

Mapping The Paradigms Of Brazilian Social Thought

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Abstract

One of the most constant traits in the intellectuals responsible for the history of Brazilian social thought in modern times is their attraction to the study of their own society. It is possible to identify in the historiography of Brazilian social thought, three great ruptures through which new ways of defining the country's formation were introduced. Bearing in mind that this is not a strict and rigid period division, but one based on emphasis, we could name the first of these three periods as that of race, which comes up around the 1870's; the second one, could be called the period of culture, placed around the 1930's; and the last one, that of social frame, emerging around the 1950's. This history of Brazilian social thought changed its course around the 1980's. It is possible to detect at that moment a change in focus for Brazil; some kind of transition from a perspective that favoured territorial or stratal integration to a growing emphasis on cultural integration. Since then we can see the emergence of new themes, objects and approaches also within the field of Brazilian social thought. The inclusion of new participants in the dialogue that was being carried out was to give rise to unexpected effects.

Keywords: Brazil, social thought, intellectuals, nation/country

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*What's become of us when we cannot recognise
strangers anymore?*

Paulo Leminski

One of the most constant traits in the intellectuals responsible for the history of Brazilian social thought in modern times is their attraction to the study of their own society. Until recently, it was common to see that even those studies dealing with the most specific imaginable subjects, written by Brazilian researchers, did not only focused on themes that concerned the Brazilian society, but also had their own significance justified by their supposed contribution to the analysis of the “national problems”.

These characteristics, as Vilhena suggests, implied a peculiar connotation to that field of studies, relatively recent in Brazil, known as “Brazilian social thought”. As a matter of fact, if we understand this field as a mixed set made up of different reflections on social and political issues produced in the country, those studies can only accomplish some kind of unity as we verify in them an almost obsessive recurrence of this self-reflective effort. “The last adjective of the expression refers not only to the fact that this ‘thought’ was produced in Brazil, but also to the fact that it often refers to this country and its problems to define itself as a modern nation” (Vilhena, 1997:146).¹

Taking this definition into consideration, it is possible to identify in the historiography of Brazilian social thought, three great ruptures through which new ways of defining the country’s formation were introduced. Bearing in mind that this is not a strict and rigid period division, but one based on emphasis, we could name the first of these three periods as that of *race*, which comes up around the 1870’s; the second one, could be called the period of *culture*, placed around the 1930’s; and the last one, that of *social frame*, emerging around the 1950’s.

The rise of the so-called Escola de Recife (Recife’s School) is the landmark of the first period; Sílvio Romero is its leading representative. Opposing both the spiritualism and eclecticism predominant in the Brazilian intellectual circles during the Second Empire, Romero argued strongly for what he understood as a truly Brazilian scientific perspective. That is, for the adoption of a positivist and Darwinist viewpoint, strongly influenced by a racist-oriented anthropology, which was then current in Europe.

Although he devoted himself to different areas of knowledge, literary criticism can be said to be the one he concentrated most of his efforts on. In his studies, Romero opposed both the Romantic school’s attempt to represent aesthetically the singularity of the Brazilian nation by means of extolling the heroic past of the Indians — as he considered this view false and idealised — and a stylistic and rhetorical approach to literary works. He believed that from a scientific viewpoint, all literary works should be explained by that natural determination that affects the culture/life of a people (especially the environment, the races and traditions of the society to which they belong).

Guiding himself by what he deemed to be a scientific perspective, Romero introduced into his studies of the singularity of Brazilian society and culture what he called an “anthropological perspective”, based on a “natural” inclination, in other words, that of racial determinism. As Skidmore indicated, this kind of evidence both reinforced the scientificism of Romero’s diagnosis and made possible his dialogue with some scholars whose opinions he respected, such as Gobineau and Agassiz, who were often surprised and shocked by the widespread racial mixture present in Brazilian society (Cf. Skidmore, 1993). These theorists, representatives of that way of nineteenth-century racist thinking, understood interracial crossing as a process leading to the debilitation and even to the degeneracy of future generations. Thus, the

¹ Roberto da Matta in his preface to Livia Barbosa’s *O jeitinho brasileiro* (The Brazilian Way) comments on the existence of a passionate tradition of investigating “who are we?”, which would have marked not only the Brazilian production, but also “the best of the Portuguese-American production” (Cf. Da Matta, 1992).

admission of the scientific character of these arguments by Brazilian intellectuals gave rise both to a deep anguish and a need to show the European intelligentsia the country's viability.

Taking as a starting-point the idea that discussing the advantages and disadvantages of racial mixture was useless, since, as far as Brazil was concerned, it was an uncontested fact, Romero thought that understanding the possible peculiarities of interracial crossing was of the utmost importance. In his studies, he founded the parameters that served as a premise for many thinkers, from then on, who devote their studies to this issue. Taking into account the presence and importance of the three ethnic elements (Whites, Blacks and Indians) in the Brazilian racial composition, Romero argued — in opposition to the Romantics — that the role of the Blacks was much more significant than that of the Indians in the formation of the Brazilian nationality, since the former mixed much more with White man, as a result of which they penetrated into varied activities. Thus, during the formative process of our nationality — still in progress then, according to Romero — the Portuguese mixed in different degrees with Indian and African races, producing a singular type of Brazilian, the basis for a literary and cultural expression typical of the Brazilian nationality.

However, contrary to what many could think, the crossing of races had not produced (yet) a homogeneous type, which would explain the lack of homogeneity in Brazilian culture. According to Romero, only at the end of a process — which was likely to be long — of fusion and racial selection where, owing to their superiority, White men were to eventually triumph, would at long last rise the “Brazilian national character” in its form, if not finished, more homogeneous at least. It is plain to see that, without denying the importance of the racial issue, Romero “scientifically solved”, by means of this “inevitable whitening”, that dilemma that racial theories had created for the national identity (Cf. Romero, 1978 and 2001; and, for a critical appreciation of Romero's methods, Cândido, 2006).

From then on, up to the late 1930's, the discussions among the theorists of “Brazilian social thought” revolved, in general terms, around this supposed whitening process with slight variations. Nina Rodrigues (Cf. Rodrigues, 1976) and Euclides da Cunha (Cf. Cunha, 1968), for example, who can be considered as Romero's followers, though they had divergent opinions, produced influential works based on the racial paradigm. Hence, the debate carried out by most authors at that period, in spite of its contribution, can be seen, if understood from this wider perspective, as variations on the same theme. Only in the 1930's, when Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-grande e senzala* (Cf. Freyre, 2013) is published, we can clearly notice a change in perspectives, as well as the emergence of a new paradigm: that of culture.

As Antônio Cândido pointed out, *Casa-grande e senzala*, Freyre's long essay on Brazil's historical formation, made a tremendous impact on that generation, freeing it from the analyses carried out by the racist theorists (Cf. Cândido, 1988). This impact can only be compared to that made by Franz Boas in the United States, or by Manuel Gamio in Mexican Indian studies. Freyre, like Gamio, was educated at Columbia University in the States, and in *Casa-grande*'s preface, he emphasised the importance of his

studies with Franz Boas, with whom he learned the distinction between race and culture, a fundamental principle for his review of the Brazilian racial problem. The national problems, unlike many people believed, were not due to innate traits but to environmental factors. Interracial crossing, though it still appeared in Freyre's work as an essential element of national formation, was shown as a symbol of the democratic and flexible character of Brazilian culture. In order to account for this history of the Brazilian cultural foundation, Freyre carried out his researches both through traditional documental sources and through the Portuguese Inquisition's diaries and documents (unexplored sources at that time), presenting his results in an essayistic and literary composition that achieved a remarkable success.

At the beginning of the 1930's, an affirmative moment for the second paradigm, the concern over scientific knowledge of Brazilian reality came along with major achievements at the institutional level, which made possible, in the following decades, some criticism of the cultural paradigms. The early 1930's saw the beginning of the first Social Sciences university course in Brazil, given by foreign professors in the hope that they could put an end to the rhetorical exaggeration so peculiar to Brazilian intellectuals, educated at Law schools.

Gradually, universities became an important element to Brazilian intellectual life. Many social thinkers refer to them as a determining factor for the paradigmatic changes to take place around the 1950's (Cf. Miceli, 1989 and 1995). The transition from the cultural studies to those of social structure were marked by the search for a new kind of social reflection, which could be scientific and critical at the same time. As Mariza Peirano pointed out: "In the 1920's and 1930's, when Brazil was under the influence of the 'país novo' (new country) ideology, the concept of culture played an important role in sociological studies. Yet, this period was followed by another at which the notion of 'underdeveloped country' was paramount [...] Retrospectively, the first period was marked by a lukewarm 'awareness of being backward', in which national identity was the main concern, whereas the second one implied an awareness of being backward that was simply 'catastrophic' [...] The concepts of underdevelopment and dependence, advanced by sociologists during the 1950's and 1960's, were in full bloom" (Peirano, 1981:237).

Florestan Fernandes can be pointed out as the author who led the transition from the cultural paradigm to the one of social structure. His study on the relations between Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, carried out at UNESCO's ² request, yielded a result that challenged all current interpretations of Brazilian reality then, since, based mainly on Freyre's studies, it was described as a racial democracy. According to Fernandes, interracial crossing as an index of social integration and racial equality created these effects only when it did not combine with a strong social stratification.

From this formulation I have presented in such a schematic fashion, Fernandes will conclude that, in spite of interracial crossing, racial prejudice was still a reality in Brazil, not owing to any cultural characteristics

² Based on the belief in racial democracy Brazil, UNESCO carried out a comparative research on racial relations in different Brazilian urban centres with a view to oppose the racist ideology spread during the II World War. Roger Bastide and Florestan Fernandes co-ordinated the research together in São Paulo.

but to the incomplete manner through which the transition from a social frame founded on castes — a legacy from the slavery days — to a class system supposed to represent modernity took place. From then on, the diagnosis of the incomplete process of modernisation, according to the viewpoint of social structure, will consolidate as a compulsory theme in the debates on the Brazilian social structure that followed.

From that moment onwards, the studies carried out till then were seen as pre-scientific and ideologically bent, concentrating everything social-oriented thought should oppose. Dante Moreira Leite, for example, can be considered as one of the main representatives of this mentality. His *O caráter nacional brasileiro* (The Brazilian National Character), a study originally presented as a Social Psychology thesis at Universidade de São Paulo, in 1956, revolved around what he optimistically considered as the moment of rupture — around the 1940's³ — which he called “the conquest of ideologies” (Cf. Leite, 1976). At the end of the next decade, Carlos Guilherme Motta's *Ideologia da cultura brasileira* (Ideology in Brazilian Culture) did not go far beyond the conclusions presented in *O caráter nacional brasileiro*, except for producing a much less optimistic diagnosis as to the possibility of conquering ideologies (Cf. Motta, 1994).

Since then, the adoption or the search for a scientific tone in social discourses — on “Brazilian reality” — has dominated the panorama of social thought studies in Brazil, either through social structure studies (functionalist or Marxist ones) or through those oriented by structural analyses carried out from different sources: linguistics, anthropology, Marxism and even psychological studies).

This history of Brazilian social thought I have been delineating changed its course around the 1980's. The publishing of *Carnavais, malandros e heróis* (Carnival, Rogues and Heroes) in 1979 can be heald as a landmark in social thought studies in Brazil (Cf. DaMatta, 1997). In his work, Roberto DaMatta put Brazil in the spotlight again as an object of anthropological reflection in a dense and original way. As Mariza Peirano pointed out (1981) in her study on Brazilian anthropology, it is possible to detect at that moment a change in focus for Brazil; some kind of transition from a perspective that favoured territorial or stratal integration to a growing emphasis on cultural integration.

Besides, as Vilhena (1997:62) emphasised as he focuses Peirano's work, “if these authors [DaMatta and Cândido] approached objects that, according to them, could define Brazil as a nation — Carnival and Literature, respectively — they did it from a relativist and universalist perspective, breaking with the tendency introduced by [Florestan] Fernandes in our Social Sciences, in which the issue of Brazil as a nation, in the sense of an “ultimate totality” to be interpreted, resulted in a growing aversion to foreign theroretical influences”.

According to some, this moment was marked by a lack of credibility in those great paradigms that attested scientific rules formerly. It became widespread by the late 1960's and made possible a process of

³ After the publication of Caio Prado Júnior's *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo* (The Formation of Contemporary Brazil) in 1942.

reevaluation, deconstruction and new interpretations. Along the last decades, we had the opportunity to follow a debate that blurred the rigid boundaries supposed to set apart the typical narrative forms of scientific works from strictly literary narratives. This movement made possible both the reading of scientific reports as a literary genre and the rehabilitation of fiction as something created, questioning its link (fiction's) with everything that is false, imagined, non-factual. As an immediate result, we can see the emergence of new themes, objects and approaches also within the field of Brazilian social thought. The inclusion of new participants in the dialogue that was being carried out was to give rise to unexpected effects.

By way of an example, and sticking to one of the main author-ideas of Brazilian social thought we have been tracing, we can point to Ricardo Benzaquen de Araújo's work on Gilberto Freyre in the 1930's (Cf. Araújo, 1994). Presented in the early 1990's as a Social Anthropology doctorate thesis at Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro, this piece of work reevaluated part of Freyre's production from the viewpoint of "orality" in his prose, that is, the repetition, the incompleteness, the imprecision in Freyre's work, a most emphasised criticism levelled by his critics along this century. However, these characteristics "that confer to his prose an extremely captivating tone, close to a conversation" (p.185) were understood by Benzaquen not as a mark of incapacity to reach conclusions owing to the little scientificness of his work (something that would remove him from the scientific ground to that of Literature), but as a manifestation of his insertion into a kind of narrative in which incompleteness is part of the "essence", that is, as an essay.

"All this emphasis on 'incompleteness' and imperfection, however, should not lead us to suppose that the characteristic unaccomplishedness of an essay entails necessarily the praise of indefiniteness. On the contrary, what it seems to actually refuse is the commitment to the idea of totality, that is, to the concern for presenting a systematic and exhaustive view on the current issue" (p. 203).

As he emphasises that this aversion comes along with a keen interest in understanding what is fundamental, Benzaquén brings up again the issue of the paradigm posed by Freyre, maintaining that he did not simply shift the focus from race to culture, but actually attempted to integrate these two viewpoints adopting a neo-Lamarckian perspective, which allowed him to depict Brazilian culture as the result of "uncountable antagonisms in conflict". Thus, Freyre's strategy as far as the question of Brazilian cultural identity is concerned could be summarised as an attempt to integrate nation and region, race and culture. ⁴

Other examples of reinterpreting acclaimed authors and themes could be evoked, as well as those of unknown and inconsiderate voices till then. The authority crisis of models that used to support the dominance of some discourses prompts new strategies answerable for truths. The rise of new voices as a result of transforming objects into subjects made possible redistributing the narrative of truth according to new complex axes. It seems to me that the above-mentioned work is representative of the current changes.

⁴ This description (that can be read as a complex and tense one) when compared to the north-American experience is elected as a picture of Brazilian racial democracy (with Freyre's agreement).

It is possible to say that the stretching of this academic area has begun to present and provoke, as part of a movement that is not only its own, cracks and fissures in the narrative history of Brazilian social thought. This is the sign of a new redefinition in the writing of this history.

Paraphrasing Clifford Geertz, we could say that it is a redefinition of our history that we (Brazilians, historians, social scientists, literary critics etc.) tell ourselves. If we understand, still according to Geertz, this new writing not as a reflex but as a reflection on ourselves, it may be possible to indicate, through the appreciation of these new voices, some evidence of the emergence of another self and another identity, which is no longer homogeneous, totaliser and even totalitarian, but plural and diversified.

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