

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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FREYRE, Gilberto de Mello (Recife, Brasil, 1900 – Recife, Brasil, 1987)

Born in Recife, Pernambuco, on 15 March 1900, Gilberto Freyre was descended from traditional Brazilian Nordeste stock both on his father's side and on his mother's. However, the region was undergoing a decline at that time on account of the end of slavery and the various crises in the sugar economy. His father, Alfredo Freyre, had felt the impact of this decline directly since his plan to study in Coimbra had to be aborted because of the serious blow that the abolition of slavery in 1888 had on the family's finances. As a result, he remained in the country of his birth where he qualified as a lawyer, became a professor and a judge, and was later appointed as a Full Professor of Political Economy at the Recife Law Faculty. He was always interested in and kept himself up to date with European life, being "Frenchified" and an "admirer of England", as Gilberto himself would remember when talking about his origins ("Raízes brasileiras de um recifense sempre itinerante" [Brazilian roots of an ever itinerant Recifense], 1981, p. 129). Such Eurocentric traits as well as his great erudition would leave a profound mark on his son – or rather on his sons since Gilberto's brother, Ulisses, would also have them – complemented by the "less erudite yet not casual talk" of his mother, Francisca de Mello Freyre, "who knew her French and read Alencar and Eça" (idem, p. 128).

According to his reminiscences, from an early age he showed a liking for drawing and painting, in such a way that "he felt no need to learn how to read and write". This learning would come later, at about the age of eight, thanks to the action of Mr Williams, an English teacher who was a friend of his father's, who skilfully encouraged the young boy to become literate (in English of course). At the same time, although he came from a "traditionally Catholic family", he entered the Protestant (Baptist) Gilreath American College, no doubt through his father's professional and personal ties to the institution where he was a teacher as well as the director. He studied in this school until he obtained a bachelor's diploma in Science and Letters in 1917. During his time there, he gave Latin classes (a language he had learnt with his father) in the college, he became involved in literary and social activities, he took private lessons in French and made his debut as a speaker in 1916 in the capital of Paraíba, the neighbouring state to Pernambuco, giving a talk on "Spencer and the problem of education in Brazil", which was later published in the newspaper *O Norte*.

His meeting in 1917 with Manoel de Oliveira Lima (1853-1928), the historian and diplomat from



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Pernambuco, and the deep and influential friendship that was born from this encounter also dates from the period of his first intellectual movements. This friendship began in Recife and intensified in the following years in another setting, the United States of America. This was where Oliveira Lima had already settled both personally and professionally, donating his huge library to the Catholic University of America in Washington, and the country where Gilberto Freyre went in 1918 to pursue his higher education – first at the University of Baylor in Waco (Texas), then at the University of Columbia in New York. He remained at Baylor, a destination chosen as much for the academic and religious links between the University and the College in Recife as for the fact that his brother was already studying there, until 1920 when he obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree; the following year, he enrolled in the Faculty of Political Sciences at Columbia as he was interested in working towards a doctorate, but various personal reasons (ranging from financial problems to solitude) meant that he submitted in 1922 only a Masters dissertation entitled *Social life in Brazil in the middle of the 19th Century*, published in the same year in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* (v. 5, n. 4, Nov. 1922). In this period, Oliveira Lima became his intellectual mentor and, more than this, a type of “second father”, providing him with personal support and a precious network of relations, which also ensured he got the History Professor, William Shepherd, as his supervisor at Columbia.

After finishing his education in North America, Gilberto Freyre travelled around Europe for a few months between August 1922 and March 1923, passing through France, Germany, England and Portugal. Here he spent a bit longer and made “contact at the University of Coimbra with students who were romantically bohemian, but also with Eugênio de Castro, Joaquim de Carvalho, the philosopher, the Count of Sabugosa – the last of the ‘Vencidos da Vida’ [Life’s Losers] group in whom he found something of Eça – Fidelino de Figueiredo, the literary critic, Paulo Merêa, the jurist” (“Menos especialista que generalista” [Less specialist than generalist], 1981, p. 142-143). It is the experience of the trip itself, however, as much as the contacts he made, if not even more than them, that marks the beginning of Freyre’s mature life. This experience was something that would not stop there, but would unfold in a decisive way in his work, as Fernando Nicolazzi and Maria Lucia Garcia Pallares-Burke, each in their own way, have already shrewdly pointed out. On his return to his native Recife, but not without some hesitation, he began to collaborate with the *Diário de Pernambuco* and the *Revista do Brasil*. He became part of local and regional literary circles, little by little widening these in the direction of Rio de Janeiro, at that time the capital of the country and the centre of its cultural life.

This was how he formed relationships – some closer and longer lasting, others not so much so – with names that, like him, would come to assert themselves in the 1930s on the Brazilian intellectual scene, such as José Lins do Rego, Manuel Bandeira, Rodrigo Melo Franco de Andrade and Sergio Buarque de Holanda. At the end of the decade, he put the sociology he had learnt in the United States to good use, working from 1928 on as a sociology teacher at the Escola Normal de Pernambuco. At the same time he continued as



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secretary to the State Governor, Estácio de Albuquerque Coimbra, a post he had taken the year before to the surprise of his foreign and Brazilian friends who wondered what sense there was in a thinker of his calibre getting involved with political life and its vicissitudes.

It is still ironic to note though that it was precisely these vicissitudes of political life that gave a new and decisive boost to Freyre's intellectual activity. After all, his first book, *Casa-grande & senzala. Formação da família brasileira sob o regime de economia patriarcal* [The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization], published in Rio de Janeiro by Maia & Schmidt at the very end of 1933, is a work written "as an émigré", as he himself would say many years later ("Como e porque escrevi *Casa-grande & senzala*" [How and why I wrote *Casa-grande & senzala*], 2002 [1968], p. 708). He had been forced to become an émigré as the 1930 Revolution, which brought Getúlio Vargas to the central government and led to a rearrangement of local powers throughout Brazil, caused him to go into exile, accompanying his ousted friend Estácio Coimbra. It was at this time that, in his own words, "the idea to write a work that might open up new perspectives for the understanding and interpretation of Man through an analysis of the past and the *ethos* of the Brazilian people" came to him – a work he had already been thinking about in 1926 when, passing through Washington, he had taken advantage of the rich contents of his old master Oliveira Lima's library to do some studying and take some notes. It was, however, kept "in almost absolute secrecy" until the end of the decade (idem, p. 709). There is nothing gratuitous therefore in the opening lines of *Casa-grande & senzala*, in the first paragraph of the first edition: "In October 1930 I embarked upon the adventure of exile, going to Bahia and Portugal, with Africa as a port of call – the ideal journey for the studious interests reflected in this book" (CGS, 2003 [1933], p. 29). Needless to say, the journey (and his experience), however atypical and unexpected it was, is not only present in the work but rather shapes it as his use of the qualifying adjective "ideal" shows.

Planned and written between 1930 and 1933, with the author travelling in a somewhat errant way and not without difficulties between America and Europe, between Rio de Janeiro and Recife, he did not seem to be very enthusiastic about the essay on the eve of its launch. In a letter to his friend Rodrigo Melo Franco de Andrade, his representative in Rio with the publisher Augusto Frederico Schmidt, Freyre said: "this book has already given me quite enough work and trouble – and my role now is to take care of life, and hand over the book to its true and legitimate owners – the editor and any who might be curious enough to go to the trouble of buying and reading it. I really do need to look after my own life" (*À sombra das palmeiras* [In the shade of the palm trees], 2010, p. 131-132). Once in the bookshops, however, the more than three hundred pages caused a huge immediate impact, with practically all the important critics praising him over and over again on the excellence of his text, the analyses he presented and the theoretical and documental foundations that supported it.

There were criticisms too, for example, about the language he used, which some saw as being "not very



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serious” for a “scientific” approach, or about the absence of a clear common thread, which others demanded, that led to specific conclusions about the subject under study; even so, it can be said that there was unanimous recognition of the value and importance of the work. One of these critics, Yan de Almeida Prado, wrote in some detail in January 1934 that “he [Freyre] is going to suffer more bitter and less sincere criticism for the imprudent act he has committed amongst us, moving towards terrain that is slippery and irritating for the indigenous scientist when modern methods are applied to sociology. All the insignificant trifles and flaws in the revision, done in the author’s absence, will be collected to punish him for the crime of having shown such a rare talent. It seems to me that Gilberto Freyre’s book will be the last clash between modern minds and the old, between the old generation and the new” (*Casa-grande & senzala e a crítica brasileira de 1933 a 1944* [*The Masters and the Slaves and Brazilian criticism from 1933 to 1944*], 1985, p. 55). The members of the prestigious Sociedade Fellipe de Oliveira certainly felt the same as one year later they awarded *Casa-grande & senzala* the “Book of the Year” award, a decision that was hailed by another critic, Saul Borges Carneiro, as rewarding with well-deserved glory a work that would not be “merely the best book of 1934. It is the best book of an age” (idem, p. 159).

In a word, the success of *Casa-grande & senzala* boosted Gilberto Freyre’s reputation and highlighted the novel approach his analysis represented to studies about Brazil. “New” could be the adjective used to summarize it since everything in the book was stamped with newness: the new historical subjects presented, that is, the *senhor de engenho* or sugar plantation owner, and the slave and the world around him; the new approach used which centred on the private sphere of the relations between these subjects, with the family as the key element and the binomial of the title as the expression of social life; the new explanation offered which, mindful of the teachings of Franz Boas (whose student he had been at Columbia), differentiated “race” from “culture” and emphasized the positive nature of miscegenation; the new sources used, such as books from the Holy Office, letters from Jesuits and other ecclesiastical documents, inventories and wills, travel books, notebooks containing *modinhas* [songs], recipes and etiquette, newspapers, novels, memoirs, depositions and biographies, even iconography; the new prose that organized, articulated and expressed what his research and analysis led him to – a prose that was loose, fluent, lively and intense.

But the fundamental novelty, the one that was his greatest innovation and perhaps the main reason why he made such an impression, was in fact the whole book, which brought all these characteristics together in one single work manipulated by one single author. As had happened decades earlier with *Os Sertões* [Rebellion in the Backlands], (1902), Freyre’s book showed a surprising interpretative force, which revealed to its readers aspects that had hardly ever, or never, been considered until then regarding the formation of Brazilian society – and, for this very reason, the work started to be favourably compared to Euclides da Cunha’s masterpiece. Moreover, Freyre promised even more since, as he said almost at the end of the preface to *Casa-grande & senzala*: “the aim of condensing all the work into one single volume was



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something I unfortunately did not manage to do. The material overflowed, exceeding the reasonable limits for a book. The study of other aspects of the matter will go into a second book – which in fact might be even more greatly developed” (CGS, 2003 [1933], p. 50-51).

This second book appeared in 1936 with the title *Sobrados e mucambos. Decadência do patriarcado rural e desenvolvimento do urbano* [The Mansions and the Shanties. The Making of Modern Brazil], published by the Companhia Editora Nacional in São Paulo as part of its highly respected collection *Coleção Brasileira*. This was the same year that his first publisher, Schmidt, released the second edition of *Casa-grande & senzala*. Gilberto Freyre took advantage of this coincidence to explain and defend, within the pages of the works themselves, his particular way of analyzing Brazil: in the new preface to *Casa-grande*, he said he had restricted himself to “attempting to establish certain aspects of the patriarchal formation of the Brazilian family, at times venturing into interpretations”, but the “certainly more noble” task still to be concluded, he left to a group he vaguely termed “thinkers” since his works brought together merely “a group of facts that, for their social significance, might perhaps give rise to a few thoughts”. Further on, he justifies the scarcity of references to the “great masters of our history”, such as Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen, Capistrano de Abreu and Oliveira Lima, by explaining that he gave priority to variety and quantity of sources over bibliography, which “would humanize” the reconstruction of the past (CGS, 1936, p. 33-34).

Following the same line, the preface to *Sobrados e mucambos* presented the new essay as the continuation of the “attempt at the reconstitution and interpretation of certain more intimate aspects of the social history of the Brazilian family that had been begun in a previous work”, and that it was written “following the same criteria and the same study techniques” (*Sobrados e mucambos*, 1985 [1936], p. 38). For this reason, he also warns further on that the second part of his study would continue to prove strange to those who were avidly seeking conclusions since these were virtually absent – although their absence did not signify “rejection of intellectual responsibility for what there might be that is not very orthodox in these pages; what is contrary to what is established, accepted, acknowledged”. It had, in fact, a “revolutionary quality”, coming from “the very evidence from the material here gathered and here revealed and interpreted using the greatest objectivity possible, both of method and of technique”, with a view to understanding as a whole the “series of profound misalignments, alongside the adjustments and balances” that had formed Brazil. As “the human being can only be understood by the human being – up to the point where he may be understood”, it was necessary to “leave space for doubt and even for mystery”, acting with “humility before the facts”: this is what he imposed on “the new Franciscans who seek to save the truths from History, both from hard stratification into dogmas and from rapid dissolution in extravaganzas of the moment” (idem, pp. 50-51).

No doubt should remain, however, that Gilberto Freyre thought, spoke and wrote as a historian. And, taken as a pair, the texts quoted here can be read as a true manifesto for a new history of Brazil - a history



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free, as far as possible, of preconceived ideas and at the same time permeated with sociology, anthropology, psychology and any other science that would enable a better understanding of its processes. A history supported by the most diverse sources, which would allow not only an overall, multifaceted reconstitution of the past but also an understanding of its dynamic. A history marked by the historian's commitment to his subject, produced by interweaving scientific objectivity with analytical subjectivity. A history that, without limiting itself only to itself, might orient modern interpretations of Brazilian society so that the limits of habitual, or "traditional", approaches might be pushed forward. A history in fact that might revolutionize knowledge of Brazil and might be converted, at the very limit, into its new paradigm.

One can also say that, supported by the knowledge he had acquired in his studies and research outside Brazil and, above all, by the originality of his reflections about dimensions which until then had been hardly, or not at all, considered by world historiography, Freyre undertook his own battle for history, being "a genuine pioneer", as the English historian Asa Briggs noted some time ago (and as Peter Burke did more recently), "in the elaboration of what Lucien Febvre called in 1949 'a new type of history'" ("Gilberto Freyre e o estudo da história social" [Gilberto Freyre and the study of social history], 1981, p. 35). It was not by chance that it was the same Febvre who was asked to write the preface to the French translation of *Casa-grande & senzala*, published by Gallimard in 1952 with the title *Maîtres et Esclaves*. This demonstrates perfectly how the work of this man from Pernambuco was in tune with that of the French historians of the *Annales* school in the 1930s, even though at the time he and they were following their own paths, by themselves and in their own ways. There is no problem with this. On the contrary, the parallel trajectories serve to remind us, as Briggs also says, that "a new type of history" always results from the "work of many hands in many places" (*idem, ibidem*), thus crushing any eventual value judgements and anachronistic ranking of works and authors.

In 1936 Gilberto Freyre was also invited by the publisher José Olympio Pereira Filho to take over management of and edit the *Coleção Documentos Brasileiros* (Brazilian Documents Collection) to be launched that same year. More important than the considerable salary, which he could add to his salary as a professor at the recently founded University of the Federal District in Rio de Janeiro – a post he had held since 1935 – the offer represented the opportunity to occupy a privileged position within one of the main publishing houses in the country and thus to intervene more directly in producing and circulating ideas. By accepting the invitation and enjoying total autonomy to decide on the titles in the series, he not only gained a potential space for his own future books but also, and especially, the real possibility to expand his efforts beyond his own work in order to bring about a regeneration of knowledge about Brazil. In addition to this, he also took advantage of his position to establish an action programme centred around his own intellectual interests.

His presentation text to the first volume in the aptly titled *Documentos Brasileiros* collection - Sergio



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Buarque de Holanda's *Raízes do Brasil* [Roots of Brazil] – already clearly showed this as it emulated the foundations of his own individual work, beginning with the attention devoted to the historical nature of memoirs, biographies, travel books and “a [whole] variety of material as yet largely untouched”. The “intimate history” of society, called for at the opening of *Casa-grande & senzala*, would also reappear in his reference to those “who seek to know the Brazilian past in its greater intimacy”, as well as his emphasis on the diversified nature of history and on the need to approach it with “humility”, without however failing to break its rigidity in order to “humanize it”.

Consequently, there was nothing more logical than that the authors listed as collaborators on the project, ranging from friends such as Octavio Tarquínio de Sousa, Olívio Montenegro and Sergio Buarque himself to researchers linked to the modern social sciences and to academia in Brazil and outside such as Heloisa Alberto Torres, Donald Pierson, Pierre Deffontaines and Percy Alvin Martin, had a great affinity with the editor. In other words, the design of the collection was nothing more than a well-planned extension to the intellectual *casa-grande* built by Freyre, who administered it with great zeal up until 1938 when he decided to give up the job (also giving up his professorship at the University of the Federal District the same year, whether a coincidence or not); nevertheless, he always remained close to the project and to José Olympio, the editor and publisher, who in fact became responsible for publishing most of his work, including *Casa-grande & senzala*, until the end of the century.

At the beginning of the 1940s, Gilberto Freyre was recognized as being one of the most important Brazilian intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century, if not the most important. This position, based on the success of his books, his collaboration with various Brazilian and foreign newspapers and journals as well as his activity as a conference speaker and professor both inside and outside Brazil, allowed him to live as an independent scholar, with no binding contractual ties of a professional or institutional nature, or, as he liked to say, simply as a writer. *Casa-grande & senzala* increasingly established itself as his major work, from which his key ideas radiated through the whole of the rest of his output (at times overshadowing it), which, already not small, continued to expand to the point that the prolific writer proposed to José Olympio and even insisted that he collect all his work together in its own collection, the “Gilbertiana”, a dream that finally came true in 1958 with the official name of “The Collected Works of Gilberto Freyre”. From that time on, and increasingly as the years passed, there were frequent invitations, tributes, awards and titles and he was even made a Knight Commander of the British Empire in 1971.

As to his personal life, he married Maria Magdalena Guedes Pereira in 1941 with whom he had two children, Fernando and Sonia, and they settled in the Recife neighbourhood of Apipucos, in an old mansion that today is the Magdalena and Gilberto Freyre Museum-House and headquarters of the Gilberto Freyre Foundation. At this point, he also took up political life again, but this time as a federal deputy; elected in 1945, after the end of Getúlio Vargas' *Estado Novo* [New State], by the conservative União Democrática



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Nacional (UDN – National Democratic Union), he became involved in the work to draft a new Constitution, promulgated in 1946. He was also on the Education and Culture Committee of the Chamber of Deputies during his mandate, which lasted until January 1951 when he failed to be re-elected. His main project, approved in 1949, was to set up the Joaquim Nabuco Institute of Social Research, today the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation (Fundaj), which rapidly made its mark as one of the most important research centres in the country. He himself ran courses and conferences there, as he also did at the Federal University of Pernambuco from 1966 to 1979 with his Tropicology Seminars (transferred in 1980 to Fundaj). Although he did not go back into politics again, he remained very close to the political arena especially after the 1964 military coup which brought in the dictatorship that lasted until 1985. Although he refused various posts in the generals' government, such as those of Minister for Education and Culture and Brazilian Ambassador to UNESCO, he supported the regime and did not shrink from collaborating with institutions like the Federal Council of Culture or the government party, ARENA - National Renewal Alliance Party, a position that betrayed his conservative (for some, reactionary) politics and ended by tainting the academic appreciation of his work for a long while.

As to Portugal, this country occupied a special place in the life and work of Gilberto Freyre and vice-versa. As mentioned earlier, the relationship between the writer and Portugal that began at the time of his first visit to Europe in the 1920s became even closer during his “adventure of exile” in 1930 as those days were tough: even though in the preface to *Casa-grande & senzala*, Freyre says he took advantage of being in Lisbon to become familiar “with the National Library, with the collections in the Ethnological Museum, with novel vintages of port, and with new varieties of codfish and sweetmeats” as well as going “to Cintra and to the Estorils” and “greeting distinguished acquaintances” like João Lúcio de Azevedo, decades later he would write that at that time, “almost without any money at all, I began to live the most wretched of all the lives I have ever lived” (“Como e porque escrevi...”, p. 710). What saved him was an invitation from Stanford University (USA) where he went in 1931 as a visiting professor to run courses about Brazil for a year. This was an opportunity that enabled him to define the project for his future book – “a book that was a new reconstitution, a new introspection and a new interpretation of a developed society of European origin with extra-European elements of ethnicity and culture in a tropical space; one based on a patriarchal and slavocratic organization of the economy, the family, co-existence” (idem, p. 711-712).

This is therefore a book that, while talking about the formation of Brazilian society, also says a great deal about the history of Portugal and in particular about the Portuguese people's “aptitude for tropical life” and “tendency for social plasticity”, as demonstrated first in the peninsula itself with Muslims and Jews and afterwards in India, Africa and ultimately America, thereby echoing the historiography of Herculano, Oliveira Martins and Teófilo Braga (the first two often quoted in his works). At the end of the decade, this idea began to take a new shape: in the preface to *O mundo que o português criou* [The World the Portuguese Created](



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a very suggestive title in itself) written in 1940, Freyre says that his analysis takes the view of the “unity of feeling and culture formed by Portugal and the various areas of Portuguese colonization in America, Africa, Asia and the islands” since the “constant interpenetration of diverse cultural values” and the “abundant miscegenation” is what lends “richness, strength and the capacity for expansion not only to the whole Luso-Brazilian nation but also to all those national and regional cultures influenced by Portuguese culture and of which Brazil is today the most important expression”.

In times marked by political authoritarianism on not only one side of the Atlantic but on the other too, it was not hard to attribute an ideological tone to such a perspective and emphasize it. This was very ably done by Salazar’s regime at the beginning of the 1950s with the “complacent complicity of Gilberto Freyre”, as the historian João Medina says (“Gilberto Freyre contestado” [Gilberto Freyre Contested] , 2000, p. 50). Invited by the Portuguese *Estado Novo* to visit the colonies, Freyre travelled between August 1951 and February 1952 to Guinea, Cape Verde, Angola, Mozambique and India as well as around the metropole itself, returning to Apipucos with “his eyes full of Portugal” and two books soon to be written, *Um brasileiro em terras portuguesas* [A Brazilian in Portuguese Lands] and *Aventura e rotina* [Adventure and Routine], both published in 1953. In both, we find the basis of “a possible Lusotropicology”, which would be, as he says in the preface to *Um brasileiro...*, “the systematic study of a whole series or a whole interconnected set of adaptations made by the Portuguese to the tropics and of the tropics, not to the imperial yoke but to the very special trans-European vocation of the Portuguese people. Not only trans-European: specifically tropical”. From Lusotropicology to Lusotropicalism was but a step and, to quote Medina once again (p. 61), “from that time on the propaganda machine of the Portuguese regime would continue capitalizing on Freyre’s positions for the benefit of their colonial policy”.

As usually happens with authors with a vast and rich output, Gilberto Freyre’s work has become inescapable: there is no way to avoid it when studying Brazil and its many historical links with the world (beginning, obviously, with Portugal) even though the contact is not always made directly. It was in large part thanks to the impact of *Casa-grande & senzala*, for example, that slavery became firmly fixed as one of the key themes, and a fertile one too, of Brazilian historiography even though, as Dain Borges observes, “the most productive strands of this national historiography are generally considered to be anti-Freyrian” (“Como e por que a escravidão voltou à consciência nacional na década de 30” [How and why slavery returned to national consciousness in the 1930s], 2003, p. 206). Freyre’s merit in this case lay in bringing back under the spotlight the influential presence, broadly speaking, of the slave in the life of the colony and, afterwards, in the life of the independent country, a subject that suggestively disappeared from intellectual and political debates following the abolition of slavery in 1888. By doing this, and above all by doing it in the way in which he did so, “he opened the way to the modern historical understanding of the Brazilian past, insisting on the centrality of slavery to the formation of Brazilian society” (idem, p. 217).



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Stuart Schwartz has made a similar analysis which says that, before *Casa-grande & senzala*, “other authors had written about slavery. Afterwards, many questioned Freyre’s interpretations; but, in his work, slavery and the negro became the main subjects, the *leitmotifs* of Brazilian historiography” (“Gilberto Freyre e a história colonial: uma visão otimista do Brasil” [Gilberto Freyre and colonial history: an optimistic view of Brazil], 2001, p. 110). It is also worth noting that quoting these two North American historians of different generations in particular deliberately serves to highlight the reach and recognition of Freyre’s role in a field of study of the greatest importance, one which it is not difficult to understand is not limited by linguistic barriers or geographical borders.

On the other hand, as often happens with great authors, this Pernambuco scholar did not escape interpretative misunderstandings and misconceptions. The main one was certainly that which attributed to him responsibility for the “thesis”, according to some, or the “myth”, according to others, of “Brazilian racial democracy”. As such an association cannot withstand an honest and careful reading of Freyre’s *oeuvre* and has already been discussed and contested by various perceptive critics who have addressed the issue, it is difficult not to agree with Hermano Vianna and David Lehmann, who, in different works, reach the same conclusion: it is a cliché that distorts and falsifies Freyre’s thought, often with the conscious intention of discrediting him (“A meta mitológica da democracia racial” [The mythological aim of racial democracy], 2001; “Gilberto Freyre: a reavaliação prossegue” [Gilberto Freyre: The Reassessment Continues], 2008).

One could also add that the cliché ends up reducing his work to the trilogy on the formation of the patriarchal society in Brazil - *Casa-grande & senzala*, *Sobrados e mucambos* and the later *Ordem e progresso* [Order and Progress], published in 1959 and dealing with the social transformations marked by the passage from slavery to free labour, from monarchy to republic, from the 19th century to the 20th – overshadowing other original and pioneering works he wrote such as *Nordeste* [The Northeast] (1937), presented as “an attempt at an ecological study” on the sugar-cane producing area that he knew so well, or *Inglezes no Brasil* [The English in Brazil] (1948), an essay on “aspects of British influence on the life, landscape and culture” of the country, or even *O escravo nos anúncios de jornais brasileiros do século XIX* [The slave in Brazilian newspaper advertisements in the 19th century] (1963), whose title, eloquent in itself, also reveals how he was sensitive to records from the past that could serve as powerful documental sources.

One should not, however, think that Gilberto Freyre’s ideas are not subject to, or escape, pertinent comments and questions. The limits and ambivalence surrounding his interpretation of the dynamics of miscegenation and the process of the Portuguese colonization of America, the political and ideological use of Lusotropicalism – as much in Portugal as in Brazil in fact – the supposed absence of “methodological rigour”, if not “scientific [accuracy]”, in his works, and the reach and validity of his analyses beyond the specific and limited world of the sugar-producing society, to mention just the most recurrent topics of his critics, have been, and to a certain extent still are, the subject of a lot of ink since the 1960s at least. At the same time,



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the appearance in the last few decades of historiographical strands dedicated to culture, to private life and to material life have led to a rediscovery of his works, with readings made from different perspectives that, while still evaluating his contributions and not ignoring evaluations already made about them, shed new light on them. This is all a sign of the vitality of his work and of how his thought is capable of provoking reflections and revelations, both direct and indirect; a sign, above all, of a classical author in the full sense of the word: one who the more we read, the more we are incited to make discoveries.

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APOIOS:

