

## Florestan Fernandes: Memory and Utopia

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In 1977, in an Italian tavern next to Tavistock Square in London, during a conversation with Prof. Eric J. Hobsbawm on the obstacles to the consolidation of democracy in Brazil, I was so bold as to comment on certain difficulties in understanding this country's ambiguous current history. This great historian smiled discreetly, pointing out that one of the five greatest social scientists and interpreters of our time was Brazilian, namely, Florestan Fernandes, who, at that moment was living in Canada. I started to wonder who the other three interpreters would be....

Today, as the lights of "the age of extremes" go out, I remember this London meeting, which was indeed so important to me at a time when I was reading through essays on the life and work of Florestan, a great teacher, friend and socialist. Florestan was a simple man just like Hobsbawm, just like the much missed Albert Soboul, Joaquim Barradas de Carvalho and Warren Dean. All are leftist intellectuals, great researchers and exceptionally creative writers who helped us place Brazilian studies on the map of today's world.

Florestan was a multifarious intellectual, whose exemplary and conscious trajectory reflects and, at the same time, eclectically questions the political and cultural history of São Paulo, Brazil and Latin America. The "uprooted" Florestan's personal history has solid roots in São Paulo, in a socio-cultural formation of which the new oligarchies and emerging bourgeois classes are composed and reproduced with method and rigor. I don't believe that any other social scientist or writer has reflected so much and so compulsively on their own institutional and political role and on the

significance of their discipline throughout Brazilian history. Indeed, two disciplines, Sociology and History, fascinated the young researcher from the very outset. It may even be said that the constellation known as the “Escola Histórico-Sociológica de São Paulo,” as it is internationally known, was centered on him.

Student and soon master of a new discipline—Sociology—he was called upon in the 1940s—along with his steady partner, Antonio Candido, and at the invitation of his teacher Fernando de Azevedo, one of the founders of the Universidade de São Paulo—to develop new approaches for a society which was then discovered to be “backward” and “archaic”: Brazilian society. Sociology was gaining ground in Brazilian studies with the innovative works of Gilberto Freyre. Nevertheless, although innovative in the 1930s, Freyre’s voice was that of the decadent stately classes; his works were thus, considered groundbreaking only because Brazil was “very much backward”—as Caio Prado Jr. still believed even in the early 1980s.

Florestan quickly performed the role of spokesperson of world visions and values of newly emerging classes, which had only begun to emerge on the national scene. He represented—or rather imagined he was representing based on his own life story—the “dispossessed,” those “from below,” those excluded by Brazilian society, which he defined as an autocratic bourgeois model. Florestan was an impressive man due to his capacity for hard work, his seriousness, and sharpness. In his classic book *A Cultura Brasileira*,<sup>1</sup> the always demanding and straightforward Fernando de Azevedo wrote that Florestan, besides being the greatest intellectual talent he ever met, had a genuine vocation for the social sciences. Again, it was Florestan who in the 1950s and 1960s, in collaboration with Roger Bastide,<sup>2</sup> the innovative and most combative researcher of an avant-garde institution, created the important Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Arts at the Universidade de São Paulo, which, not by chance, was dismembered and devitalized under the military dictatorship established with the 1964 coup d’état.

In the 1970s, with his license withdrawn by the military dictatorship, Florestan deepened his reflection on Brazil and on his condition as a sociologist with socialist leanings. Expelled from the university, he soon discovered the Latin America of Martí and Mariátegui, Pablo González Casanova, Orlando Fals Borda, Moreno Fraginals and Aníbal Quijano, writing two of his most decisive books: *Capitalismo Dependente e Classes Sociais na América Latina* and *Poder e Contrapoder na América Latina*. But he

does not distract his attention from Brazilian history. At the same time he also produced *Circuito Fechado*, an important contribution to understanding the influence of the colonial past. In the United States his main interlocutors were Stanley and Barbara Stein, Charles Wagley, Richard Morse and Warren Dean.

In the 1980s, he himself actually engaged himself in a political party, the “Partido dos Trabalhadores” (“The Workers’ Party”), becoming an active agent of the ups and downs of national political life along with a wide and emerging sector of Brazilian society, the labor world, linked to radical elements of the middle class.

The 1990s began for Florestan with an homage—he was granted the title of doctor *honoris causa* by the Universidade de Coimbra, then celebrating its 700 years of existence, and recognizing him as one of the most important intellectuals of the Luso-Afro-Brazilian world. Towards the end of his life, the son of the Portuguese immigrant D. Maria returned to Portugal to receive the recognition of Coimbra, thanks to its most progressive sector—a sector lead by intellectuals such as the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

The 1990s also found him in a state of serene maturity, busy with the activity of the great socialist public intellectual he turned into, surrounded by friends, his wife Myriam and younger and livelier advisers such as Vladimir Saccheta, Márcia Camargos and Paulo Martinez. Death caught up with him—the verb is fitting—in a phase of total lucidity, aligned with the most significant avant-garde events of Brazil.

The main aim of Florestan’s works was to reveal the profound syntony between theory and praxis. After all, due to his poor childhood, Florestan himself knew well what it meant to live in a peripheral condition—geographically politically and socially. Florestan therefore combined biography and intellectual responsibility as an important researcher. Complex intersections: Florestan was neither a manual worker nor held the means of production or property, thus belonging to none of the so-called fundamental classes. He was neither son nor grandson of oligarchs; nor did he benefit from scholarships or support from national or international foundations; nor did he come from a family of liberal professionals; nor from the class of bureaucrats and/or the military, as did most of his colleagues and pupils.

He was very much a self-made intellectual, quite close in this regard to Anatol Rosenfeld or Maurício Tragtemberg, both of whom did not by mere

chance adopt a certain critical concept of culture as well as São Paulo as their city. At times, Florestan described himself as having an odd *sans-culotte* behavior and his mindset stood somewhere in this foggy region between the mental horizons of the urban *petite bourgeoisie* and those of the proletariat. But he was neither one nor the other. Moreover, he did just about everything in order to earn his living, from being a tailor's assistant to a waiter. In that situation, as an outsider, he cultivated a strategic angle from where he could observe the life of the stately and bureaucratic classes, as well as the variations of some segments of the middle class of which he finally became part.

Florestan grew up in a world in which (as Karl Marx defined in *The German Ideology*) former classes—from which Caio Prado Jr., Sérgio Buarque, Afonso Arinos, Gilberto Freyre come from—lived on familiar terms with future classes; indeed, former classes were part of the future ones or entered into intense conflict with them. Those were classes from which personalities such as his great friend and the great journalist Hermínio Sacchetta belonged or from which important political figures such as Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Luiza Erundina emerged. But his gaze came “from below” and that is why—like Jean-Jacques Rousseau—he was able to detect the foundations upon which the Brazilian autocratic model stands in all of its social dimension. In other words, Florestan could keenly unveil the persistent heritage from the past slavocratic class, both in its network of social relations and in its mentality. A great friend to his friends, filled with a strong sense of genuine *fraternity* (I am thinking of the specific sense in which this term was used in 1793), on more than one occasion I witnessed his rustic and direct style, half *sans-culotte*, half Jacobite and half Rousseauite. On the other hand, he was excellent at imposing the radical combative character he created, apparently unpleasant when he faced his far too conservative, intransigent or reactionary opponents. His logic then would stand up to the immovable and ice-cold Caio Prado Jr., whom he respected over all the other Brazilian intellectuals.

In more recent years, he would get upset when his dense and well-articulated parliamentary speeches as a representative of the “Partido dos Trabalhadores” were not listened to. He would criticize the predominant mediocrity at the National Congress and would even deplore that not even one single conservative, however prepared, like the parliamentarian Roberto Campos, deserved the attention of this audience. “What a waste,” he thought. He thought that major national themes were going unnoticed by

the political class, the press and universities. Furthermore, Florestan, the Member of Parliament, rendered accounts and heeded the suggestions of his electorate like no one else, for he took responsibility as representative of a group, a project, a utopia.

But how does a Florestan Fernandes emerge in a historical and cultural process like ours? In noteworthy texts, written after his death, such as those by Heloísa Rodrigues Fernandes, his daughter and also a sociologist of merit, or by Boris Schnaiderman, an important writer and literary critic, we gathered information about his daily life as an intellectual, his way of working, reading and how he prepared himself to understand the world. I was able to accompany him during a few periods of his life and witnessed the impact of certain readings, such as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, by Milan Kundera, or *Viva o Povo Brasileiro*, by João Ubaldo Ribeiro. Or even, at the end of the 1970s, the serene effect from re-reading Thomas Mann and Proust.

Florestan had a taste for reading, for studying, and for a non-bookish but informed analysis. And intellectually he was bold. He created concepts, combining theories and crossing research from different fields. But one comes to the conclusion that indeed he was a self-made man. He forged himself into a mixed model of an individualist militant and an old-fashioned gentleman, having surely learnt a lot—including “good manners,” let’s say—with his “brother” Antonio Candido, another socialist who even to this day continues to serve as an important reference for new generations.

In this regard, Antonio Candido, through his statements, clarifies the early times of Florestan, the politician, when he comments on the ups and downs of the obscure democratic left and the emergence of the “Partido Socialista Brasileiro,” a party consistent in its ideas but precarious in its actions.<sup>3</sup> Thus, one can understand the orthodoxy and the former controversial “eclecticism” of the São Paulo sociologist, or rather the uniqueness of his concept of socialism. Indeed, the concept of a radical, popular and anti-populist democracy, a concept that makes a world of difference in a country whose political culture is dominated both by the oligarchic interests and populism. It was, so to speak, a São Paulo tailored form of socialism—Florestan was deeply “paulistano,” that is, capable of a rude frankness uttered in simple and direct sentences. At the same time he was an open man, urbane and polite, which was the hallmark of our industrial city, formerly famous for its people’s hospitality—not populist,

may I insist—, but lively and democratic. A hospitality which the sociologist cultivated and which today has become rare, though it is terribly needed.

One can, however, never overemphasize the rare ability at self-criticism Florestan had. Various recent studies evidence courageous corrections of his intellectual trajectory—always within a leftist thought, it is worth stressing—as well as his visceral lack of desire for reconciliation of any type. As it is well-known, this is precisely what is happening today in Brazilian society and this desire for reconciliation at any cost might dangerously tear apart the very political basis of the country. That obviously did not stop him from mingling with personalities different from his own leanings, like Júlio de Mesquita Filho, director of *O Estado de São Paulo*—who during a certain period, at the start of the 1960s, kept weekly contacts with Florestan, at least by telephone.

But to mingle or socialize did not mean to reconcile. Likewise, he accepted companions from the orthodox and even dogmatic left. Again, this did not stop him from criticizing the *mores* indigenous to Brazil (on the right as well as on the left, especially when the latter proved to be simplistic or opportunistic), or, on the contrary, supporting already in the 1950s the leaders of the black, gay or women's movements. Perhaps his pessimism vis-à-vis the action of the generation to which he belonged may have been overdone. At a certain point he described it as "the lost generation," a rather pompous, exaggerated title of a remarkable and well-known essay by him—exaggerated in particular if one looks closely at the following generation, which is very conciliatory.

And lastly, his studies still raise major questions about the ambiguities of the so-called Brazilian culture, this gelatinous octopus whose tentacles point time after time towards conciliation and demobilization, a culture in which civil rights and workers' victories are not consolidated. Five years after his death, the vortex of time and things seems to engulf the memory of Florestan's actions, erasing the outline of his trajectory and shrinking the significance of his battles, many of which stemmed from his individualist militancy or his methodology. As the "scandal fixer" in many a decisive situation, he would not spare even his closest interlocutors, friends or associates, compelling them to forge further ahead in their combats.

Florestan finally saw himself as a battering ram preceding the construction of a democratic order and he knew better than anyone else the difficulties that construction entailed. For it was—and still is—very difficult

for someone who “comes from below” to break out of his political and cultural class—which helps explain the astonishment of those who perchance have succeeded in landing positions in the hierarchies within the current social model.

In sum, Florestan Fernandes can be situated and understood as the supreme conscience of our time. In the field of Human Sciences, he was a creator who supplied the critical flesh of this society, not sparing himself from profound self-criticism—into which at times were dragged his generation and his university colleagues or party mates—but always conferring meaning upon our experiences and our time, criticizing, building, examining, improving, proposing a counter-move, expressing irony. He had the sense of history and of the intense historicity of daily life, in addition to his solid and programmed historiographic readings. From Gibbon to Mantoux, from Dobb and Baran to Faoro, he had an opinion, a sharp comment, based on his reading. In that regard, I would not hesitate to say that he was without exaggeration, the most important and complete character of our intellectual history. And, in a way, he also was a great historian.

What can be said of Florestan’s personal courage? (And mind that this is not an idle issue if one remembers the violence of the military dictatorship established in Brazil in 1964.) I witnessed him in difficult situations, as on that evening of November 1975, shortly after the murder of Wladimir Herzog. At the Dominican Convent, in Rua Caiubi, with Perseu Abramo, José de Souza Martins and others, when we tried to organize the civil society in order to stop the barbarism that was being announced by the increasing violence of the regime, Florestan—the last speaker and certainly the most targeted of us all—laid out a caustic argument, showing how on the crest of the bourgeois revolutions “civil rights” in fact were recognized only in a “minority of equals”... I can’t imagine how we got away unscathed (he, in particular) from that night, on to fresh clashes, departing soon after, when things began to heat up, for a short sojourn in Austin, Texas. There I had, along with my family, the displeasure of running once again into Brazilian right thugs—bravely confronted by the historian and friend of mine Richard Graham—and went on to face cold Toronto and the theoretical clashes with the sociologist Amitai Etzioni.

Of those long and depressing months in Texas, I remember how brilliant was the interdisciplinary colloquium on his recently published *A Revolução Burguesa no Brasil*. The colloquium, organized in collaboration with the

brave Professor Graham, was held with great difficulty, and counted on the participation of Emília Viotti da Costa, Silviano Santiago, the late Alejandro Losada,<sup>4</sup> K. David Jackson, Graham and others. Something of this thought-provoking meeting was preserved, and was published by Moacyr Félix and by the great publisher and man of culture Enio Silveira in the *Encontros da Civilização Brasileira: De Tudo fica um Pouco*.

Of Florestan much has remained, namely a stimulating and diversified work that constitutes an encompassing theory for understanding Brazil. What also remains is a sense of a warm friendship, a general feeling for things in an era where "our modernity" insists on the predominance of "the non-feeling."

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This important book was translated as *Brazilian Culture: An Introduction to the Study of Culture in Brazil*.

<sup>2</sup> Along with Roger Bastide, Fernandes published *Relações Raciais entre Negros e Brancos em São Paulo*.

<sup>3</sup> This constitutes a topic that deserves a study by historians of ideas as well as by political scientists.

<sup>4</sup> On that occasion, Losada drew an interesting parallel between Mariátegui and Florestan.

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