

THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF FLORESTAN FERNANDES¹

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Among studies of Brazilian social thought, a substantial subset has been dedicated to analysing the sociological contribution of Florestan Fernandes (1920-1995). The auspicious critical fortune of diverse aspects of his trajectory can be detected across a wide range of analyses. These aspects can be summarized as: an exploration of the biographical factors that predisposed him to pursue an innovative analytic project, distinct from other approaches prevalent at the time, lending an exceptional singularity to his work; a decisive role in the expansion and modernization of the social sciences in Brazil and Latin America vis-à-vis other experiences; his rigorous application of the principles of the scientific method and, conversely, the prominent role of the university institution in shaping his ideas; a selective dialogue with the intellectual tradition considered in light of the author's creative assimilation of the dominant theories; the importance of his work in terms of creating the emergent academic style and profession of the social scientist; a pioneering development of collectively articulated research projects; the construction of new institutions and procedures in a still restricted university environment; a body of work that provides an innovative sociological contribution to our understanding of Brazil's modernization processes; the influence of his political positions, from the outset, on the selection and problematization of research objects and approaches to the same; an articulation between his research agendas and urgent social

issues. Finally, this vast set of works can be arranged in accordance with the criteria established by the dominant schools, recognizing, of course, that these are not mutually exclusive and include combinations of attributes.

Nonetheless, observed over time, analytic trends can be perceived that trace back to the possibilities contained in his work, predisposing it to formulate responses to questions emerging from present day concerns. Put otherwise, since the questions formulated today themselves emanate from contemporary problems, innovative authors tend to be repositories open to reflection. Florestan Fernandes's distinct trajectory enables his work to be interpreted from the viewpoint of a wide variety of academic, intellectual and political agendas. Generally speaking, it would seem justifiable to point to a certain predominance of political issues ever since the first more systematic interpretations of his trajectory, produced in the wake of Brazil's return to democracy – which exposed the repression unleashed during the military dictatorship, to which the sociologist himself had fallen victim – from the foundation of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores: PT), as well as the widespread participation of the university community and intellectuals in the campaign and subsequent election of Fernandes as a representative to the Chamber of Deputies.² This interpretative tendency persisted over the years and, to a certain extent, eclipsed a more detailed evaluation of the contributions made by the sociologist's opus.

Despite this fact, other studies are located in more distant academic domains and have privileged the treatment of the breadth of his work, very often taking root on the margins of whatever agenda is in vogue. Running between the mid-1980s and the start of the 1990s, the History of Social Sciences in Brazil Project developed in the countercurrent to the essentially politicized arguments of those interpretations, and drew from a variety of supports, privileging institutional aspects, but analysing these through the broad filter of the social history of practitioners and their immersion in multiple conditioning factors (Miceli, 1989; 1995). This project – coordinated by the sociologist Sergio Miceli – has become a benchmark and inspired new research. To a large extent, the project itself and the more recent studies are a product of the institutionalization of postgraduate studies in Brazil, along with the reorganization and differentiation of the Brazilian university system, leading to a renewed interest in disciplinary traditions.³

The process of institutionalization of Brazilian social sciences took place during this period, an outcome of the combination of institutions created to promote research at postgraduate level, based on systematic training, the structured activities of professors-supervisors, research organized in thematic areas, and the selection of common problems and themes. This context fostered the examination of disciplinary traditions for diverse reasons, including the affirmation of scientific identities that mobilized hierarchies and emulated greatness. Irrespective of their motives, the volumes of works on known authors

who ‘explained Brazil,’ the so-called ‘interpreters,’ has been a characteristic feature of the country’s social sciences, reviving the analytic models constructed by them, when not revitalizing the ways in which the problems and themes studied by them are approached. The underlying question, still not adequately pondered, is understanding the reason for the constant return to an agenda selected by authors of the past, inseparable from the formative process of these disciplines themselves, paradoxically intensified at a moment of a pronounced fragmentation of research objects and consequent disciplinary specialization.⁴

Generally speaking, social sciences in Brazil can be said to have become institutionalized by analysing the processes of social change linked to modernization and the construction of modern society, examined from the viewpoint of national development, especially during the 1950s, when these disciplines as a whole became absorbed in the country’s problems – years in which the Brazil pursued “an ideal of the modern marked by progress, by self-improvement and limitless enhancement of the social, and by the orientation of values, interests, conducts and institutions” (Botelho, 2008: 15). This was the decade when Florestan Fernandes’s sociology was constructed and the so-called São Paulo School of Sociology was organized. The school congregated his assistants, whose works affirmed a unique style of producing social sciences in the country (Arruda, 2005b), a period in which a new kind of specialized intellectuality mobilized their ideas for building projects for Brazil, seeking to regenerate the nation from a condemned past (Bastos, 2008). In sum, these were years when people believed in the power of ideas and in the strength of the intelligentsia to produce keenly anticipated changes (Villas Boas, 2006). A belief in the transformative power of ideas and the social use of knowledge.⁵ In this half century, the pace of development in Brazil surpassed all global indices, combined with a less tense political setting, open to participation and disagreement. Brazilian sociology flourished in this soil of freely made promises.

The three most significant ventures in the area – those of the so-called São Paulo School of Sociology at the University of São Paulo, the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB) in Rio de Janeiro, and the nascent course in Sociology and Politics at the Minas Gerais Faculty of Economics – privileged, albeit in distinct ways, the theme of social change and the correlated development as the centre of their concerns. Hence a clear parallel emerged between the prevailing social issues and the research agenda of social scientists, since the pace of transformations in Brazil was unequalled, both in terms of its own past history and at international level. The deeper question for a substantial contingent of the social sciences was to understand how to promote development with social justice, a problematics that mobilized the research agenda, manifested in the theories for overcoming Brazil’s underdevelopment and its peripheral condition, implying the rejection of imperialism and the overcoming of dependency, questions posed in a different way in the following period.

The 1964 political coup d'état rejected the democratic, socially advanced proposals for national autonomy, and redirected the agenda towards diverse expressions of modernization. Indeed the first years of military government were of intense economic growth and the affirmation of the modern lifestyle, especially in the big cities. Development persisted as an ideal, but eschewing the democratic causes, absent from the path taken by conservative modernization in general.⁶ The decisive crisis of the so-called developmentalist State occurred, however, especially after 1980, during the final military government of João Figueiredo, and indeed lay at the root of the regime's impasses. The themes linked to the development and social change lost ground on the research agenda of the social sciences and also declined in importance in the hierarchy of studied topics, almost to the point of disappearing. In this scenario, the works on development and social change ceased to possess the legitimacy needed to build academically prestigious positions. The national-developmental ideal was very often understood as mere ideology, as an illusion of intellectual demiurges.

The question returned, though, in transversal form, whether through the multiple studies on modernization and modern culture, or through the consideration of authors who had devoted themselves to the issue in the past, symptoms of the persistence of a certain malaise. In sum, a manifestation of the change in research agenda. The persistence, albeit in oblique form, of themes that appeared to have been abandoned for good elucidates the trajectory of Brazil's history throughout most of the twentieth century. A history that struggled to deal with the problems inherent to the constitution of modern society in the country. A history of the altering conceptions of Brazilian intellectuals concerning the viability of the modern in the country, palpable in the shift from Euclides da Cunha's vision of the incompleteness of the country's social reality, a result of the "tumultuous dynamism of an inchoate nation," (Nascimento, 2010)⁷ to the vision of Mário Pedrosa (1998: 413): from those banished by civilization to those "condemned to the modern." It remains to determine what the modality of the modern is, as the current crisis clearly illustrates and with it the impasses of the so-called lefts, which has resulted in the reversal of progressive and socially advanced programs.⁸

In this scenario, primarily political works on the intellectual trajectory and work of Florestan Fernandes have tended to recede. In part this is because the orientations that mobilized them have been thrown into question due to the present dilemma in which PT finds itself, as well as the legacy of the Lula and Dilma Rousseff governments, which left their more socially-inclusive projects exposed to critique, allowing regressive proposals to develop. Despite this fact, the present moment would seem favourable for a more balanced appraisal of Florestan Fernandes, enabling a re-evaluation of the significance and extent of his contribution to our understanding of this 'Brazil enigma' – the slippages in relation to modern civilizing principles, or, in the sociologist's terms, the dramas of the country's history.

Seen in the context of the research agenda of the social sciences focused on cultural phenomena, or studies of social thought, Fernandes's intellectual legacy is highly pertinent in terms of framing views that point to a decline in the strength – for some, the surpassing – of those works identified with the so-called paradigm of national formation, which produced the most pungent analyses of Brazil's specificities. The sociologist's thought serves as a point of equilibrium, since it shares and at the same time distinguishes itself from the characteristics of this intellectual lineage (Arruda, 2017). It converges insofar as the central problem relates to the inquiries into the trajectory of Brazil's modernizing process and its modalities of affirming modern culture. It diverges, though, due to the form in which its language is constituted, as well as the particularities of the discourse. In both cases, an image of Brazil is formed, combined with a desire to overcome the country's impasses while expressing the condition of intellectuals in peripheral contexts. Overall, the history of the nation can be accompanied in the transition to the modern.

In this context, rethinking dimensions of Florestan Fernandes's work in the intersecting of the texts on 'formation,' certain interpretive proposals originating from the so-called sociology of culture and studies of social thought, allows us to revisit the sociologist's dense reflection from a new angle. It is not a question of producing one more interpretation of his trajectory, nor of highlighting his distinctive attributes, so frequently found in outstanding authors. Rather the aim is to reflect on the innumerable suggestions present in his work – sometimes dispersed in the writings as a whole – that allow cultural phenomena to be considered in the constitution of the principles inherent to the modern frameworks of values within dependent and peripheral societies.⁹ Moreover, the immediately political and singular interpretations end up obscuring the significance of Florestan Fernandes's contribution to understanding Brazil, subsuming it to the activist agenda and the exceptional trajectory.

The proposal here is that reappraising Florestan Fernandes through the filter of the crisis of contemporary Brazil and through an interpretation explored via the sociology of culture and Brazilian social thought can elucidate questions intrinsic to the present moment.¹⁰ I am thinking, especially, of the incapacity of the current Brazilian executive and legislature to solve the country's problems – or at least consider them in light of the social demands – leading to paralysis and reproducing the impasses. Put otherwise, a clear discrepancy can be perceived between the political culture of most of the country's leaders, including here the dominant classes and much of the mainstream media, and the dynamic unleashed by the actions for social and educational inclusion implemented primarily under the Lula and Dilma Rousseff governments, a process that brought new actors into public life.

Irrespective of the recognized difficulties of the economy, the consolidation of the changes, while certainly demanding flexibility from the dominant

sectors to accept social demands of a democratic and civilizational kind, especially requires a ruling class with the capacity to embody the role of elites, moving beyond the simple fact of being wealthy.¹¹ Underlying this deeper question is the way in which the relation between the dominant class and power is constituted, as well as the forms of legitimation. In sum, the issue is the particular formation of modern society in Brazil, its culture and its corresponding values. Here another discrepancy can be observed in relation to the constitution of modern culture and, in its wake, the sociology deriving from it.

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As in other peripheral societies, modern culture in Brazil was formed steeped in models formulated in advanced countries, in line with external production. In this setting, intellectuals were led to think according to the canons of advanced economies, though faced with a disheartening reality compared to the foreign reference points. This resulted in the emergence of at least three types of intellectual:¹² the demiurge, who embodies a project for society – in a way, the studies on the formation are the most distinguished lineage of this category; the critic, who ends up projecting another society – in the case of interpretations of Fernandes, this modality was appropriated under the category of the Marxist and the militant; and finally the *estrangeirado*, the foreign-like, a rarer species in Brazil. It is interesting to note that over his career, Florestan Fernandes embodied the three types of intellectual, very often simultaneously, although there were oscillations generated by the circumstances of his trajectory, revealing the complexity of his thought.

Seen from this perspective, a number of variations can be perceived over the course of his intellectual life. The assertion that the central task of the sociologist was to institute the science in the country according to the canons of universality – that is, according to the advanced theories conceived abroad – characterized his writings in this period: “We should not forget that we were in the 1940s and 1950s and what was essential, therefore, was to construct Sociology as an empirical science” (Fernandes, 1975b: 12). Hence the absorption of diverse theoretical-methodological contributions and taking inspiration from different theories; Fernandes claimed that he had no theoretical preconceptions: “We should exorcize neither the word *function*, nor the causal analysis resulting from structural-functional interpretative frameworks. They are instrumental. What should be exorcized is a naturalist conception of Social Sciences: this is the rub of the question” (Fernandes, 1975b: 56). Or again: “It was not a matter of seeing Marx in terms of the dogmatisms of a political school. Marx emerged directly from his texts and their theoretical impact in Sociology” (Fernandes, 1975b: 14). Or, in other words, it was crucial to work at the level of theoretical constructions, distinguishing the principles of the analysis from their political repercussions. Even at the end of the decade, when Fernandes

slowly began to review certain positions, he expressed caution about any unmediated application of knowledge to social issues, since he adhered to the research protocols derived from rigorous conceptions of knowledge, whose application is intrinsic, he argued, to the very nature of science. Specialist sociologists, in Fernandes's view, would be able to mobilize the results of their research to alter systems of relations, based on new discoveries forged in the confrontation with social issues.

The fundamental problem of sociology in Brazil, therefore, resided in the need to refine the methods inherent to the applied nature of the science, readapting them to the treatment of more heterogenic and less organic societies like Brazil's. His rejection of the forms of knowledge associated with the dominant social movement and his attachment to scientific criteria did not signify, *ipso facto*, disapproval of the intervention initiatives. On the contrary, he held the Chicago School of Sociology in high regard: "Given the analogies between Chicago and São Paulo, and our own proposals to expand sociological inquiry here, the attempt to convert São Paulo into a laboratory (or a special field of work concentrated on the sociologists) attracted the best of my imagination" (Fernandes, 1980: 170). In any event, the sociologist eschewed any self-referential understanding of science.

In this spirit, Florestan Fernandes engaged in a well-known polemic with the ISEB sociologist Alberto Guerreiro Ramos on the nature of science,¹³ an episode illustrative of his adherence to the world of universalized science, according to the abstract principles of knowledge, though this did not imply indifference to the problems of Brazilian society. In sum, it meant reflecting on the reality of the country, based on universal analytic reference points, a trait frequently minimized in many of the innumerable pages written about him. His conceptions, however, draw an essential part of their driving force from Mannheim's sociology¹⁴ – evinced in the significance that he attributed to the role of intellectuals in the life of societies, present in his formulations concerning 'scientific civilization' – also resulted in analyses on the dilemmas of modernization in Brazil. The awareness that Brazil's modern formation was singular did not prevent him, especially over the 1950s, from admitting the real possibility of creating in the country the principles of a modernity rooted in democratic values. In his terms, despite the "transplantation of western civilization to the tropical zone" being "a painful process, full of difficulties and setbacks," constructing modern civilization in the country was viable as long as certain requirements were met, such as the expansion of education and the rational intervention of the social sciences (Fernandes, 1974: 311). Fernandes worked actively in both fields, using his capacity for action to promote democratic access to education at all levels, expressing his staunch commitment to the lower class from which he had come, himself the product of expanding opportunities in the field of education. The belief in the role of science and education as a means to

promote change and civilization attests to the depth of the valorisation of culture as central, whether as a product of the spirit or as symbolic universe.

Nonetheless, his commitment to the advancement of modern society in Brazil presented variations over the course of his academic trajectory, which lasted from 1945 to 1969, spanning from his admission as a professor at USP to his dismissal by the military government. The change that occurred over these years accompanied the dynamic of transformation of Brazilian society during the period, but intensified after the 1964 coup d'état. In *Mudanças sociais no Brasil* (Social changes in Brazil) – a book that combined a set of texts written over the 1950s, especially in the first half – there are sections that clearly affirm modernity and the emergence of a universe of values based on the principles of progress, since he considered the main reference point for the vision of “Brazil as a country of the future” to be the city of São Paulo, where “Brazilian society of the scientific and technological era is truly being fashioned” (Fernandes, 1974: 303). In *A integração do negro na sociedade de classes* (The integration of the negro in class society), conceived in the first years of the 1960s, a clear shift occurs in his optimistic vision of Brazil.

His biography, like those of many of other Latin American intellectuals, reproduced the routes and wrong turns taken by Brazilian history on its path towards the construction of modern capitalist society. Like the work of various other social scientists from the continent, such as Gino Germani, in Argentina, whose work embodied “the dilemmas and the interrogations faced by his era,” (Blanco, 2006: 19; see also Neiburg, 1997) Florestan Fernandes’s thought was suffused by the essential problems with which he came into contact over the course of his life. A key moment was in the 1950s, precisely the period that harboured the most diverse promises and demarcated the differences between the public activities of the sociologist and his commitment to science, as can be perceived in the following passage: “undeniably the influxes of the environment in the formation of the Brazilian society are, from diverse aspects, highly constructive. In particular they favour the creation of a more open and refreshing attitude, whether through the possibilities for theoretical synthesis provided by Sociology, or the potential contribution of the Social Sciences in the area of applied knowledge. Nevertheless, they tend to corrupt the equilibrium that needs to exist, in the world of science, between positive causes and the extra-scientific causes of the investigations” (Fernandes, 1958a: 213).

In his book *A integração do negro na sociedade de classes*, a thesis presented to obtain the position of Chair in Sociology, in March 1964, the changes also appear in his analytic approach. An exemplary monograph, the thesis revisited his concerns about the theme of racial relations and discrimination, initiated with UNESCO’s promotion of social research in different regions of Brazil, between 1949 and 1951, and elaborated in partnership with Roger Bastide. The work revealed the maturing of the sociologist’s thought on the process leading to the

constitution of modern Brazil, evident in a more sceptical position concerning the real possibilities for constructing modern civilizing principles in Brazil.

Situating the problematics of the black population in the transition from slave-based society to class-based society, the sociologist analysed racial relations through the prism of the global dynamic of Brazilian modernization, accentuated in the city of São Paulo. The rapid urban transformation that occurred between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth made the inclusion of black and *mulato*¹⁵ populations in the urban lifestyle impossible: either they lacked the resources to compete with immigrants, or, to use Fernandes's terminology, the heteronomy present in the 'caste situation' prevented the black population from assimilating the potentialities offered by the 'class situation.' The outcome of this process is the 'structural maladjustment' and 'social disorganisation' typical to the condition of the descendants of Africans, relegated to living in a state of social marginality, proscribed from accessing the conquests of civilization. Prejudice and other expressions of discrimination exerted the function of "maintaining social distance" and reproducing "sociocultural isolation," seeking to ensure the preservation of "archaic social structures."

The intense pace of historical change in São Paulo generated a strong disjunction between social order (more synchronized with the transformations of the economic structure) and racial order (a slower adjustment to changes), remaining as a kind of "residue of the old regime," whose future elimination would come from the "indirect effects of the progressive normalization of the democratic lifestyle and the corresponding social order." These passages make explicit the author's understanding of the singular way in which modern society developed in Brazil, as a complex process and with hybrid results, since, despite the pace of transformation, it suffers from a kind of congenital weakness, compromising all its subsequent development. In this way, analyses of the legacy of slavery would form part of the quest to understand how the foundations of Brazilian society produced obstacles to the full achievement of civilized principles, blocking the path to pure capitalist modernity.

The book's pages are filled with a clear scepticism, given the nature of an exclusionary process, but one that cannot be understood without taking into account the dimensions of a dominant culture resistant to the assimilation of subaltern groups. This compromised the modernization of a country itself lacking the strength to overcome the legacy of the past. The weakness of the modern ended up infusing tradition with the breath of life as they combined, the origin of the future impasses of the nation. With the book *A revolução burguesa no Brasil. Ensaio de interpretação sociológica* (The bourgeois revolution in Brazil. An essay of sociological interpretation) these concepts gave a creative impetus to the work and guided the narrative, leading him to develop categories adequate to the treatment of the problems and barriers typical of societies that have failed to achieve advanced forms of modern civility.

A *revolução burguesa no Brasil* (The bourgeois revolution in Brazil) is fundamental to explaining the sociologist's trajectory. A major work, focused on the analysis of the historical formation of bourgeois society in Brazil from Independence to the repercussions of the 1964 military coup. Full of nuances, this text displays a clear rupture in the author's thought, manifested at the heart of the analysis itself. Written between 1966 and 1974, work on the book was interrupted for around three years, a period in which Fernandes taught at the University of Toronto. From the outset the author explains the way in which he perceives his undertaking: "The reader should understand that the aim was not to produce a work of 'academic Sociology.' On the contrary, the intention was, in the simplest language possible, to summarize the main lines of the evolution of capitalism and class society in Brazil. It comprises a free essay, which could not be written by anyone save a sociologist. But an essay that foregrounds the frustrations and hopes of a militant socialist" (Fernandes, 1975a: 9-10).

Despite its declared intentions, the book is an academic exercise in interpretation, in which the peculiarities of this style are vividly present. Interrogating the meaning of the notions of 'bourgeois,' 'bourgeoisie' and 'bourgeois revolution' in the Brazilian context, it seeks to "establish in preliminary fashion certain questions of heuristic scope" (Fernandes, 1975a: 15). The decisive problem of the work is located in the discussion of the specificity of the construction of class society and bourgeois revolution in Brazil, seen through the lens of the formation of a bourgeois rationality, a bourgeois mentality, that is, an ethics of 'gain,' 'profit' and 'calculated risk.'¹⁶ It is worth adding, an analysis too of the genesis of modern society in Brazil and the development of class society, questions that pervade the first part, dedicated to the study of the process of Independence and the unleashing of the bourgeois revolution. To examine this formative period, the author reviewed the universe of values informing the actions of the agents involved, highlighting the fact that the economic mentality in the colony "was subject to an inevitable distortion" (Fernandes, 1975a: 25). Naturally, the analysis foregrounds psychosocial dimensions in order to characterize the 'bourgeois spirit' – that is, it alludes to the universe of values of the agents and to the non-assimilation of the modern civilizational principles. Conceived from the perspective of the present, the analysis accentuates the pivotal role of culture in the construction of the directions taken by Brazilian modernization, relativizing the interpretations that envisage the central concern of the work to be "pre-eminently economic questions" (Nahoum, 2017: 18-19).¹⁷

For this reason, the construction of national society, based on Independence and liberalism, as a doctrine of action of the 'native elites' is crucial, since it becomes possible, henceforth, to glimpse the emergence of new values orienting action. In other words, liberalism produces "specifically political forms of power organized for profitmaking" and, at least for part of society, demands "free competition" (Fernandes, 1975a: 48). There emerged, therefore, "an area in

which the ‘competitive system’ could coexist and collide with the ‘estate system.’” Liberalism lay at the base of the emergence and structuring of national society, but, as since became mixed with components of earlier history, it was not always able to surpass them (Fernandes, 1975a: 39).¹⁸ Here the specificity of Brazil’s historical formation comes to the fore, allowing him to discuss the problematics of the country’s bourgeois revolution. In his take,

the question is one of [...] determining how the absorption of a structural and dynamic pattern of organizing the economy, society and culture unfolded. Without the universalization of wage labour and the expansion of the competitive social order, how would we organize a market economy on monetary and capitalist bases? It is from this perspective that the ‘bourgeois’ and the ‘revolutionary’ appear on the horizon of sociological analysis. Brazil did not have all the past of Europe, but it was able to reproduce its recent past in a singular form, since this was part of the very process of implanting and developing modern western civilization in Brazil. Speaking of bourgeois revolution, in this sense, involves seeking out the human agents of the large historical-social transformations behind the dissolution of the slave-owner regime and the formation of a class society in Brazil (Fernandes, 1975a: 20).

Centred on the social dynamic of the agents, the reflection seeks to understand “the formation of so-called ‘modern Brazil,’ a cultural flowering of the silent socioeconomic revolution, in which the political revolution would unfold, slowly, over time,” (Fernandes, 1975a: 71) constructing a hybrid identity, composed of disparate traits, which lies at the core of Brazilian history.

The second part of the book – The formation of the competitive social order – comprises a fragment. As the title indicates, the author sets out to understand the formation of the competitive social order in countries, like Brazil, with a colonial history. “In dependent ‘national societies,’ of colonial origin, capitalism is introduced *before* the constitution of the competitive social order. Here the work explores economic, social and political structures elaborated under a colonial regime, only partially and superficially adjusted to capitalist patterns of economic life” (Fernandes, 1975a: 149). The incapacity to overcome the principles inherent to the previous social order, conferred limits to the “competitive style of social life” and to the “rational economic mentality.” It was an urban commercial bourgeoisie, denominated an “intermediary social estate,” (Fernandes, 1975a: 160) which expressed the new social values, but, nonetheless, could not or was incapable of breaking the powerful circle coming from the past.

Here we should emphasize in particular the close connection established, genetically, between substantially conservative social interests and values (or, in other terms: particularist and elitist) and the constitution of the competitive social order. Due to its historical, economic and political roots, it tied the present to the past as though it were an iron chain. While, at a certain historical moment, competition helped quicken the decline and collapse of the caste and estate society, at another moment, it chained the expansion of capitalism to a crude, rigidly particularist and fundamentally autocratic privatism, as though the ‘modern bourgeois’ were reborn from the ashes of the ‘old master’ (Fernandes, 1975a: 167-168).

In this part of the book, Florestan Fernandes formulates the concept of autocracy, a notion derived, but transformed, from patrimonialism, which signifies a privatist relation with power. Irrespective of the political regime, the Brazilian elites appropriated the mechanisms of exercising power, an essential trait of the dynamic of Brazilian capitalism. This differentiates it from patrimonialism, since the latter relies on traditional values as a form of legitimation, while the former is fully effective even in a modern context.

Given that commercial activities, focused on the domestic capitalist market, were incapable of disentangling themselves from the logic that governed the movement of the past, its agents appealed to the same estate-based criteria as the slavery-based order, cultivating a lifestyle similar to that of the agrarian aristocracy (Fernandes, 1975a: 183). The final outcome reflects a society whose barriers prevent the full emergence of a competitive social order and of the criteria inherent to a class structure, with visible and harmful consequences for the construction of “superior social relations” (Fernandes, 1975a: 196-197).

In the third part – Bourgeois revolution and dependent colonialism – are discussed the genesis of the form of dependent capitalist accumulation and the specificity of its realization. Fernandes reiterates the particularity of class structures, the bourgeois world and the bourgeoisie in Brazil. Incapable of gaining autonomy from the oligarchy, fulfilling the tasks typical of their European peers, such as the creation of the nation, and becoming the fundamental agent of transformation, the Brazilian bourgeoisie experienced the historical dilemmas of its class situation. It merged with the retrograde social forces and failed to implement liberal democracy. The State was the backbone of the changes, since the bourgeoisie did not launch the industrialization process. For all these reasons, “dependent capitalism is generally, owing to its very nature, a *difficult capitalism*, which leaves just a few effective alternatives to the bourgeoisies that served it for a time as midwives and nannies. From this viewpoint, the shrinking field of historical action of the bourgeoisie expresses a specific reality, through which bourgeois domination appears as a historical connection not to the ‘national and democratic revolution,’ but rather to the affirmation of autocracy, the mark of our dependent capitalism and the kind of capitalist transformation that it supposes” (Fernandes, 1975a: 214).

The impasses of the bourgeoisie are the dilemmas of a history dependent on the hegemonic centres, whose internal forces are incapable of breaking with the external bonds. The capitalist order collides with outside interference, given its diverse patterns of development that produce, for their part, a solidarity made of opposites. This is why the analysis of the “bourgeois revolution in Brazil comprises the *crisis of the bourgeois power*, which is located in the current era and emerges as a consequence of the transition from competitive capitalism to monopolistic capitalism” (Fernandes, 1975a: 215). And from this moment, the ruptures become manifested with full force. Ruptures that relate to the

progress of the analysis and the categories that inform it. The last two chapters – “Nature and stages of capitalist development” and “The autocratic-bourgeois model of capitalist transformation” – shed light on these changes. They also elucidate a substantial part of his contribution to the understanding of the most recent decades of Brazilian history.

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The scale of the reflections developed in the book, the scope of the period covered and the essay style of the work, especially its consideration of the problem of the historical formation of Brazilian society, allow it to be included in the tradition of fundamental texts on the interpretation of Brazil – a work paradoxically completed at the moment when Florestan Fernandes’s choices had turned away from the university. Even more significantly, it reveals a reversal in his ideas about essays dedicated to exploring the historical formation of the Brazilian nation, since he had previously rejected the essay as a legitimate expression of scientific knowledge, identifying it with the ‘estate form’ of intellectual life. Likewise, he had argued for the incompatibility between scientific sociology and the kind of historical reconstruction typical of essays (Fernandes, 1963: 230; Fernandes, 1958b: 45-46). The author was unable to maintain the same systematic organization of ideas and the same belief in the inadequacy of the essay form for scientific discourse (Arruda, 2015b: 315).

In fact, *A revolução burguesa no Brasil* represents a double breakthrough: it overcomes Florestan Fernandes’s sedimented conceptions of the nature of the scientific style, and it advances the essay form itself, given the character it acquires in the hands of the sociologist. In the broad historical period under consideration – from Brazil’s Independence to the 1970s – the reconstruction of the process of modernizing the nation is infused with a defined critical position. However, the discourse remains that of specialized language, but whose development involves constant ruptures, at the same time as the analytic range becomes heavily distorted, introducing disharmony into the text, the discrepancies of which do not operate in line with the typical form of the essay – that is, as “construction of the deviation in the text and of the text itself as a deviation” (Duarte, 2016: 4-5).

From the formal point of view, however, the book diverges from the classic essay, manifest in the distance between the cultured language of the genre, close to the literary, and the constrained style of the sociologist. Irrespective of the stylistic features, the proposal to explain the conservative modernization instigated by the post-1964 regime was a reformulation of the view of Brazil at the time. The typical questions of the classic essays transmuted and migrated to questions on the real civilizing virtualities and the assertion that the project had failed. Unlike *Raízes do Brasil*, the finest example of the genre, where the initial thesis of exile is ultimately resumed in transformed form through the allusion

to the Faustian pact, *A revolução burguesa* is a singular book more resistant to classification, including due to the fact it can be read as an example of dissolution of the essay on national formation. The renowned scepticism of Sérgio Buarque was transformed into pessimism and the affirmation of Brazil's civilizational tragedy in Florestan Fernandes. However, the book continues to elude classification, since the wide-ranging proposal turned the essay into an unsurpassable language, given the presence of its totalizing vision, and despite the absence of belief in the future. There is a kind of imposition of the essay form when the desire is to produce a sweeping interpretation, revealing the weight of this tradition in the intellectual system in Brazil.

Paradoxically, at the time when Fernandes believed in the civilizing transformation of Brazil, he was averse to the essay. Later, when his view changed concerning the directions assumed by Brazil's modernity, he wrote a work capable of being identified with the genre, revealing the intimacy between the essay form and the treatment of national questions. Equally, it attested to the difficulty of preserving the characteristic model of the essay form at a moment when the so-called national project was coming apart. In other words, the essay writing dominant in Brazil had been modelled on the same movement of valorising the nation's singularities, a repository for reflecting on the viability of modernization in the country as a means of overcoming the country's delayed progress, above all as a modality of exploring the potentialities of the civilizing principles on which the nation would rest. The inaugurated period rejected these beliefs that intermingled in the essays.

With the acceptance of the essay form, Florestan Fernandes deviated from the discursive pattern that he had previously affirmed, without, however, moving away from the sociologically founded and rigorously pursued analyses. From his commitment to the constitution of modern society in the tropics, passing through the observation of the fragile acclimatization of these values in Brazil, to the confirmation of the impossibility of attaining the state of a real civilization in the country, the sociologist travelled a path along which the directions taken by Brazilian history mixed with his own biography and his sociology. In this context it is possible to understand the different ways in which he reflected on the experience of the country in the course of modernization, as well as structuring a body of work that, though presenting ruptures, resulted from a combination of conceptions of knowledge and analyses of the process of building modern society in Brazil, especially in his description of its impasses. For this reason, he transited between the monographic genres, considering them closer to scientific discourse, and the essay form, without, though, ever abandoning the primacy of disciplinary interpretation. Naturally, this movement was suffused with the 'drama' of Brazil's modern formation.

At a moment when the country is singularized by the fragility of its institutions, the blurring of the future and the continued resistance of its lead-

ers to civil transformation, revisiting the work of Florestan Fernandes through the filter of its contribution to understanding the deviations that the defining values of modern culture have taken in Brazilian society allows us both to re-evaluate the conceptions of the country's formation and reveal the distance between intentions and the unforeseen and unusual effects of human action in contexts like Brazil's. It may be precisely here that we can identify his main contribution to a new conception of the formation of modern society in Brazil.

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NOTES

- 1 Many of the observations made in this article are developments of analyses that I have pursued in other texts on Florestan Fernandes.
- 2 The book *O saber militante: ensaios sobre Florestan Fernandes* – the result of a seminar dedicated to the author – contains in-depth analyses on the sociologist’s production and trajectory and is the first more systematic publication on the topic. But despite this fact, the politically-oriented nature of various essays is notable. See D’Incao (1987).
- 3 Other prominent publications dedicated to examining diverse aspects of Florestan Fernandes’s trajectory were published over the same period. See Martinez (1998) and Martins (1998). The book *Ideologia da cultura brasileira (1933-1974)*, by Carlos Guilherme Mota (1977), contains a pioneering portrait of Florestan Fernandes. Collections edited during the same period selected Florestan Fernandes among the analysed authors. See Cohn (1999). Also during the period, the following were published: Soares (1997); Garcia (2002), the result of a doctoral thesis presented in 1997; and Arruda & Garcia (2003). The books by Heloisa Pontes (1998) and Fernanda Areas Peixoto (2000), though dealing with other themes, contain interesting comparative analyses on Florestan Fernandes.
- 4 In an article published in 2004, I called attention to the problem, emphasizing that the set of analyses that produce a sociology of sociology “obliges a return to the same problems, revealing shared frameworks of values” (Arruda, 2004: 116).
- 5 On the intervention project contained in Fernandes’s sociology, see Arruda & Garcia (2003), especially part 2.
- 6 On the repercussions of conservative modernization in the cultural sphere, see Arruda (2015a).
- 7 Among the vast critical literature analysing the positions on the obstacles to the modern in Euclides da Cunha, this book by José Leonardo do Nascimento stands out due to its exploration of the role of scientificism in the constitution of Cunha’s vision of Brazil and his approach to aesthetics.
- 8 A sizeable bibliography exists on the so-called crisis of the left. I shall dispense with discussing it since it lies

outside the scope of the present article. See Martins (2016) and Singer (2012).

- 9 Dimitri C. Fernandes (2017: 102) stresses that despite this potential for the “conceptual self-consciousness imbuing the present-day sociology of culture, a certain confusion or disagreement can also be seen with regard to the handling and comprehension of ‘culture.’” In my view, however, the sociology of culture developed a solid and diversified conceptual framework that allows its practitioners to construct interpretations based on a variety of objects. Furthermore, achieving complete consensus within our disciplines is always highly unlikely.
- 10 Nuances exist among the interpretations originating from the sociology of culture and Brazilian social thought, or among what were denominated contextual and textual analyses. See Maia (2009); Bastos & Botelho (2010). For a nuanced analysis of the question, see Fernandes (2017).
- 11 In a recent interview, the economist Luís Gonzaga de Melo Beluzzo (2017) asserted: “I’m not going to talk about elites because Brazil has no elite. Brazil has the rich, generally uncultured and accustomed to spout nonsense about everything. These were the people responsible for the impeachment [of Dilma Rousseff] [...]. Democracy and the rule of law are not exactly the values preached by those folk who took to the streets in their yellow [football] shirts [...]. Democracy is the regime of the weak. Through it the weak can express themselves [...]. What worries me most is this social arrangement and the manifestation of power of these sectors who feel no connection to the poorest population”.
- 12 Paulo Arantes, in a well-known essay examining the impact of Brazilian intellectual life on the formation of the nation, argues that this problem is linked to the cosmopolitan intellectual in peripheral societies. See Arantes & Arantes (1997: 21).
- 13 The polemic between Florestan Fernandes and Guerreiro Ramos, which erupted during the First Brazilian Sociology Congress, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1955, tends to be treated as a watershed in the history of the social sciences in Brazil, since it reflects diverse positions on the nature of the discipline. While Fernandes called for a scientific

sociology, universal from the viewpoint of its reference points, Guerreiro Ramos advocated a national sociology capable of promoting the self-awareness of nation. See Oliveira (1995); Arruda (2015b: chapter 3); and Jackson & Barboza (2017).

- 14 Karl Mannheim was an important author in Brazil, especially in the 1950s, due to the prominent role that he attributed to intellectuals, as well as to democratic planning. See Mannheim (1963).
- 15 A term for someone of both European and African descent [T.N.].
- 16 The author makes use of Sombart's categories. See Fernandes (1975a: 16).
- 17 I agree, however, with the interpretation of Dimitri C. Fernandes (2017: 117) for whom “the period did not call into question the study of culture by culture, of cultural studies by themselves, or the visualization of the connections between culture and society through a methodology adapted to the object of culture.”
- 18 Florestan Fernandes based his analysis on the ideological and utopian dimensions of liberalism in Karl Mannheim.

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A ATUALIDADE DE FLORESTAN FERNANDES

Resumo

O artigo propõe repensar a obra de Florestan Fernandes no entrecruzamento dos textos sobre a “formação”, de certas referências analíticas oriundas da sociologia da cultura e dos estudos sobre pensamento social brasileiro. Nessa perspectiva, realça as dimensões culturais da produção sociológica do autor, a partir da sua análise sobre a constituição dos valores modernos em sociedades periféricas como a brasileira. Finalmente, revê a sua contribuição no crivo da crise do Brasil contemporâneo, buscando elucidar questões intrínsecas ao nosso tempo.

Palavras-chave

Florestan Fernandes;
crise do Brasil contemporâneo;
formação;
sociologia da cultura;
pensamento social brasileiro.

THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF FLORESTAN FERNANDES

Abstract

The article proposes to rethink the work of Florestan Fernandes at the intersection of the texts on ‘national formation,’ certain analytic references originating from the sociology of culture, and studies of Brazilian social thought. From this perspective, it emphasizes the cultural dimensions of the author’s sociological output, based on his analysis of the constitution of modern values in peripheral societies like Brazil’s. Finally it revisits his contribution through the filter of the crisis of contemporary Brazil, seeking to elucidate questions intrinsic to our own era.

Keywords

Florestan Fernandes;
crisis of contemporary Brazil;
national formation;
sociology of culture;
Brazilian social thought.