

Review / Resenha

Peter Burke and Maria Lúcia G. Pallares-Burke, *Gilberto Freyre: Social Theory in the Tropics*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008.

A Case for Gilberto Freyre as Brazil's *Uomo Universale*

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Among the epigraphs for this encyclopedic intellectual biography of Brazil's best known 20th century writer of essays of national interpretation, Gilberto Freyre, is one of Freyre's own truisms, invoked in response to an accusation that he held an excessively historical point of view, "*O passado nunca foi; o passado continua.*" Seventy-five years after the publication of his most famous work, *Casa Grande e Senzala* (translated into English as *The Masters and the Slaves*) and more than two decades since his death, we might be tempted to read the epigraph instead as, "*Gilberto Freyre nunca foi; Gilberto Freyre continua.*" And of course, this would have to be read with all due ambivalence. Something along the lines of "Gilberto

Freyre just won't go away!" and, simultaneously, "Long live Gilberto Freyre!"

After a marked lull in his prestige over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, when a critical consensus had largely undermined the authority of his work, Freyre has been the subject of re-readings and reassessments over the past decade and a half, beginning, most significantly, with Ricardo Benzaquen de Araújo's *Guerra e Paz: Casa Grande e Senzala e a Obra de Gilberto Freyre nos Anos 30* (1995) and, more obliquely, Hermano Vianna's *O Mistério do Samba* (1995). And he has come to serve as a sort of touchstone in heated debates on race relations and racial identities, inequalities and redress in contemporary Brazil. The term "neo-Freyrean" has emerged—often as a dismissive epithet—to lump together those who question the use of race as a political tool, as with the recent experiments with race-based affirmative action policies in higher education and the controversial Racial Equality Statute, still being debated in the Brazilian Congress, that in the interest of addressing racial inequalities would affix racial categorizations onto individual citizens' national identity documents. Though the reception of Freyre's work has always been sharply polarized, often easily lumped into either homage or dismissal, perhaps never before has Freyre's intellectual and symbolic legacy been such an intensely contested terrain, in the context of legislative challenges to the sublime vision of a racially transcendent, *mestiço* nation so often evoked by the mere mention of Freyre's name.

Weighing in on this debate and measuring Freyre's fortunes in contemporary public and intellectual discourse in Brazil, however, is not precisely the intent of *Gilberto Freyre: Social Theory in the Tropics*. Co-authored by Peter Burke, Professor Emeritus of Cultural History at the University of Cambridge, and Maria Lúcia G. Pallares-Burke, former Professor of History at the University of São Paulo and now associate researcher with the Centre for Latin American Studies at the University of Cambridge, this study is framed as a case for Freyre's universality, an attempt to stake out a position for Freyre among the major cultural historians and social theorists of the last century. That is, if Freyre was and in many ways remains a key figure in explorations and interrogations of

Brazilianness, he remains, the authors argue, an under-recognized, peripheral figure in terms of accounting for transnational disciplinary formations and transformations. As the authors state in their introductory chapter, "The Importance of Gilberto Freyre,"

One of the central arguments of this book is that the histories of historical writing, histories that emphasize contributions from the "centre", in other words Europe and North America, need to be redrawn in order to take account of the pioneering work of this gifted sociologist-historian from the periphery. ... How different would the history of sociology or anthropology have been if Max Weber (say) had come from India, Emile Durkheim from Cuba or Norbert Elias from Martinique? (17)

The task the writers set for themselves is thus quite ambitious: challenging for and by way of Freyre an epistemological world system of centers and peripheries for which Brazil (or the post-colonial or third-world at large) is a site for the application but not the production of universal knowledge. If their attempt is not quite entirely convincing, it is in some sense to their credit. Though a hagiographic tone—overall a bit milder than the moment above might indicate—predominates over the course of the book, we are also reminded throughout of myriad critiques of Freyre's methods, conclusions, and positions as a public intellectual. The book details Freyre's stylistic and methodological influences, objects of study, and arguments—organized according to periods, to individual works, or to the different modes and spheres of discursive intervention. It also summarizes his critical reception. This is then followed by responses to the critics—either those articulated by Freyre in his own defense or others presented on his behalf by the authors. This approach, resulting in an encyclopedic breadth rather than analytical depth, firmly positions the book as an indispensable English-language reference guide to Freyre, a quality strengthened by its inclusion of a bio-bibliographical chronology and an extensive bibliography of works in English on Freyre and the Brazil of his time. Burke and Pallares-Burke present the reader a vast array of

entry points into the unwieldy vastness and fascinating (and often frustrating) eclecticism and contradictions of Freyre's works.

The book is organized into seven chapters, including the short introductory chapter mentioned above. Chapter 2, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man", and Chapter 4, "A Public Intellectual", together contribute much new biographical detail to the English-language bibliography on Freyre. The former builds upon aspects of Pallares-Burke's pioneering study of the influence of British writers and culture on Freyre's intellectual formation, *Um vitoriano nos trópicos* (2005). Here Burke and Pallares-Burke present a sketch of Freyre's early life, his studies, travels, mentors and fellow students, and, most significantly, his encounters with books and ideas. The authors recount Freyre's long stays as a university student in the U.S., at Baylor and Columbia, and as a "scholar gypsy" in France, Germany and England, and they detail his voracious reading of foreign books—from Spain, France, Germany, and especially England and the United States—that would leave a lasting mark on the interests and approaches he would develop over the course of his lifetime. The constellation of texts and intellectual influences that Burke and Pallares-Burke identify here is vast, often simply reduced to long and suggestive lists, and elsewhere commented upon, drawing straight lines to aspects that would emerge in Freyre's subsequent works. For example, Freyre's emphasis, infuriating to many of his detractors, on a dimension of harmony and humanity that softened conflict between masters and slaves, is given roots in a lecture he attended at Columbia by British classicist Alfred Zimmern:

...Freyre's later development reveals the rich contribution... [Zimmern's ideas] made to his new paradigm for the interpretation of Brazil. It is interesting to note that the expression "Big House," which Freyre would make emblematic of the Brazilian patriarchal system and of the "feudal" power of the plantation owners, was used by Zimmern as a synonym for the master of the Greek patriarchal family. (27)

The chapter also briefly locates Freyre's intellectually formative experiences vis-à-vis some of his Latin American "peers." Noting Freyre's anglophilia and the exceptional esteem he reserved for British writers, Burke and Pallares-Burke draw a number of parallels with Jorge Luis Borges. And in Freyre's North American period, the authors are reminded of José Martí's

ambivalent experience with the U.S., his admiration for the country's democratic traditions and his horror upon witnessing brutal manifestations of racism. The comparisons in both cases are novel and suggestive, but their development here seems more fanciful than substantial.

Building upon a final section in Chapter 2, which recounts Freyre's pivotal role at the center of a group of artists and intellectuals in Recife following his return in 1923, Chapter 4 considers Freyre as a public intellectual, by way of his work as a journalist, cultural critic, and political functionary and activist. Freyre's journalistic writing and cultural criticism are surveyed here in terms of the breadth of topics that drew his attention, ranging from architecture, to soccer, to literature, to food. Again, Burke and Pallares-Burke suggestively name a number of influences and affinities in terms of both the substance and style of Freyre's journalism, including H.L. Mencken and Lewis Mumford. The longer narrative thread followed in this chapter chronologically recounts Freyre's political activities, beliefs, and associations. Here the writers trace early ideological ambiguities that would by the 1950s and 1960s become much more clearly aligned with conservative political forces, both at home, as a defender of the 1964 military coup, and abroad, as an invited guest in the 1950s of Portuguese dictator António Salazar, who saw in Freyre's theory of Luso-Tropicalism—or the exceptional openness of the Portuguese to sexual and cultural hybridity—a useful means of responding to anti-colonial pressures. Freyre's conservative turn is lamented by the authors and explained in part as attributable to a certain haphazardness, naivety or even romanticism when it came to politics. He is ultimately described as a “conservative revolutionary,” akin to “Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris, all of whom were opposed to capitalism but nostalgic for some aspects of the Middle Ages....” (127) We are encouraged not to make an easy equation between his political positions and the overall value of his work.

Three chapters each turn their attention to Freyre's books, surveying both his influential titles and, a most welcome contribution, a number of his “minor” works that have received less critical attention. Chapter 3 focuses on his 1933 masterpiece, *The Masters and the Slaves*, considered to be the cornerstone of all his later work and rightly regarded

as having had the effect of an earthquake in intellectual circles in Brazil at the time of its publication. Again, keeping to the encyclopedic scope of their book at large, Burke and Pallares-Burke do not develop a new analytical approach to Freyre's enormously influential text, but instead survey aspects of its style and themes, and locate it within a variety of contexts, historiographical, political, and socio-cultural. Thus, their chapter is organized into a variety of short, relatively discreet sections: "The House and the Plantation", "Patriarchal Society", "The History of the Child", "Gender and Sexuality", "Race, Culture, and Hybridity", "Harmony and Conflict", "Multidisciplinarity", "Sources and Methods", "Foreign Models", "The Critics", and so on. Summarizing their review of the book and the critiques of it, the writers emphasize its formal hybridity—as part intimate history, part literature, part sociology—and its formative contributions not as a systematic, fully substantiated history but as a series of still intensely evocative hypotheses about Brazilian history, culture, and identity. Again, their approach, with its broad survey of a number of entry points and reading strategies, will prove useful for new or even returning readers of this classic work.

Chapters 5 and 6 more broadly survey a number of his works, first considering them as histories of the Brazilian Empire and Republic and then as evidence of Freyre's contributions as a social theorist. While largely commenting upon Freyre's better known trilogy, including *The Masters and the Slaves*, *The Mansions and the Shanties* (*Sobrados e Mocambos*, 1936), and *Order and Progress* (*Ordem e Progresso*, 1959), Burke and Pallares-Burke also draw our attention to lesser-known works, including *Northeast* (*Nordeste*, 1937), a pioneering work of ecological and agricultural history, *The English in Brazil* (*Ingleses no Brasil*, 1948), and even the planned and named but ultimately unfinished fourth major volume in the sequence, *Tombs and Shallow Graves* (*Jazigos e Covas Rasas*). Freyre's contributions as a historian are measured here by the pioneering breadth of his interests, including childhood, the body and sexuality, death, and all aspects of material culture, including food, furniture and clothing. Also noted is his unusually expansive use of novel sources—gravestones, photographs, literature, popular songs, newspaper

advertisements, travelogues, and recipes, among other largely untapped archives of socio-cultural information. In evaluating Freyre as a social theorist, the authors survey a number of the key concepts and methods that he either invented or, more often, appropriated and re-deployed: regionalism, rurbanization, the interpenetration of past, present and future, polarities and mediations, tropicalism, tropicology, and tropicalization, and, most famously, hybridity, racial democracy and Luso-Tropicalism. Critiques of Freyre as both a historian and as a social theorist are also briefly surveyed here, including charges that he was excessively unsystematic and unscientific, in short an amateur in an excess of fields and objects of study, and that his consensus approach to history was far too rosy and nostalgic, discursively functioning as a reification and naturalization of ongoing political and social inequalities in Brazil. In a sense, the response to these critiques is simply their inversion, noting his lack of methodological rigor as his method, giving value to the literary dimensions to his work over the scientific, and acknowledging his truly stunning force in identifying structures of feeling of everyday life in Brazil and narrating powerful myths of national origins and exceptionality that seem to have endured despite glaring empirical lapses and contradictions in his work.

The final chapter, "Gilberto Our Contemporary," briefly states a case for Freyre's continued relevance, not only in terms of intellectual and cultural discourse in Brazil but, again, as a social thinker worth revisiting in terms of a number of the phenomena and problems that mark today's globalizing world. Again, in terms of the latter argument, Burke and Pallares-Burke make their case largely by way of suggesting a number of conceptual, methodological, and stylistic affinities and affiliations with scholars either from or already consecrated by the "centre": Burckhardt and Huizinga and their intimate portraits of ages, Braudel, Bloch, Febvre, and Ariès of the French *Annales* and *nouvelle histoire* schools, and, among post-colonial thinkers, Fanon, Mukerjee, Srinivas, and Fernando Ortiz, the latter specially noted as having become a friend of Malinowski (and who, we might pause to recall, praised Ortiz's concept of transculturation though failed to hold to his pledge to adopt it in his own work).

In the end, the case for Freyre's relevance beyond Brazil, though, comes to rest most specifically upon two arguments: that his "tropicalizing" of social thought might serve to provincialize Europe; and that, in an age of "racist revival and racist violence, . . . the world still has something to learn from Gilberto Freyre's 'mixophilia' and his encouragement of harmony and fraternity." (214) More convincing, perhaps, at a moment when hybridity itself seems to have been established as a hegemonic discourse without much remaining of a critical edge, is that we should re-read Freyre's work as an inspiring but ultimately failed attempt to escape or transcend the Eurocentric discourse of race and nation. And, sympathetically, we would be wise to (re-)read Freyre in order to discover the ways in which his hopes, his inexhaustible curiosity, and his substantial errors still inhabit our own work and thought. The great merit of *Gilberto Freyre: Social Theory in the Tropics* is that it serves as a generous guide and inspiration for a return to Freyre's books, with multiple readings in mind, including those simply attuned to the often seductively idiosyncratic beauty of his writing.