

# Recent Interpretations of Race Relations in Brazil

by DONALD B. SMITH

## RÉSUMÉ

Au Brésil, en général, les blancs constituent la classe aisée et les noirs et les métis font partie des classes inférieures. Depuis trente-cinq ans, on offre maintes explications de ce phénomène. Durant les années trente et quarante on a cru que les couches de la société brésilienne n'étaient séparées que par classe. Plus tard, pendant les années cinquante et soixante, des révisionnistes ont découvert, après avoir fait plusieurs études, qu'il y avait des préjugés de race au Brésil. Cet article est une tentative d'exposer et évaluer, les écrits en anglais de ces deux écoles. Pour conclure on va examiner comment, aujourd'hui, au Brésil, les préjugés de race sont bénins.

It is thus still a general rule throughout Brazil that the people of the upper class are almost exclusively Caucasian in appearance, and the majority of the 'people of color' are found in the middle and lower classes. C. Wagley (1952:145)

Various explanations of this phenomenon have been presented in the last forty years. The earliest explanation offered came from Arthur Ramos, Gilberto Freyre and Donald Pierson, who felt that Brazilian society was split on class, not on racial lines. However, in the early 1950's other social scientists questioned their conclusion. While class was a chief determinant of the black and coloured classes' generally inferior position, racial factors were instrumental as well. In the late 1950's historians, in co-operation with the social scientists, began to undermine the traditionally offered explanations of the lack of racial prejudice in Brazil.

This paper represents an attempt using English-language sources, to survey these recent interpretations of Brazilian race

relations. It will examine the tenets of the two "schools"; delve into the controversies over miscegenation, slavery, manumission, and abolition; assess the effect of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization on racial attitudes; probe into the problem of establishing what separation of racial discrimination can be made from that caused by cultural and class differences. My conclusion will sum up the factors which mitigate contemporary racial prejudice in Brazil.

Ramos, Pierson, and Freyre, all writing in the 1930's, were convinced that discrimination in Brazil was based on a class factor alone. If a black or coloured person proved himself able, he could easily ascend the social scale. As Pierson (1942:177) put it: "Individual competence tends to overbalance ethnic origin as a determinant of social status." They granted that dark colour was still identified with lower status and white with that of the upper. Yet all three writers noted that in view of Brazilian history this was only natural. The black temporarily suffered from his original slave status, his relatively disadvantageous position after Emancipation, the consequently restricted opportunities for economic advancement, and the comparatively short period that he had been freed. (Pierson 1942:185)

In spite of the obstacles, he had advanced. In time he would advance further, the three men claimed. Ramos (1939) himself devotes over one-third of his book, *The Negro in Brazil*, to identifying coloured and black figures who had "made it" in the arts, literature, politics, the sciences, and the military. These men had become social whites. Freyre (1963a:423) observed that many whites had become social blacks:

Whites, near whites, and even blond persons — who have come down in the social scale and are today the "poor whites", "the yellows", "the eaters of toads with banana", so despised by those of the lower classes of darker color. Like the majority of the Negroes, the mulattoes, and the darker *caboclos*, they live in shanties, in houses made of straw or thatched with straw like those of Africa; they eat with their fingers out of gourds cut in two, like the Indians and the Negroes; they go barefoot and sleep in hammocks or palm fronds... They use banana leaves instead of plates; their children go naked; their women prefer red dresses like the Indian and Negro women. Men and women of this type of whites prefer witch doctors and forest herbs when they are sick to medicines from a

drugstore or laboratory, others prefer the leader of native cults to the priest.

In the 1950's several social scientists reconsidered the conclusions reached twenty years before. The work of Wagley (1952), Zimmerman (1952), Harris (1952) and Hutchison (1952) in rural Brazil exposed the presence of racial prejudice in all levels of rural society. Morse (1953) and Bastide (1957) in their studies of Sao Paulo unveiled the strong currents of racial discrimination in that city. Some whites might have filtered down to the bottom of the social coffee-pot, but few blacks had percolated up. As Wagley (1952:148) concluded "With rare exceptions, the people of the upper class of Brazil are Caucasian in physical appearance." Admittedly, wealth, occupation, and education, as the earlier writers had noted, were most important for social advancement. But, to these three items the social scientists added a fourth — race. By the mid-1960's, Harris (1964:61) could write:

It has by now been convincingly demonstrated that Negroes throughout Brazil are abstractly regarded as innately inferior in intelligence, honesty, and dependability, that negroid features are universally (even by Negroes themselves) believed to be less desirable, less handsome, or beautiful than caucasoid features; that in most of their evaluations of the Negro as an abstract type, the whites are inclined to deride and slander; and that prejudiced stereotyped opinions about people of intermediate physical appearance are also common.

Had there been racial prejudice in Brazil in the past? Why did it exist? Freyre denies that the Portuguese, "the most pliable and plastic of European types (1963b:408), exercised racial prejudice in the "Luso-tropical communities (1961)," the areas of Portuguese settlement. They were free of "a feeling or consciousness of racial superiority (1963b:193)." Other historians disagree. Boxer (1961:23) concedes to Freyre that the Portuguese did mix more than did other Europeans, and that they had as a rule less colour prejudice. However, they had a colour bias at times throughout their Empire; "Their colour problem assumed different forms at different times and places, as it has done with those other European nations who followed in the wake of Lusitanian navigators to the tropics." (Boxer 1961:14)

Boxer (1963:56) also observes that one race cannot systematically enslave members of another on a large scale for over

three centuries without acquiring a conscious or unconscious feeling of racial superiority. Referring to a 1764 pamphlet published in Lisbon, Boxer (1964) states that the great number of Portuguese in the eighteenth century felt that the black was born to serve the whites and that the latter could do what they liked with them. He adds that the allegations made by the anonymous author concerning the ill-treatment of negro slaves in colonial Brazil are "amply borne out by the testimony of reliable and contemporary observers, as I have shown elsewhere." As for the "Luso-tropical community", Duffy (1962) has torpedoed the legend of a happy multi-racial society in Angola and Mozambique.

The widespread miscegenation in Brazil is offered by Freyre (1922) as proof of the lack of racial prejudice in Brazil. One fact on which all agree is that miscegenation certainly was widespread. By 1847 there were over one million coloured persons out of a total population of seven million. Pierson questions Freyre's assumption that miscegenation was a sign of the lack of racial prejudice. It took place in the southern United States, in South Africa, and in India. "Miscegenation and interracial marriage are perhaps always incidental to the expansion of a racial frontier." (Pierson 1942:115) There was a scarcity of white women in colonial Brazil's early days. It did not follow from their readiness to mate with coloured women that the Portuguese male had no racial prejudice. The force of Harris' (1946:68) objection to the Freyre interpretation makes it worth quoting;

It is time that grown men stopped talking about racially prejudiced sexuality. In general, when human beings have the power, the opportunity and the need they will mate with members of the opposite sex regardless of color or identity of grandfather.

But the most devastating critic of Freyre is Bastide (1962:11). He violently rejects his theory of miscegenation on these grounds:

Now if miscegenation were to take place in the form of marriage, and thus in mutual respect and equality between the sexes, it would indeed show an absence of racial prejudice. But as it is practised it effectively reduces a whole race to the level of prostitutes. For just as the middle classes of Europe created prostitution in order to shield their daughters from the lubricity of the male, so the whites spare their own women by channelling their desire towards the condemned race. So that behind the

institution of prostitution in the West: the defence of one group considered as superior, and therefore untouchable, to the detriment of another racial or social group.

Freyre advances the mildness of the slave system in Brazil as the second proof of the lack of racial feeling in the colony. Tannenbaum and Pierson concur with him. However, since Tannenbaum (1947) bases his observations chiefly on Freyre's conclusions, he need not concern us. As for Pierson (1942:80), he does confess that slavery in Brazil was both "mild and severe." The weakness in Freyre's argument is that his remarks on the slave system in Brazil are almost completely restricted to the condition of the household slave. He had the easiest life of all — which still was not saying too much. Of the slaves in the mining areas, Ramos (1939) records;

The number of instruments of torture employed were numerous and profoundly odious. They recall the most inhuman aspects of the whole system of slavery... undernourished, ill-treated and the victim of the most severe penalties, the Negro degenerated physically. Sickness and death were the consequences of these conditions... this was in large part the reason for the belief in the inferiority of the Negro and the mulatto when in fact it was no more than the consequence of over-work, carried out under the most unfavorable conditions, and accompanied by an inadequate hygiene and faulty nutrition.

Stein (1957:134) quotes a description of a Parahyba Valley planter published shortly before the abolition of slavery. It presents well the attitude toward the plantation slave;

Though a planter might be capable of displaying compassion and pity for whites, toward his slaves he was "harsh and very cruel" for he refused to see in them the "nature and dignity of men". The slave was little more than an animated object, a tool, an instrument, a machine.

As for the freed slaves and their descendants, of whom there were large and gradually increasing numbers, they were better off than slaves in most ways, but they were still discriminated against in law. They enjoyed fewer privileges than their white fellow citizens, in that the punishment inflicted on them was usually more severe for an identical offence (Boxer 1961:18). In 1933, Freyre (1963b:409) stated that "the Portuguese and Brazilian tendency was always in the direction of favoring in so far as possible the Negro's social ascent." The historical and

sociological evidence which has come to light since 1933 proves the contrary.<sup>1</sup>

The high degree of manumission and the bloodless achievement of abolition are cited by not only Freyre but also Ramos and Pierson as evidence of the Brazilian's lack of racial prejudice. Manumission was higher in Brazil than in other slave societies, but as Harris points out this should not lead us to accept what Freyre (1961:283) calls "Portuguese benignity." The plantation system of Brazil had prevented the development early in colonial times of a white class of small-scale European farmers. The slave owners were compelled to create an intermediate free group of half-castes to stand between them and the slaves. There were certain essential economic and military functions for which slave labour was useless and for which no whites were available. (Harris 1964:87).

Likewise, abolition has been misinterpreted. One is left with the general impression that the Brazilian Parliament declared the law freeing the slaves in response to humanitarian sentiments, and to the pressure of public opinion aroused by a propaganda campaign ably directed by a handful of abolitionists. (Graham 1966:123) More recent accounts have stressed the role of self-interested groups: the slaves themselves who ran away (Ramos 1939:71-79); the entrepreneurs of the cities who shared an interest in change and "progress" — a belief in a society characterized by social mobility, and an economy dominated by the profit motive. (Graham 1966:128) It was self-interest rather than a quickening of the national conscience that led to the abolition of slavery in Brazil.

In reviewing the past it is not terribly difficult to understand why Pierson, Ramos, and Freyre, ruled out racial prejudice as a factor contributing to the class chasm between black, brown

<sup>1</sup> For a brief outline of Freyre's early life and work, see L. Hanke, "Gilberto Freyre: Brazilian Social Historian" *Quarterly Journal of Inter-American Relations*, I (1939), pp. 23-44; reprinted in *Latin American Civilization* ed. by H. Bierck. The very short article by S. Stein, "Freyre's Brazil Revisited" *HAHR*, XLI (1961), pp. 111-114, underlines Freyre's reluctance in the 1950's and 60's to modify the racial hypotheses he formulated in the 30's.

and white... The 'traditional' racial relations of the pre-industrialized, pre-urbanized Brazil were basically paternal. As Bastide (1965:14) explains, it was precisely because they did not constitute a danger to the traditional social structure, because they did not threaten the whites' status, that the latter did not feel fear, resentment or frustration towards black and coloured people. Yet racial prejudice was latent.

Large scale industrialization and urbanization in the great metropolises of the South have brought about changes in the traditional attitudes and behaviour. In an industrial and urbanized context the races compete: the negro is pulled into the productive circuit; the barriers of race are shattered; there is vertical social mobility of educated negroes; and finally, a small black and coloured middle class emerges (Bastide 1965:18). From the vantage point of the 1930's these trends were probably not yet apparent. As Pierson (1955:460-461) pointed out, industrialization and with it urbanization have only been intensified in the last two decades. Now that the blacks and coloured form a competitive group, racial prejudices have been activated.

What about the influence of immigration? Have the over four million immigrants who came to Brazil chiefly between the years 1887 and 1934<sup>2</sup>, influenced Brazilian racial attitudes? Marshall (1966:119) observes that; "These new Brazilians, the descendants of the Spaniards, the Germans, or the Italians, will not as a rule marry even a mulatto." Lowrie (1939:697) commented on the "New Brazilian's" almost total avoidance for marriage purposes of persons of coloured blood. The majority of Japanese in Brazil, Tigner (1961:529) has remarked, "were vigorously opposed to intermarriage." Lynn Smith (1963:134) writes that the Germans in Brazil have retained a feeling of racial superiority. Today after reproducing at a very rapid rate they have blanketed much of southern Brazil with people of Teutonic stock and German

<sup>2</sup> Prior to 1887 immigration to Brazil had been a "mere trickle". Since 1934, it has been restricted by a quota system. The immigration flood came between the years 1887 and 1934.

Lynn Smith, *Brazil, People and Institutions*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1963, p. 118.

culture. Thus, they have spread their racial attitudes across the south.

Pierson (1955:461) suggests that immigrants may have brought into Brazil racial conceptions and attitudes different from those developed during the colonial period, and may have diffused them to some extent among the original population. Bastide (1965: 13) disputes this. He states that the immigrants are all racially prejudiced. He feels that this fact should not surprise anyone — for the immigrants have merely assimilated the Portuguese-Brazilian mentality.

One writer who fails to state or to infer that the “new Brazilians” have racial prejudice is Freyre (1963a). At the beginning of the century Portuguese and Italian immigrants were “shacking up” with Black or mulato women all over Brazil. Hence Freyre comments they had no sexual repugnance for black and coloured women. But one asks if they had any prejudice towards them. If they regarded them as equals would they not have married them? In short, the immigrants had racial prejudice. The debate concerns whether they imported or assimilated that prejudice.

This essay would give a false impression if it insinuated that all discrimination in Brazil is on a racial or a class line. Warren (1965) has commented that the race-class explanation is inadequate. There is cultural prejudice as well. Brazilians have long classed their citizens according to the way they practised their Christian religion — they have distinguished between European and non-European Catholicism. Black religions and cults are not the only form of cultural expression which has survived in Brazil (Ramos 1939:94). The number of folklore survivals is extremely large. As long as these variations exist, the participants expose themselves to cultural discrimination. Thus, the researcher’s task is most complicated for he must distinguish between cultural, class and colour discrimination. For as Warren (1965: 213) has observed;

The educated class has retained much of the traditional patriarchal attitude which judged an individual as socially white or Negro, that is as belonging to the upper or lower class, at least as much by his culture, especially the way he conceived and celebrated his religion, as by the



size of his pocketbook, by the kind of labour his ancestors did, or by the colour of his skin

In the paternal society of the slave and the pre-industrial Republic, racial prejudice was latent. Once industrialization and urbanization were in full operation, it became overt. Social scientists made new studies, then altered their diagnosis of the Brazilian racial situation. Historians re-examined miscegenation, slavery, manumission and abolition, to find that racial prejudice had always been present in Brazil. The task of historians, and more particularly of social scientists, was complicated by the fact that a separation of cultural, class and colour discrimination was extremely difficult to make. The influence of the white immigrants in the South remained debatable. They were racially prejudiced like most Brazilians (perhaps in some cases more so), but had they assimilated or brought with them their prejudices?

Race prejudice existed in the colony, the Empire, and the Republic. It exists today. Fortunately, it is perhaps the mildest in the world. The "bleaching process" is producing a whiter population with each generation. This is due to: the immigration of white Europeans, the production of thousands of mulattos by extra-martial intercourse between white males and darker females, and the fact that the children of the white upper classes undoubtedly survive in larger proportions than the children of the lower (darker) classes (Smith 1963:73). Second, in Brazil there is an ambiguity of racial identity. There is a penumbra of semantic confusion concerning the racial identity of Brazilians. There is no descent rule, there is high frequency of "passing". Hence systematic discrimination and segregation is precluded. In order to prevent the numbers of a certain group from voting, enrolling in a school or joining a club, it is indispensable that one have a reliable means of establishing the identity of the persons who are to be discriminated and segregated against — in Brazil this is impossible (Harris 1964b:28). Third, as Bastide (1965:24-25) points out, in the long run industrialization is working towards the production of greater class consciousness. Brazilians are learning through industrial concentration and trade unions that the ties that should bind them are not racial but those of class.

## REFERENCES

- AZEVEDO, T. DE  
 1961 Italian colonization in Southern Brazil. *Anthropological Quarterly* 34: 60-68.
- BASTIDE, R.  
 1957 Stereotypes, norms and interracial behaviour in Sao Paulo, Brazil. *American Sociological Review* 22: 689-694.  
 1963 Dusky Venus, Blanck Apollo. *Race* 3: 10-18.  
 1965 The development of race relations in Brazil. *In* *Industrialization and race relations*. Guy Hunter, ed. London, Oxford.
- BOXER, C.R.  
 1961 The colour question in the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1825. London, Oxford.  
 1963 Race relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415-1825. London, Oxford.  
 1964 Negro slavery in Brazil: translation and annotation of a Portuguese pamphlet, 1764. *Race* 5: 38-47.
- DUFFY, J.  
 1962 Portugal in Africa. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, Penguin.
- FREYRE, G.  
 1922 Social life in Brazil in the middle of the Nineteenth century. *Hispanic American Historical Review* (HAHR), 5:597-628.  
 1961 Integration of autochthonous races and cultures different from the European culture in the Luso-Tropical community: general aspects of a process. *In* *The Portuguese and the Tropics*. Lisbon, International Congress of the History of Discoveries.  
 1963 a The mansions and the shanties. Translated and edited by Harriet de Onis. New York, Knopf.  
 1963 b The Masters and the slaves. Translated by Samuel Putnam. New York, Knopf.
- GRAHAM, R.  
 1966 Causes for the abolition of Negro slavery in Brazil: An interpretative essay. *HAHR* 56:123-137.
- HANKE, L.  
 1939 Gilberto Freyre: Brazilian social historian. *Quarterly Journal of Inter-American Relations*:23-44.

- HARRIS, M.  
1952 Race relations in Minas Valhas, a community in the Mountain Region of Central Brazil. *In* Race and class in rural Brazil. C. Wagley, ed. Paris, UNESCO.
- 1964 a Patterns of race in the Americas. New York, Walker and Co.  
1964 b Racial identity in Brazil. *Luso-Brazilian Review* 1:21-28.
- HUTCHINSON, H.W.  
1952 Race relations in a rural community of the Bahian Reconcavo. *In* Race and class in Rural Brazil.
- LOWRIE, S.  
1939 Racial and national intermarriage in a Brazilian city. *American Journal of Sociology* 44:684-698.
- MARSHALL, A.  
1966 Brazil. London, Thames and Hudson.
- MORSE, R.  
1953 The Negro in Sao Paulo, Brazil. *Journal of Negro History* 38: 689-694.
- PIERSON, D.  
1942 Negroes in Brazil. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.  
1955 Race relations in Portuguese America. *In* Race Relations in world perspective. A.W. Lind, et. Hawaii, University of Hawaii.
- RAMOS, R.  
1939 The Negro in Brazil. Washington.
- SMITH, L.  
1963 Brazil, people and institutions. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press.
- STEIN, S.  
1957 Vassouras. Cambridge, Harvard.  
1961 Freyre's Brazil revisited. *HAHR*, 41:111-113.
- TANNENBAUM, F.  
1947 Slave and citizen. New York, Knopf.
- TIGNER, J. L.  
1961 Shindo Remmei: Japanese nationalism in Brasil. *HAHR* 41: 515-532.
- WAGLEY, C.  
1952 Race relations in an Amazon community. *In* Race and class in rural Brazil.
- WARREN, D.  
1965 The Negro and religion in Brazil. *Race* 6:199-216.

## ZIMMERMAN, B.

1952 Race relations in an Amazon community. *In* Race and class in rural Brazil.

\* \* \*

1966 Readings in Latin American history. Edited by L. Hanke. New York, Crowell.

1967 Latin American civilization. Edited by H. Bierck. Boston, Allyn and Bacon.