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Review of *The Gilberto Freyre Reader*

Elizabeth Wilhelmsen

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mewbank@nebraska.com*

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BOOK REVIEW

The Gilberto Freyre Reader
Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
New York, 1974 $7.95

It is difficult to introduce Gilberto Freyre, one of Brazil's most outstanding and well-known contemporary thinkers, because of the multi-faceted nature of his understanding and the versatility of his pen. Being both scientist and humanist, critic and artist, Freyre is perhaps best recognized as a sociologist and historian of his native land. However, he defies classification even in this last role as is well revealed in his essay, "Como e Porque sou e não sou Sociologo" ("How and Why I Am and Am Not a Sociologist"). Criticizing the conventional hermetic specialization and unbending insistence upon objectivity, he asserts that "man's social life cannot sensibly be fragmented into particles and scrutinized by specialists using purely mathematical methods or techniques of quantitative analysis."

Freyre is author of a famous trilogy on the development of Brazil which examines the depth and breadth of a land rich in regional, ethnic and cultural variety. While never resorting to the use of statistics or the imposition of sociological a priori theorems, Freyre displays an exhaustive acquaintance with the complex historical reality of his land. The volumes are titled Casa-Grande e Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves), Sobrados e Mucambos (The Mansions and the Shanties: The Making of Modern Brazil) and Ordem e Progresso (Order and Progress: Brazil from Monarchy to Republic). The anthology under review was prepared for American readers. It is composed of excerpts from the above mentioned works, as well as samples of poetry, travel notes, newspaper articles and interviews. Whereas it draws only a sketch of Brazilian life and history as understood by Freyre, the volume manifests the author's flexibility by its presentation of the most disparate subjects side by side. It is certainly an excellent invitation to a deeper exploration of Freyre's mind.

Freyre calls himself adventurous, nomadic, relentless and a bit anarchistic. But perhaps he best explains his vocation by placing himself within the Iberian literary tradition. A member of this tradition "writes out of a need to complete or intensify himself as a person, as a man (or woman), just as others who are part of the same tradition may choose to paint, or fight bulls, or give themselves to the Catholic Church or to the State, or devote their lives to rebellion against the Church or State, while never losing their character or becoming any less Spanish no matter what extreme they may choose." Outstanding members of this tradition are Cervantes (who
combined direct experience of life with the analytical and lyrical power to understand and dramatize it, and the half-Portuguese Velásquez (who symbolized the intimacy between the artist and his creation by immortalizing both in one single esthetic act). But their great forerunner was Ramon Lull (the Mallorcan who empathized himself into a Moor in order to comprehend Islam).

As an observer, sometimes a voluptuous observer, of the outward appearances of life and the world, Freyre's rich and symbolic descriptions reveal the activity of extraordinarily keen senses and of that mysterious faculty, intuition, which carries beyond the range of reason. Thus he will comment that in his land soccer is played “as though it were a dance,” as a result of African blood and influence; that the old colonial city of Recife “hides bashfully behind its coconut trees in almost Moorish modesty,” and that in Olinda “all we see unites in Franciscan brotherhood to form this landscape, at once Christian and Brazilian;” that the heat of the industrial age dissolved the “color of feast days, processions, Carnival, military parades” giving way to the “black and gray of the iron stoves, top hats, boots and carriages of nineteenth-century Europe;” that the cultivation of the rich, soft soil of the Northeast, “marked even by a child’s foot as he runs with a kite,” in a few years “made of Nova Lusitania a colony of such solid wealth and solid men, with such a susurros of silk and so many gleaming rubies, such fine stone-and-plaster houses with tiled upper stories, such churches garnished with rosewood and gold.” The man who has sought “not for fantasy, but for the real that is realer than real” has found it by a tenacious adherence to the historical dimension, by allowing the symbolized to be carried by the symbols. Where there is color there is gaiety; where religious festivities, a common orthodoxy; where there is history there are monuments which witness to it; where there is restraint there is distinction. The Freyre reader learns a lesson known instinctively to every child: that appearances are seldom deceitful. However, the spontaneous thinker does allow himself an occasional flight of fantasy, as when he speaks with fascination of the mysterious lover who dwells in the warm coastal waters of his native town, surely the same lover who has for generations lured young Lusitanians to search for adventure in the lands beyond the sea.

In a different tone Freyre discusses colonization and evangelization, an expected topic from a new-worlder with a comprehensive historical perspective. Unabashedly he distinguishes the “Christ-cen-tered” sociological drive of Iberian man from the “ethnocentric” sociological orientation displayed by Europeans. He remarks on the ability of the Spaniard and Portuguese to adapt to tropical climates, to marry the native, to express himself in new artistic forms, while simultaneously sowing the seeds of civilization and Christianity. He tells us that bourgeois European society, to the contrary, shrinks from tropical societies with repugnance, while manifestations of the native cultures become “crushed under the technological and economic weight of European Imperialism.” The thesis is certainly acceptable if one understands “European” as “modern European.” The Spanish and Portuguese success in colonization was made possible, of course, because the Christian Western heritage was still unadulterated in Iberia at the time of the great expansions; thus they tended not to substitute homogeniety for unity, power for authority, nationalism for catholicity.

The history of Brazil is saturated with ironies and unexpected surprises. Of that history, Freyre concentrates on the half-century spanning from the 1870s to the end of World War I, a period during which Brazil underwent decisive changes. Before this, though, Brazil had experienced the stages of colony, monarchy and empire. Brazil's first king was the Bragança Dom João IV of Portugal, who, on the eve of Portugal’s occupation by Napoleonic troops, sailed forth from Lisbon with the entire court to set up residence in Brazil. Having gained for himself the demeaning appellative of “John the Runaway” in his homeland, Dom João’s presence in Brazil was extraordinarily benign. The land which had hitherto been only one of many neglected colonies became endowed with a university, libraries, hospitals, titles of nobility, an appropriately lively court life, and Improved Identity and self-esteem. The Brazilians gladly accepted the proposal of becoming a kingdom in their own right. At the same time there was growing in the neighboring countries of South America an urge to sever the links with their mother-land, Spain. Under the influence of a growing ideological bias against the status of being a colony, Brazilians came to fear that they would be subordinated to old Portugal even though their only bond was a common sovereign. Dom João’s successor, Dom Pedro I, cleverly solved his dilemma by proclaiming himself Emperor of Brazil, while abdicating the Portuguese throne in favor of his young daughter Maria da Gloria. Dom Pedro I’s rule was a period of consolidation of the national image and of democratization of the government in
Gilberto Freyre has much to say about Dom Pedro II, the last Emperor of Brazil, son of Dom Pedro I. An orphan at the age of one by the death of his mother, Austrian Archduchess Leopoldina von Hapsburg, and shortly after by the death of his father, Dom Pedro II matured in a fashion that was lonely, dreary, smothered, without tasting the joys of childhood. "He seemed to feel comfortable only in his Prince Albert coat and black silk hat, and uncomfortable, ridiculous, out of character, in his royal robes and crown. With the Gothic, military civilization, the Catholic and ecclesiastical, Dom Pedro’s links were very tenuous. He was the typical city European." Although Freyre asserts that he was "puritanically austere and philosophically middle-class" he fails to explain that within his tutorial staff there had been men of Masonic orientations and that he became in time Grand Master of a Brazilian Masonic Order. Having been imbued with egalitarian ideas, Dom Pedro could seemingly not find the humility to accept his exalted role. He discarded the pomp and ceremoniousness which had uplifted even the last Brazilian, and stripped the social life of the court to such a degree that intellectuals, nobility and artists fled the country in search of more glamorous and stimulating environments. The bourgeois court, "unworthy of a Bragança-Hapsburg," resulted in the dissipation of the nation’s vitality and creativity.

The conflict between the Catholic and Liberal anti-clerical political forces became an open struggle in the 1870s with the so-called “Affair of the Bishops.” An orthodox faction of the clergy tried, in obedience to Pius IX, to force members of the clergy to resign their membership in the Masonic orders. The Emperor adopted a “Voltairean pose” sending emissaries to the Vatican who argued that the ban on free-thinking societies should be lifted for Brazil to avoid a rift between Church and State. After street brawls, riots, and the imprisonment of the militant bishops, the issue ended in compromise. The Emperor’s comment was that the new arrangements would “be wise until Brazil has come of age.” A far more laudable action on the part of Dom Pedro II was the gradual abolition of slavery, initiated on a voluntary basis and to be completed by the end of the century. The nation must have decided to “come of age” in 1889 when the colorless, self-leveled monarchy was easily overthrown, a Republic declared, and the “positivist slogan Ordem e Progresso” replaced the Imperial Arms on the Brazilian flag.”

Freyre insists that the Republic was a victory for the “right-wing.” It was far more authoritarian than the Empire and granted the Army a more prominent position. Yet the curiosity is that the “white bourgeois minority” that effected the transition was formed of sociological positivists who had sought the support of irate former slave owners. A further irony is that the former slaves formed the “Black Guard” and fought valiantly against the Army in defense of the monarchy that had given them liberty. Within two decades, however, positivism was passé, and anti-clericalism had dwindled: “the Republic had ceased to be merely a present and developed a past.” It had “blended with monarchy forming a single history: a Brazilian history.”

There is no doubt that, all things considered, Brazil is a stable country, resilient to alteration and crisis. Brought into history by sociologically Christo-centered colonizing efforts, governed by a benevolent patriarchal structure and crowned with a monarchy of its own, Brazil has carried its tradition uninterrupted into the future. It stands in direct opposition to some of the neighboring Spanish-American nations, who have periodically sought with violence and revenge to eradicate their Hispano-Catholic origins. While these countries have at best an extremely tenuous Catholic life, Brazil is blessed with a far more solid Catholic social orthodoxy, one which has been tolerant yet firm. A country with roots and hierarchy, Brazil has given birth to an aristocratic son, Dom Gilberto de Mello Freyre. This self-confessed Iberian, Western and Brazilian man speaks with confidence, depth and lyricism of his tradition, and has created art upon its foundations.

Elizabeth C. Wilhelmsen
St. Louis, Mo.