

The Mansions and the Shanties: "The Flesh and the Stone" in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*

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Let us imagine that the reader of this article has never had the privilege of being immersed in *Sobrados e Mucambos* [*The Mansions and the Shanties*], Gilberto Freyre's *magnum opus*, first published in 1936. The title of the book refers to the buildings that characterized Brazilian urban settlements in the nineteenth century. It depicts both the façades of certain architectural models under whose roofs both rich and poor lived, and it also contains vast amounts of information on the Brazilian people of that period. A formidable lens that inspects walls, as well as customs, habits and traditions, Freyre's work nourishes, changes and questions the notions that we might have entertained of an ecstatic eighteenth-century Brazil.

Summarizing *Sobrados e Mucambos*, as well as introducing its author would be what the French have termed a "*vaste programme*." Both book and author are indeed vast, complex as well as compound. In order to reconcile the historian's need for objectivity with the need to reinterpret the past, I have opted to discuss two themes which permeate the whole of the work, namely, the house¹ and the human body,² or the "city" and the "body." After all, they are observatories of the social. Regarding the human body as a social body implies the various forms undertaken by the process of urbanization, and which took place in areas that were, until that time, agricultural and rural. The presence of these themes in Freyre provides evidence of his outstanding modernity, of his capacity to be ahead of his time and to further new approaches and new objectives. Haven't the "flesh" and the "stone" been a recent topic of investigation among American scholars?³

However, the reader might ask against what backdrop the relationships between the body and the city may be understood. This is the relationship between patriarchs and female owners of *sobrados*,⁴ viscounts and barons, the educated and artisans, merchants, sailors, peddlers, fruit and vegetable store owners, pastry makers, salespeople, mulattoes and free blacks, on the one hand, and the mansions, the clay and thatched houses, shanties, squares, streets, churches, markets and quays, on the other. According to the author's preface to the third edition, published in 1961, his setting is the slow and relentless transformation from rural patriarchy, along with urban development with its myriad of repercussions, "constant elements of existence, as well as norms for co-existence." Such a process, made up of both stable elements and compromises, is that of the "rural patriarchy in decline, as well as its extension in terms of a less inflexible patriarchy of landlords of urban and semi-urban mansions; the development of the cities, the setting up of the Empire, which is, in fact, the formation of Brazilian society."⁵ Alencastro summarizes Freyre's work successfully when he claims that

The Mansions and the Shanties surmounts the barriers of patriarchal intimacy and captures the everyday life of the society at the time of the Brazilian Empire. More than *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933), Freyre's classic work, which stretches out in time and in space, *The Mansions and the Shanties* is closer in its approach to that of an outstanding historical study. It has a well-defined theme based on the knowledge of a specific context; it is also restricted to a specific period in terms of this theme; it contains sources which are compatible with the research topic and the era, i.e., diaries, correspondence, travelers' narratives, newspapers and nineteenth-century university theses. Furthermore, as an unexpected bonus, Freyre resorts to oral history to convey the reported memories of witnesses from the days of the Empire. People of highly varied backgrounds, from former slaves to Joaquim Nabuco's widow, were interviewed in the years between 1920-1930, when the majority of Brazilians still had strong rural links, or when, in his own words, living in apartments was limited to either Rio de Janeiro and to São Paulo, while the rest of the country lived in houses which had been planted in semi-rural urban settlements.⁶

Freyre defines the focus of his study as that of the habitual as opposed to the exceptional. It is on this terrain that Freyre unearths a multidimensional view of historical and social reality. He seeks to articulate its various levels in

order to capture its entire flow. He is constantly at pains to describe its customs, habits, manners, to analyze the economic and social forces that underlie political confrontation, and to rebuild the logical systems of a racially mixed society. He demonstrates a continued interest in what is hidden or is being neglected, the barely visible representations, the objects of everyday life and the path by which those products that modified both biological and social life were exchanged. However, he also studies the way in which urbanization and resulting human behaviors incorporated both tastes and gestures, those phenomena signified rather than signifying, that is, phenomena that have been absorbed and internalized by society. In this way, Freyre studies the history of physical, mental and religious practices.

Let us take as an example his initial chapters, focusing on those cities that had started to gain shape by eliminating single-story buildings, covered with straw and tiles, interspersed here and there with church towers and narrow streets that meandered over hills. Horizontality was substituted for verticality. Wide-windowed houses were built, opening out to bourgeois streets. Planned squares took the place of crossroads where, in earlier days, slaves would get together to chat. Spaces for the slaughter of domestic animals and for the washing of clothes, that is, the drinking troughs, as well as the plots for the grazing of animals and for cutting wood, were reduced or transferred from the city centers to their outskirts. Domestic architecture flourished, thus turning the public thoroughfare into a "slave of the home." However, authorities tended to develop a new attitude towards these streets, now regarded as public, and which, as a result, had to be kept clean. In Recife, for example, urban transport was implemented thanks to the Baron of Mauá. Public services such as street lighting, sidewalks and sewage appeared as part of the urban scenery. The street had become aristocratic, whereas before it was a space for mules, peddlers, slaves and urchins. Over the recently laid stones, coaches, and carriages now transported the characters of this youthful society.

Portuguese economic policy, as Freyre understood it, placed value on both cities and businessmen. Colonial land aristocracy withered when faced with bourgeois and capitalist demands. According to the author, this bourgeoisie consisted of city aristocrats, described as "wearing gold chains around their necks, English top hats, riding expensive transport, eating raisins, figs, plums, drinking Port, their daughters wearing French fashions to attend concerts at the theaters."⁷ The prototype of the slave master's wife, the *Donas Brites*,

Donas Franciscas, Donas Genebras, the heavy women of wide hips, responsible for culinary knowledge, for the maintenance of the house and the care for the sick, was now outdated. Those women had been the *Iaiás*⁸ in charge of the stability of European civilization in Brazil. The society based on shared food, typical of the dining table of sugar plantations, where guests, travelers and peddlers, plantation overseers and priests, whole families from other sugar plantations sat together, was being abandoned. Freyre, however, goes beyond a mere description of those changes imposed by the decline of a rural world, a faded portrait of the demise of the sugarcane, of sugar itself and of slavery in Brazil, at a time when the country was attempting to keep pace with European capitalism. With the precision of an anatomist, Freyre examines the first signs of this change within a body of data which, today, we would call representations. These representations, it must be said, would be capable of taking on board regional, social and racial features, "often responsible for changing other aspects of the status of the same representations," as the author claimed.⁹

From seemingly fragmented elements, namely physical or psychological behavior, value or symbolic systems, conscious or unconscious motivations, Freyre seeks to reconstitute the historical realities of a recently urbanized country in its totality. His magnifying glass was the human body.

He focused, for example, on the inhabitant of Bahia, who would only move in a slovenly fashion on sedan chairs carried by slaves. He focused on the *gaúcho*, agile and muscular while riding his country horse, as well as on the moving body of the southern ranch owner dancing to *fandango* and on the sway of the Rio mulatto, a freed slave, dancing to the chords of the first *samba*. He described the body of the rich city dweller, who was a regular consumer of goods from abroad, including *petits-pois*, raisins, cod, tea, beer and of "civilized" medicines, such as the *Guilhie* anti-cholera potion or *Le Roy* pills. In contrast, he described the body of the poor, of the country yokel, of the inhabitant of the outskirts of the big city, who sought cures by means of herbs and prayers, regular eaters of pumpkin and *bagres*, a type of fish which was regarded as inferior, popularly known as "old mulatto." Freyre depicted the differences between those who slept on beds, a signal of social refinement, and those who rocked to sleep in hammocks. Social value was linked to those items imported from bourgeois Europe, which gave origin to new life-styles opposed to those which were "rural or even patriarchal." Going to the theater replaced the church service; the sword and the whip

were replaced by the walking stick; the urban mansions and the shanties slowly took the place of the masters' houses and slave compounds. Western society, encapsulated in the upsurge of machines, British assets and French fashions were now, in the nineteenth century, shaping Brazilian image, thus squeezing out habits such as the head massage known as *cafuné*, the hot bath, women's long black hair styles, all leftovers of the Moorish domination over the Iberian Peninsula.

Freyre criticized superficial interpretations which tended to attribute cultural tensions to "class struggles." He was, in fact, a keen observer of what Roger Chartier (1990) later termed "representation struggle."¹⁰ Freyre's analysis of the appropriation that both African-Brazilians and whites made of the image of Saint George, for example, is a fine sample of the use of an interdisciplinary approach to both history and anthropology. In other words, while the white masters made the image of Saint George on horseback an icon of social conservatism, because it pointed towards the domination of elites who rode horses over the inferior layers of society, the "blacks, in contrast, who were less peaceful and did not conform to their condition of oppressed race," interpreted Saint George as a representation of *Ogum*, the African divinity of war and revenge, a warrior saint who, in the same manner as the catholic saint, carried a sword.¹¹ Freyre deals as brilliantly with the outcome of these representational tensions, namely, the emergence of the educated African-Brazilian, "well-dressed, behaving like gentle folk, turning white for all social matters."¹² This is a kind of snapshot—at the time of the introduction of the daguerreotype in Brazil—of miscegenation, which left the constrained space of the slave compound to settle in the big city.

In *The Mansions and the Shanties*, Freyre transforms public thoroughfares, dwellings and the human body into historical objects, by highlighting the infinite number of combinations involving individuals and the space surrounding them. He does more. In a pioneering manner, he makes an inventory of the mechanisms used by various groups of society in order to appropriate the changing coastal cities. He casts light on places and means of communication as he investigates the exchanges undertaken between the home and the street, and between Brazil and Europe.

As he turns these topics into historical objects, Freyre in no way wishes to reduce them to a single specific and definitive image. His work avoids imposing a watertight and conclusive discourse, thus showing that he is also a pioneer in this respect. In contrast, Freyre teaches us to creep into the

crevices of urban buildings with the help of varying documents. It is these crevices, no more than chinks, which allow us to observe the spasms and paradoxes of historical scholars, to hear either their silent confessions or their wordy discourses. By using varied historical sources, Freyre allows us to visit a coherent object, a live being, that is, the urban space for the practice of activities that are both a system of invention and systems of implicit defense. Such activities, in turn, give rise to aesthetic and emotional practices. Hair styles, clothes, the use of objects, all mirror different sexual behaviors, masculine and feminine ways of appropriation. They also respond both to the frailties and to the economic power of the black, white and mulatto, without ever erasing their differences and harshness. We know that a good historian is the one who exposes the forms and structures of social situations by studying their temporal evolution and underlining their continuities and ruptures. Freyre goes beyond that, as he resuscitates the rhythm of lives long gone and the history of their destinies, their gestures, their uncertainties and their hopes.

Notes

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¹ On this topic, see Freyre, *A Casa Brasileira*, and *Oh! de Casa*.

² This idea was borrowed from Miranda, "Casa, Corpo, Mundo Brasileiro." I would like to thank José Mario Pereira for making me aware of this study.

³ See Sennet, *Flesh and Stone*.

⁴ The word *sobrado* has been correctly translated as "mansion," in the title of Freyre's work, *The Mansions and the Shanties*. However, *sobrado* can also be interpreted as a two-story townhouse, including, as hinted at by the author, its use as a brothel. (Translator's note).

⁵ Freyre, *Sobrados*, vol. 1 xxxiii.

⁶ Alencastro 7.

⁷ Freyre, *Sobrados*, vol. 1 22.

⁸ *Iaiá* was the form of address used by the slaves to refer to the wife of the sugar plantation owner. (Translator's note)

⁹ Freyre, *Sobrados*, vol. 2 369.

¹⁰ See his classic *A História*.

¹¹ Freyre, *Sobrados*, vol. 2 504.

¹² Freyre, *Sobrados*, vol. 2 602.

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