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Multicultural: Stories of Political and Cultural (Mis)Understandings¹

Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freire's masterwork *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*) was published in the early 1930s. Freire's main contention was that Brazilian society was the outcome of a specific process of colonisation by the Portuguese. That process consisted of a plantation society – in north-eastern Brazil – where the white masters lived in close proximity to the black slaves, according to patriarchal and Catholic standards that promoted miscegenation, not only from a “racial” point of view, through sexual, albeit unequal, contact, but mostly from a cultural point of view. Although Freire does not dismiss the hierarchical and exploitative nature of slavery-based plantation society, he does, however, stress the specific difficulties of Portuguese colonisation (Portuguese demographic scarcity, low levels of capital investment, a weak state that outsourced many functions to the Church, etc.) and the way in which they allowed precisely for the meeting of the indigenous, the Black and the European roots. Freire's narrative was to fuel the hegemonic Brazilian narrative of the mixture of the three “races” of “racial democracy,” and of supposedly low levels of explicit racism that are still so much part of the representations of Brazil (both the perceptions of non-Brazilians and the self-representation of the Brazilian nation state). Freire also tried to explain the reasons for the Portuguese specificity: he portrayed Portugal itself as the outcome of miscegenation between north-African, Jewish, Latin, Celtic, and Germanic contributions.

Freire's narrative was positioned. First of all, he was the product of his anthropological and sociological upbringing in Franz Boas's school in the US. That explains how his distinction between “race” and culture was innovative in a country like Brazil, where racist and raciological theories had been prevalent in order to explain the need for a whitening of society through European migration that

1 This text was originally presented at the conference “Transcultural Identity Constructions in a Changing World,” Dalarna University, Sweden, 2014, and I have decided to keep it in its original form. I believe that it is more effective this way. More scholarly analysis, with exhaustive references, can be found in Vale de Almeida, Miguel, 2004, *An Earth-Colored Sea. 'Race', Culture and the Politics of Identity in the Post-Colonial Portuguese-Speaking World*, Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

would combat the perils of an excessively large Black population. Secondly, he was a product of the agrarian and patriarchal society of the declining North-East, once the centre of Brazilian economy and society. The claim of Portuguese ancestry was a compensating factor in the internal regional struggles of the Brazilian elites. His ideas were clearly opposed to those of intellectuals from São Paulo who were promoting Modernist ideas about a capitalist, neo-European society overcoming the ancient and conservative flaws of colonisation. This means that his ideas provided the perfect replacement for an old dilemma felt by the elites since they promoted independence from Portugal in 1822: was Brazil condemned to being a lingering colonial nation “contaminated” by a huge Black population that was seen as a negative factor for the economy, civilisation, and morality, or should it be a European, White society in the Americas, through whitening? Freire’s proposal – similar to other proposals in Mexico and Cuba – was to establish a narrative of a new kind of society, based on diversity – racial and cultural – that would create a richer type of society.

So Freire’s proposal had the elements of what today we would call “the multicultural,” both in the positive and the negative senses: positive, because it turned down racist, hierarchical assumptions; negative, because it separated the racial and ethnic groups. That is, a crude multicultural approach is one that extols the virtues of diversity while maintaining the borders between the contributing groups, due to a static and reifying notion of culture. A theory of miscegenation does not necessarily mean that this ambiguity is overcome, because the contributions of each group are still distributed along a scale of value: sensual, bodily contributions by Blacks, such as music, food, sensuality, dance; contributions of passiveness and harmony with nature by Indians; and contributions of knowledge, rationality, manners, science, and bureaucracy by Whites.

Why did I start with Brazil and not with Portugal? Because I want to stress how the colonial is the setting for the making of the metropolitan. And also because there is a direct link between the history of the representations of Brazilian national identity (where Freire’s ideas were triumphant, albeit very much dismissed nowadays) and the history of the representations of Portugal during the late colonial period in the twentieth century – and still today in both countries. Freire’s ideas were very much co-opted – or should I say, they found a welcoming and fertile ground – by the Brazilian *Estado Novo* regime of the 1930s and 1940s, a period that was crucial in establishing Brazilian national representations for a long time, until in the 1980s the effects of the end of the Brazilian military dictatorship and the growth of social movements, such as the Black movement, shifted public attention to a critique of the myth of “racial democracy.” But Freire’s ideas were

also co-opted by the Portuguese authoritarian dictatorship and colonialist regime that lasted from the 1930s up to 1974, when democracy was re-established. But before I go into that, maybe I should recall a few simple facts about Portuguese expansion, colonisation, and colonialism.

The Portuguese polity was formed in the period of the Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslim Berber and Arabs by Christian forces from the Northern rim of the Peninsula. Three political entities, corresponding to three cultural-linguistic subdivisions, conquered territory on a North to South progression: the Galician-Portuguese to the West, the Castilian (Spanish) in the centre, and the Aragonese-Catalan to the East. Portugal was to be the first political, state entity to be formed, in 1143, having ever since kept its borders almost unaltered. One can say that Portuguese national identity was constructed first and foremost in opposition to the “Spanish” (i.e., Leonese, Castilian) Other and to the Moorish Other. With a small, narrow territory and a scarce population, the Portuguese economy and state developed mostly through Crown-promoted international commerce based on maritime explorations away from the Peninsula. The first period, covering the 1400s and the 1500s, was based on charting the western coast of Africa, establishing coastal fortresses and towns for trade – basically of slaves – which culminated in two main events: the discovery of the passage from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, thus establishing a sea-route to India and the East; and the – some say unexpected – “discovery” of Brazil in 1500. The colonisation of Brazil, initially based in the North-East with sugar production, was not truly successful until the discovery of gold in the south-central region. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the replacement of the centrality of African trade by the centrality of the spice trade from the Far East and the importance of the Indian colony of Goa. But once the gold economy started in Brazil – fuelled throughout by the slave trade from Africa – the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with gold mining mainly, were to witness the centrality of Brazil in the Portuguese colonial economy – which is to say, in the Portuguese economy as such.

In 1808, because of Napoleon’s invasion of Portugal, the Portuguese royal family escaped to Brazil, and Rio de Janeiro became the capital of the multi-continental kingdom. When conditions allowed for the return of the royal family to Europe, the King’s son, Pedro, stayed behind and declared the independence of Brazil in 1822. The Brazilian elites, actually Portuguese-Brazilian, thus seized the opportunity to take over the control of revenues, of the slave trade, and of the economy, and thus started the discussion and the debate about what kind of country it was to be – a discussion that I have very briefly outlined above.

What about Portugal? Without Brazil and the revenues from gold, the Portuguese economy – and its morals, its self-representation – underwent a profound crisis, aggravated by the wars between absolutist versus liberal and constitutional monarchists. The crisis reached its high point with the British Ultimatum of 1890 – which clearly marks how much the recent colonial history of Portugal and Brazil, as well as the economy of the slave trade and its abolition and global commerce at large, was now dependent on Britain (and contested by France), with the old powers (Portugal and Spain) in clear decadence.

Following the Berlin Conference of 1885, where the European states with colonial claims – and those wishing to have them – divided Africa among them, Britain confronted Portugal with an ultimatum saying that either Portugal managed to prove that it held actual power over territories such as Angola and Mozambique or Britain would take them over. The ultimatum initiated a crisis that included the growing demand for the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic, and it set the stage for the construction of a truly modern national identity. Henceforth, the occupation of the African colonies – with troops, colonists, and capital and economic activities – was to become the focus of Portuguese politics. Attempts at doing so were not terribly successful, and in 1910 a revolution established a Republican regime, whose characteristics of Jacobin anti-clericalism triggered the reaction of conservative forces. These established an authoritarian regime in 1926 that, as of 1933, was to become the Estado Novo (like in Brazil, in the same period), a para-fascist regime led by Salazar. Salazar would rule until 1968, replaced by a timidly liberalised Marcelo Caetano. Caetano would be overthrown in 1974 by a democratic military coup led by young officers against the war on liberation movements in Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique that had been going on since the early 1960s. With democracy re-established after a short revolutionary period in 1974–76, Portugal was for the first time ever “just” a European territory, joining the EU in 1986. I will return to that shortly. Let us now go back to the late colonial period in Africa, when Portugal established its foothold there, and see what kind of society was established there and how Gilberto Freire’s ideas were co-opted.

Portuguese colonialism in Africa is an instance of what I would actually call *proper* Colonialism, that is, a typically Modern project of territorial takeover, economic exploitation, state and bureaucratic control, and the production of knowledge and a body politic around ethnicity, race, and nationality. It is, in that sense, a different formation from previous colonisations, discoveries, explorations, or trade routes and settlements. The Modern colonial project was established via different strategies, opportunities, and policies. In some territories, charter companies were

given the privilege of establishing their quasi-states in large tracts of territory, with the monopoly of the exploitation of certain raw materials and with full administration and control of the population. In some colonies, such as Mozambique, Portuguese colonialism was in some aspects subsidiary to other colonial powers, especially British: forced labour laws led to the forced migration of southern Mozambicans to work in the South African mines, and part of their salaries was deposited in the Bank of Portugal and used to pay debt to Britain, for instance.

But throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the colonies were administered under a law called the Colonial Act, which established what we could call a very specific "Constitution." Inhabitants of the colonies were divided into three different legal types: the colonists, who were Portuguese citizens from the metropole or their direct descendants; the native, indigenous people, ruled by local colonial administrators; and the co-opted local leaders who were not considered citizens. They were under the laws of compulsory labour and had to pay local hut taxes, which meant that the African labour force was directed to European agrobusiness, mining, or domestic labour for colonialists' homes, thus disrupting the local economies and cultures. Finally there was the category of the *Assimilado*, the assimilated: people who could apply for the status had to prove that they spoke Portuguese; that they practised Catholicism; that they had abandoned indigenous practices, such as polygamy, and native religions; and that they dressed and behaved in Western ways.

This Colonial regime was, in this sense, not very different from other contemporary colonial regimes. However (and besides the fact that Portuguese modern colonialism, much as the Portuguese economy and polity, occupied a semi-peripheral position in the world-system, subaltern to other powers, mainly Britain), the Portuguese twentieth-century colonial regime had two other distinctive features: the metropole was under a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship, not under a liberal democratic regime; and as of 1960 and until 1974, the country was engaged in colonial wars or, from the African perspective, national liberation wars.

By the late 1950s and very early 1960s, the main colonial powers – Britain and France, but also the Netherlands and Belgium – had practically completed the change towards a postcolonial period, with the independence of many colonies. The Portuguese colonies in Africa became a bizarre situation. International pressure towards Portuguese decolonisation came from all sectors: the Bandung Conference, uniting the newly independent countries; the Soviet Union and the socialist block, which actually supported the national liberation movements, but also the US and many European countries. The Portuguese regime's reaction to this was twofold. On the one hand, it abolished the Colonial Act and replaced it

with a new political organisation of the state and the colonies. On the other hand, it appropriated Gilberto Freire's ideas.

In the early 1960s, the regime changed the name of the colonies from "Colonies" to "Overseas Provinces" and eventually Angola and Mozambique became "States" with their own legislative and executive bodies. This was an attempt at introducing a notion of "Federation" or "Commonwealth" within an otherwise colonial relation for all intents and purposes. It also abolished the Colonial Act and the Statute of the Indigenous Peoples, thus formally equating everyone in the colonies in the face of the law. Compulsory labour was formally abolished. Needless to say, these changes were formal and the mechanisms for the reproduction of the old order were replaced either by habitus or by the very logic of the colonial economy. But it is the ideological aspect of it that is of concern to me. And here enter Freire and Brazil.

In the nineteenth century and still in the twentieth century, up to the 1940s, the official and academic notion in Portugal was a racist, raciological one, claiming the inferiority of Blacks, stating that miscegenation in the colonies would be catastrophic, and also claiming Portuguese whiteness, in opposition to some raciological Northern-European theorists that pointed out the un-whiteness of the Portuguese and of Southern Europeans in general. But the national narrative of Portuguese identity had been established quite clearly since the nineteenth century as one based on the narrative of the Discoveries and colonisation. Portugal saw itself as a nation characterised not by its role in Europe or its European character, but rather as a universal propagator of Christianity and Western civilisation. The character of the poet Luís de Camões was actually salvaged and erected into that of national hero around the period of the Ultimatum, and the authoritarian regime of Salazar was to be the main promotor of the rhetoric, poetic, and propaganda of the Discoveries and Portugal's civilising role in the world. Freire's ideas seemed to have the potential to "scientifically" confirm this view that became alternative and much more so since "scientific racist" ideas had been dismissed after World War II and attacks on Portuguese colonialism were growing.

So Freire was invited by the Minister of Overseas to travel around the Empire. The work that resulted from those travels amounted to the theory of Luso-Tropicalism: the notion that Portugal (but also Spain) had had a special civilising role in the world, creating societies based on mixture and miscegenation, of racial democracy, of universal values, as opposed to apartheid-like, oppositional societies created by Northern-European, mostly Protestant, colonised powers. Freire's more political essays actually said that the "enemy" was both communism (the Soviet, atheist threat that financed the liberation movements) and Capitalism

(the hegemony of the US and its materialistic culture). Portugal and Spain supposedly had the destiny of creating a different type of society, based on Catholic universalist values and on tradition, family, affection, harmony between races, and absence of social conflict. And the grand example of it all was supposedly Brazil.

That is how the regime basically started promoting Portuguese colonialism in Africa as the construction of “new Brazils.” This moment coincided with the growing weight of the colonial economy, with Portuguese migration to the colonies, with the emergence of a local urban society that was actually more free from the constraints of tradition and social control in the metropole – so the ideological discourse seemed to have some support in perceived reality by many social agents, not only white but also those creolised or assimilated Blacks or mixed-race who willingly engaged in colonial mimicry. The regime’s propaganda passed on the idea that Portugal was a multi-racial, pluri-continental country, thus including the colonies in the representation of the country and replacing the hierarchical picturing of a colonial relationship with a horizontal multicultural one.

I would now like to introduce two examples that confound this picture, before I go on to a concluding section on the postcolonial situation in Portugal. The first example has to do with Cape Verde and the second with the Portuguese as “not quite white.” I will be brief, for I think these will trigger your curiosity and debate – and that’s my objective.

Not all colonies were ruled under the Colonial Act, with the tripartite colonialist/indigenous/assimilated division of the population. The exceptions were Macau, since it was not officially a colony but a Chinese concession town, inserted in what was acknowledged as a great “civilisation”; Goa, Damão, and Diu, in India, because the Portuguese perceptions saw them also as part of a civilisation in their own right – not as “African primitives”; and the Cape Verde islands, because they were the result of the mixture of African slaves brought to those originally deserted islands and Portuguese and other European settlers. The Cape-Verdean elite, which was placed in the more mixed and less black segment of the local culturally constructed colour continuum, had always seen itself as not-really-African, and in the 1950s its main protagonists were actually quite enthusiastic about Freire’s work and saw themselves and Cape Verde as the epitome of Freire’s idealised Brazil. They saw Cape Verde – and the colonial regime promoted that in the political status of the territory – as a region of Portugal more than as a colony. But when Freire visited Cape Verde, all expectations were contradicted. Freire did not like the profound creolisation of Cape Verde, namely his perception that the Creole language was a corruption of Portuguese, and that the clear definition of the racial/ethnic origins of each cultural contribution could not be traced. In sum,

Freire reacted against creolisation, whereas one would have expected that to be the epitome of his project. This helps us understand how the proto-multiculturalist discourse was actually – like multiculturalism today – much more based on separation than on mixture.

At the same time that the Portuguese regime was reaffirming its presence in the African colonies, trying, not always successfully, to direct migration fluxes from Portugal to Angola and Mozambique, the Portuguese peasants were migrating, mostly illegally, to France and Germany. They had done so in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to Brazil, to the US, and to Venezuela. In these places they were perceived as poor and illiterate. But in previous situations of migration, they had also been going to ex-British colonies, many times as indentured labourers to replace freed slaves in the mid- to late nineteenth century plantation societies. That was, for instance, the case with Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean, where the Portuguese replaced the Blacks in plantations and then managed to move on to shopkeeping, in bars, taverns, rum-shops, and grocery stores. This pattern was to be reproduced later in contexts such as South Africa and Rhodesia, and even the US and Canada. In those instances, they were perceived as “not-quite-whites” by the British legal racial categories, the census categories, and popular perceptions – they occupied the intermediary stratum, between the poor Blacks or natives, who saw them as exploitative merchants, and the richer whites, who did not see them as deserving admission into the colonial elites – for being poorer, less literate. This example helps us understand how a relativistic shift in perspective, one that puts together the political economy and the cultural aspects, can be useful for deconstructing essentialist and static colonial constructs.

Let me return from these parenthetical examples to my main narrative. In 1974 a military coup overthrew the dictatorship in Portugal. It was led by young army officers who opposed the colonial wars that had ravaged three colonies and an entire generation of young men in Portugal. The re-establishment of democracy through a military coup was certainly original, as had been the prolonged life of Portuguese colonialism. And both issues were connected – dictatorship and colonialism (many of the liberation movements’ leaders, like Amílcar Cabral, had been educated in Lisbon and had close contacts and cultural intimacy with Portuguese oppositionists). The colonies became independent in 1975, and Portugal was to join the European Union in 1986. Economic growth, modernisation, and development in the 1980s and 1990s, together with economic and political difficulties in the ex-colonies, led to the first wave of migration from the ex-colonies to Portugal (although a Cape-Verdean migration had been going on since the

1960s). Post-colonial Portugal had to reconfigure itself as a European nation, but that reconfiguration was short-lived.

First of all, its marginal position in Europe led to the creation of a geo-strategical compensation under the aegis of a new organisation, the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries, and the invention of the notion of *Lusofonia* (Lusophony, i.e., Portuguese-Speaking). Language became the core element in the postcolonial reconfiguration, seen as a cultural property of Portugal that was disseminated throughout the world. Portuguese democratic cultural policies are very much focused on this notion that there was a lot that Portugal gave to, or left in, the world (buildings, foods, language, religion, etc.), and very little attention is paid to what it got from those places. A gift without a counter-gift, without reciprocity – whereas not only is that not true in colonial encounters, but the negative reciprocity should be identified in the process of colonial exploitation, not in cultural gift-giving, i.e., the civilised process. So, the discourse on the Discoveries is now played out in the universalistic mode, as opposed to a more colonialist one, but still it is there, always stressing the notion that Portuguese colonisation was “different,” less racist. The same applies to perceptions of Portuguese society, represented as less racist than others. This is strikingly similar to Brazilian self-representations, and the spectre of Freire’s Luso-tropicalism is there. That is why I have been calling that post-Lusotropicalism, i.e., the continuation in the postcolonial situation of a colonial ideological artefact.

Also, if you take a close look at the governance of “race” in post-democracy Portugal, what you see is either its dismissal – because of republican universalism that forbids the mentioning of race in statistics and policies – or its re-emergence under the figure of the marginal, the criminal, the inhabitant of bad neighbourhoods, or the one who is always classified as African, even if he or she is a Portuguese national. Because of post-modern criticisms of multiculturalism as well as of French-style republican universalism, Portuguese official policy towards issues of racism is played under the aegis of the notion of what is presented as supposedly an alternative, “intercultural dialogue,” which clearly separates and remits to an ethical attitude and will the overcoming of otherwise politically and economically organised class and race hierarchies.

Take the example of the *Arrastão* episode on a beach of Lisbon in 2005. Television reported one day that hundreds of youths – portrayed in cell-phone pictures as black, although the word was never used – had run across the beach, creating huge violent confusion and robbing all the beachgoers (portrayed, again only visually, as whites). All the reports were based on hearsay and pictures taken by beachgoers with their cell phones. But police, journalists, and officials took the

events for granted, as well as the origin of the criminals: the poor, council-estate neighbourhoods of the suburbs, inhabited mostly by Africans. Furthermore, the event was immediately classified as an *arrastão*, a Brazilian expression describing similar events on Rio beaches and that were known by the Portuguese public, thanks to the intimacy that the Portuguese have with Brazilian popular culture through the media, migration, and tourism. A few days later, it became known that all that had happened was a few robberies on that crowded beach (it was Portugal Day, known as “Day of the Race”² during the dictatorship, the last day of exams, when hundreds of children go to the beach), which had led to disproportionate police intervention. A large group started running away from the police, leading to other people running away too, not knowing what was happening. Everything else was “colonisation of the real” by categories inherited from colonial times, cultural intimacy with Brazil, and the hidden, repressed conflict that exists because of racialised class divisions that intercultural dialogue and the idealised notion of a community of lusophones obscure. In the absence of a new postcolonial “Constitution,” the old Colonial “Constitution” takes over, with its citizens, its natives, and its assimilated.

Conclusion

The Portuguese case (especially its late colonial period, the construction of lusotropicalism and its postcolonial reconfiguration as post-Lusotropicalism) illustrates how a multicultural-like discourse is not simply the product of liberal-democratic attempts at recognition and greater equality. It can also be an instrument for ways of categorising, dividing, and even establishing hierarchies that are crucial for the narrative of the nation state as an intrinsically political project – and it can have its origin in colonialism itself. At the core of it is not necessarily “race” as such, but culture – even if it is racialised and, therefore, further essentialised. In the Portuguese case – and I would dare say in the Portuguese-speaking cases – it is the narrative of the history of the passing on of Portuguese-ness (in language, artefacts, habits, affections, institutions, and so on) that needs to be unpacked and deconstructed and subjected to critique so that tensions can be made explicit, eventually leading to some sort of transcultural transformation.

2 “Race” was a synonym for “nation” then (it is no longer), although the semantic confusion was certainly not just a coincidence.