconcile their prospects for a modern and prosperous country, to the multiracial reality of Brazilian people. Skidmore also noticed that such ideology appealed to the feeling of envy those elites had developed in relation to the United States – a former British colony which had become a highly industrialized and powerful country while Brazil remained agrarian and unimportant in world politics. These elites could claim to have found a much better solution for Brazil's "Negro question" than the despicable segregationist policies enforced in the US South. (Skidmore 1993, pp. 209-11)

Drawing on Skidmore's insights, but departing from his overall argument in *Black into White* – that elites' racism was the rationale behind the success of the whitening thesis –, we interpret this ideology as a case of transvaluation of values produced out of *ressentiment* by an emerging and "defensive" type of nationalism. Against Skidmore's emphasis on elite's racism, we invoke sociologist Jessé Souza's argument that the whitening ideology reflected instead the intricate relationship between socioeconomic status and perceptions of race in Brazil. As he has put, by the end of the nineteenth century, a "white" Brazilian was not just someone of European descent, but who shared the dominant codes of "Europeanism," such as Christianity and command of a foreign language, especially French. Besides, not only light *pardos* but even blacks could be "whitened," insofar as they acquired some wealth, education, refinement, and professional skills. Souza thus concluded that it was elites' longing for Brazil's development and international recognition which created the very possibility of whitening. (Souza 2001)

Yet, the whitening ideology did not survive as Brazil entered into a new era, after the so-called 1930 Revolution. Starting as a regional revolt against the federal government, this episode

significantly changed Brazil's power structure, curbing the autonomy of regional oligarchies and consolidating the Brazilian State. Getúlio Vargas, who ruled Brazil for ... years also transformed that largely agrarian country into an industrialized economy, which, in turn, gave rise of new urban groups: industrial workers, industrialists, and the middle classes, eager to participate into the political sphere.

In addition, Vargas<sup>8</sup> brought up nationalism to the centre of Brazilian politics, as he focused on promoting national integration, the strengthening of the state apparatus, and state-led modernization policies. Historian Bradford Burn has, in fact, labelled the 1930s and 40s as the “golden age” of Brazilian nationalism, not only for its assertive character but also because, for the first time in Brazil's history, it appealed to and became supported by *the people*; up to then, nationalism was a concern only among the elites. (Burns 1968, p. 9) Also, the author emphasizes, that was the time when the Brazilian intelligentsia felt compelled to elaborate an assertive and socially inclusive image of their nation. (*Ibid*, p. 39-54) Indeed, the whitening thesis became seen by many as a “blow in the national self-esteem,” and prisoner of the canons of scientific racism, which had been long discarded by academics of the developed world or labelled as an instrument of European “cultural imperialism.” (Rebello 2000)

One of the most influential images of the Brazilian nation produced at the time was that of racial democracy. It was suggested by Gilberto Freyre, the most creative intellectual of that generation, in *Casa Grande & Senzala*, published in 1933. Although such an expression is never mentioned in this text, it does defend that “miscegenation” and cultural amalgamation in colonial Brazil set the basis for the development of “a unique and exceptionally modern variety of ethnic and social democracy.”

Freyre's book was enthusiastically received by academics at the time, and the image of racial democracy it suggests became, until the 1950s, a plausible description of reality. Drawing on Greenfeld's concepts, we interpret some of the arguments in *Casa Grande & Senzala* as products of transvaluation of values, informed by Brazilian resented nationalism at its height.

Before discussing his book, it is pertinent to mention the similarities between Freyre's biography and those of nationalist intellectual actors in Greenfeld's *Five Roads*. Freyre was a child of the decadent Northeast landowner oligarchy who since his early childhood developed a passionate admiration for the Anglo-Saxon culture. He attended an American high school in his home town of Recife, joined the Baptist church, and went to the United States for his college graduation. (Ribeiro 2002, p.20) Unable to go to Oxford during the First World War, Freyre obtained his Master degree in social sciences at Columbia University, which he considered “very British.” (Freyre 1975, p. 62-4) The author, however, deeply resented the racial stereotypes attached to the Brazilian people in the countries he worshipped: England and the United States. Back in Brazil, Freyre himself felt rejected by the conservative academic environment in his remote home state, and struggled for professional recognition in the country's most important centres.<sup>9</sup>

Freyre's conflicting allegiances and sentiments, we argue, had influenced him to conceive some of the arguments he put forward in *Casa Grande & Senzala*. For example, the author suggested that slavery in Brazil was “less harsh” than in the United States. One of the reasons for the phenomenon, according to him, was the Portuguese culture's tendency to conciliate and incorporate elements from other cultures, in contrast to the “rigidity” of the Anglo-Saxon cultural systems.<sup>10</sup> Freyre also asserted that the Portuguese colonizer lacked the sense of racial superiority that typified their English counterpart.

Moreover, he explains, the slave system the Portuguese introduced in Brazil mirrored that practiced by the Moors in Africa. This type of slavery allowed some proximity between masters and their slaves, who could become part of the master's extended family. Despite the unequal relationship and the oppression characteristic of any slave system, it was common for landowners to have children with his slaves, letting their mixed-race children work in their households or farms as free men and women, although, to be sure, retaining their inferior status vis-à-vis the white population. Thus, the result was an ever-growing number of mixed-race people with loose links with the mainstream Portuguese cultural heritage. Thus, Freyre concluded, proximity and even affection between individuals

of different races, as well as the reciprocal influence between dominant and dominated cultures, became possible in Brazil but not in the United States. (Freyre 2002, p. 260)

While it is certainly true that President Getúlio Vargas incorporated the image of racial democracy to his nationalist discourse, the notion of racial democracy was only effective insofar as it resonated with the perceptions and aspirations of Brazilian large black and mixed-race population. Indeed, as a result of the modernization process launched by Vargas, blacks and *pardos* could finally experience social mobility, and achieve important positions among the political and cultural elites. (Souza and Sant'Anna 1991) In addition, the Vargas administration promoted the art and cultural practices of African origin, such as *samba*<sup>11</sup> and *capoeira*,<sup>12</sup> to the status of *national* symbols and declared a mixed-race female “saint” to be the patroness of Brazil, among other measures aiming at the social integration of “racial minorities.”

It is possible thus to understand why such image represented a definitive “solution” to the old dilemma over the correlation between race and development, a long-time source of *ressentiment* for Brazilian elites. We claim that this myth was elaborated as transvaluation of values, in the sense Indeed, through the myth of racial democracy, intellectuals could finally establish that the multiracial character of the Brazilian population represented no obstacle to the country’s prosperity. Furthermore, it gave Brazil world recognition.

In this sense, the celebration of racial mixing and harmony as the backbones of Brazilian national identity can be seen as a creative response to feelings of resentment. The image of Brazil as a racial democracy helped the country’s large and culturally heterogeneous population to finally create a sense of an “imagined community,” as it provided to her resented population a sense of dignity associated with the idea of nation and gratification for being part of a unique society that was able to solve its racial problems.

### **The future of Brazilian national identity**

The persistence of the myth of racial democracy and the relative weakness of the black movement notwithstanding, it is highly probable that we will eventually witness a further erosion of the myth’s appeal and a strengthening of black consciousness in Brazil. Indeed, many authors have presumed that globalization weakens nationalism and nation-states, while multiculturalism keep promoting identities based on race, ethnicity, or gender. This line of reasoning conveys a somehow popular idea within the intelligentsia that nationalism is something inherently reactionary, anti-democratic, and dangerous. The upsurge of bloody nationalism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere has corroborated to this view.

On the other hand, identification with the nation, in different circumstances, has functioned as a mechanism of economic, political, and cultural advancement, as well as a factor of racial integration. If this more positive view of nationalism prevails, the myth of racial democracy may persist in its position of major influence. Greenfeld’s conceptions of nationalism lend credence to this possibility. As she has remarked, post-modern identities have coexisted with a strong sense of national identity all over the world, never really surpassing it. In fact, she argues, nationality persists as the most defining form of identity in the modern Western world, despite the increasing internationalization in economics, politics, and culture, as well as its corollary phenomenon of societal fragmentation. As she puts it:

Nationalism is a historical phenomenon. It appeared in one age and it can disappear in another. But if it does, the world in which we live will be no more, and another world, as distinct from the one we know as was the society of orders that it replaced, will replace it. This post-national world will be truly post-modern, for nationality is the constitutive principle of modernity. It will be a new form of social being and it will change the way we see society. (Greenfeld 1992, p. 491)

## Conclusion

This essay has tried to show that the myth of racial democracy was a *ressentiment*-inspired, creative response to the fears and anxieties of both elites and population regarding Brazil's future. This foundational myth was developed by intellectuals, in their self-appointed roles as the translators of nation's identity and destiny, in the context of the socio-economic and political transformations of the Vargas era (1930-1945), through a process of transvaluation of values. By adopting this myth as the basis of national identity, Brazilian society finally overcame the negative stereotypes associated to racial mixing, which was a source of deep feelings of inferiority, especially in relation to the United States. We conclude this essay by suggesting that challenges to the myth of racial democracy, as posed by race-based affirmative action policies, are still perceived by many Brazilians as a threat to their national identity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, a study demonstrated that Brazilian anti-racism discourse is shared by individuals of *all* social classes while discrimination against women, homosexuals, and the poor varies according to levels of income and education. (Souza 1997, pp. 117-43)

<sup>2</sup> *Pardo*, which in Portuguese literally means "brown," is the official term used by the decennial Brazilian Census to refer to mixed-race individuals. At the occasion, people are asked to classify themselves as white, black, *pardo*, or yellow (which stands individuals of oriental descent) and *indigenas*, for native Brazilians.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'social imaginary' is defined by Charles Taylor as 'socially shared ways in which social spaces are imagined.' (Taylor 1999)

<sup>4</sup> Greenfeld, however, explains that this was a long process which eventually involved violence. Under the later Stuarts, the conflict between the popular conception of sovereignty and the monarchical one had to be fought to a bitter conclusion in the English Civil War. (Greenfeld 1992, Chapter 1)

<sup>5</sup> Greenfeld adopted the term *ressentiment* from German philosopher Max Scheler who, in turn, had elaborated the idea first developed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Genealogy of Morals*. (Scheler 1961)

<sup>6</sup> Count Gobineau's *Essay sur l'inegalite des Races Humaines* (1855) eventually inspired national-socialism in Germany.

<sup>7</sup> This immigration movement was first sponsored by landowners and eventually by the State of São Paulo, which brought more than four million European and Asian peasants to Brazil between 1895 and 1930.

<sup>8</sup> Vargas was a former Army officer and Governor of a remote Southern state who led the 1930 Revolution against the ruling oligarchies. Vargas became the head of a provisional government until 1934, when he was elected President by a constituent assembly. In 1937, with the help of the Army, he led a coup and, for the next eight years, ruled the nation as a dictator.

<sup>9</sup> Freyre is considered one of the founding fathers of Brazilian sociology

<sup>10</sup> This unique 'quality' of the Portuguese culture allegedly reflects its own history of racial mixing as well as its colonial experiences in Africa and India.

<sup>11</sup> Music and dance of African origin, born in the bohemian neighbourhoods and impoverished shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>12</sup> Form of martial art created by Angolans brought as slaves to colonial Brazil. Its practice was considered a crime until 1937.