

The Nation's Borders and the Construction of Plural Identities: *Carnivals, Rogues and Heroes*, or Roberto DaMatta and the In-between Place of Brazilian Culture

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Since the Second World War, fundamental changes have occurred in the world which social anthropology inhabits, changes which have affected the object, the ideological support and the organizational basis of social anthropology itself. And in noting these changes we remind ourselves that anthropology does not merely apprehend the world in which it is located, but that the world also determines how anthropology will apprehend it.

Talal Assad (12)

The 1979 publication of *Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis* can today be considered a milestone in the study of social thought in Brazil, regardless of the short amount of time that has since passed. In this work, now in its fifth Brazilian edition, Roberto DaMatta revived Brazil as a subject of anthropological reflection in a complex and original form.¹ As Mariza Peirano noted in her anthropological study of Brazilian anthropology, a doctoral dissertation presented two years after the publication of *Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis*, a shift in the focus of studies of Brazil can be identified after this moment. This transformation could be seen as a shift from a perspective that privileged territorial or class integration to a growing emphasis on cultural integration (Peirano 1981).

In addition, as Vilhena emphasizes when discussing Peirano's work, "if those authors [Roberto DaMatta and Antonio Candido] dealt with subjects that, according to them, defined Brazil as a nation (carnival and literature, respectively), they did it from a relativist and universalist perspective. Thus, they departed from the trend of Brazilian social science introduced by

Florestan Fernandes, in which the emphasis on Brazil as a nation in the form of an 'ultimate totality' to be interpreted led to a growing rejection of foreign theoretical influences" (Vilhena 62).

As DaMatta suggested in the introduction to *Carnavais*, his intention was to "know what makes Brazil, Brazil," or, in other words, "to discuss the roads that make Brazilian society different and unique, although it is equally submitted to certain common social, political, and economic factors, as all other systems" (15). In works published since then, the discussion of these roads and their multiple paths has been DaMatta's main subject of reflection. "A Fábula das Três Raças" (published in *Relativizando*, 1981), *A Casa e a Rua* (1985), *Conta de Mentiroso* (1993), and *Águias, Burros e Borboletas* (1999), can be considered important moments in the development of a body of interpretive work that the author has been completing in his insightful construction of a sociology of the Brazilian dilemma, as he himself points out inspired in Gunnar Myrdal's classic study of race relations in the United States.

According to DaMatta himself, the understanding of Brazilian society through carnival, literature, music, *saudade*,² inflation, violence, and *jogo do bicho*³ is the result of his "faithfulness to a certain style of social anthropology," compounded with an "obsession for Brazilian society" that he has been carefully crafting (*Conta de Mentiroso* 12). Keeping a clearly delineated interpretation of Brazil as a guide, we can follow the development of his work both as an attempt to completely distance itself from any substantive (essentialist) vision of a national identity or of a Brazilian character and as a proposal for understanding the construction of this identity as a process that is undergone by means of a story that Brazilians tell to themselves about themselves.

The reliance on this guide is due to a determination to understand Brazilian reality with the hypothesis that it is constructed through a paradox inherent in its social system. In general terms, this paradox is characterized by the Brazilian social system's reflection of modern values without "abandoning (or resolving) a series of traditional practices (and ideologies)... that continue to reproduce themselves and *relationally* and *hierarchically* govern social life" (*Conta de Mentiroso* 93, author's emphases). In this way, the enticing digression on the fable of the three races that appears in *Relativizando*, in which DaMatta presents his view of the emergence and construction of this paradox in Brazilian history, can be identified as a

privileged example for the understanding of the author's thought. His new book, *Águias, Burros e Borboletas*, published in conjunction with Elena Soárez, should also be consulted. It focuses on the topic of the *jogo do bicho*, a lottery that emerges "at the dawn of the republican era, when the country finally embraces an intensely liberal economic policy" (*Águias* 32).

As DaMatta indicates, "it is as if the modern, individualist, and impersonal nation-state were completely unaware of its personal, relational and charismatic society. Or better said: it is as if the nation-state weren't in the least attuned to the prevailing social practices in society and culture" (*Conta de Mentiroso* 94). Or still yet: "it is as if modern universalism were demanded in public, but particularism continued to function on the personal and private planes" (*Conta de Mentiroso* 160).

This duality, which the author characterizes as the Brazilian dilemma, can be expressed as a group of conflicts that *structurally permeate* the development of national life. In *A Casa e a Rua* (1985), he explicitly posits the principal parameter for considering the literal meaning of this dilemma:

I would say, then, that the secret to a correct interpretation of Brazil is rooted in the possibility of studying that which is located *between* things. It would be through the links and conjunctions that we could better see the oppositions, without unraveling, minimizing, or simply taking them as irreducible. Given that this is a basic teaching of the social anthropology that I practice, I assert that the Brazilian style is defined by an '&,' a thread that distinguishes two entities and simultaneously invents its own space. (21, author's emphasis)

A phenomenon common to all contemporary national societies, the oscillation between universalism and particularism, individualism and wholism, egalitarianism and hierarchy, sociologically expresses the Brazilian dilemma through the unique way it manifests itself in this society.

The consequences and evolution of this dilemma are the primary subject of analysis in the essays collected in *Conta de Mentiroso*. The matter is distilled into a condensed and engaging form in the essay "Da Matriz Cultural da Inflação: Notas sobre Inflação, Sociedade e Cidadania." DaMatta begins with the principle that "inflation cannot be lobotomized without first psychoanalyzing citizenship, or in other words, without first understanding ourselves, and above all, how we traditionally attempt to understand ourselves" (153). The Brazilian dilemma is then gradually revealed in

practices of balanced coexistence between “bourgeois, egalitarian and individualist universalism,” represented by the norms of the street, and the “relational system of personal relations that is its parallel and its opposite” (161), represented by the rules of the home. In a model organized in this way, “the social role of the citizen is the prevailing and official civic currency of the system, but we all know that this currency loses value when the number of citizens increases and citizenship becomes a universal right” (163). The devaluing/demoralizing of the civic currency, instead of overturning the regime, leads to the existence of “other currencies capable of diminishing, compensating for, and making financial losses formidably elastic” (171). As DaMatta notes, in an inflationary system of this kind, the most powerful are those who have the most *monies* and the widest access to all of the currencies. In this way, “it is confirmed that power lies very far from the common man, and very close to he who has the possibility of utilizing many codes and rules” (174).

As a backdrop to this gradual construction of what makes “brazil, Brazil,” it is essential to stress the existence of a position that is sometimes present in an implicit and occasionally explicit way, namely questioning the very history of anthropology in Brazil. Constantly referring to his contemporaries (“his Brazilian colleagues” [*A Casa e a Rua* 10]), to his functional interlocutors (Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and others), and to authors that contemplate the foundations and implications of a writing of (Brazilian?) culture, it could be said that DaMatta positions himself, in the sense of assuming new solutions, new dispositions, and new styles, in relation to the meta-anthropology that has been occurring primarily since the 1980s.

What is clear is that DaMatta, in spite of—and maybe even because of—his conscious conviction that he should or would like to do what he often has called *old-fashioned anthropology*, creates a dialogic text in which multiple voices are summoned to defend their individual ways and to position themselves in relation to the anthropological project. In this polyphony, we can see that the undeniable contemporary relevance of the questions raised in the texts is the fruit of the author’s intentional effort to always stay attuned to anything that might *stir up* his positions. This so-called meta-anthropological production, when taken seriously, as DaMatta does, without reducing the authors and ideas to presumed movements, immediately produces a reaction. Its effect is a rethinking of anthropology in general, and of his anthropology in particular, though it also might be only a way of reaffirming his previous choices from new platforms.

The author's healthy attitude means that we have in front of us a *writing of Brazilian society* that is the fruit of DaMatta's constant dialogue with anthropological production in general and with his own choices in particular. In this way, the already declared loyalty to a certain style of social anthropology is gradually manifested: "It is the category that leads to a sharp awareness of feeling, not to its opposite" (*Conta de Mentiroso* 21); or still, "the universal is not opposed to the particular, but complements and illuminates it. The contrary is equally true" (*Conta de Mentiroso* 27).

Much like his other works, this book can also be understood by the initial motivation to understand (Brazilian) society as a *totalized entity* (or through a totalizing analysis). The essay on anthropology and literature published in *Conta de Mentiroso*, clarifies much about the relationship between the *totalized entity* and DaMatta's work in a general way:

To discover that a society can be invoked through many voices, perspectives, or texts does not mean that it can't have an integrated view of itself, and that, for this same reason, it hasn't established ways of speaking about itself that it considers the most adequate and correct. It is society that establishes the 'clearest' and most legitimate ways of speaking about itself! (37)

It is left to the analyst to identify these as well as understand them.

It seems that DaMatta accomplishes exactly this, seeking to reveal the dynamics of the constant and complex construction of Brazilian identity, either through literary texts taken as ethnographies or through the description, testing, and analysis of society as a text. Through death, women, citizenship, health, carnival music, the representation of nature, tradition, the cultural origins of inflation, discourses on violence and the *jogo do bicho*, all that might appear disjointed when seen with a dualistic logic—in which truth and lies are separate in an apparently neutral and unequivocal way—emerges in an integrated and at the same time, polysemic form: "the problem... is not 'to discover' that things are out of place, but to understand their place" (*Conta de Mentiroso* 134).

In the relationship that is established between the ethnographic task and the possibility of understanding that a totalizing analysis would enable, DaMatta directs us to respond as Nietzsche would:

Hence, what is truth? A mobile battalion of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, basically, a sum of human relations that have been poetically

and rhetorically emphasized, transposed, decorated, and that, after long use, now appear solid, canonical and obligatory to a people. Truths are illusions that have been forgotten as such, metaphors that were worn out and lost perceptible force, coins that lost their faces and are now only considered metal, and no longer coins. (56)

In the Brazilian case, this understanding requires a critique of the uses and abuses of dualistic readings of a social logic that, as DaMatta proposes, should be perceived as triadic, complementary, and hierarchical. This is the logic of the character-metaphor of Dona Flor, which DaMatta explores in *A Casa e a Rua*, the logic of feminine Brazil (108) and the logic that highlights the ambiguous and the intermediary in the creation of cultural borders and in-between spaces of the nation (a space of negotiation between identities and differences) and that, as DaMatta emphasizes, suggests another interpretive possibility that is “the key to sociologically understanding Brazil and, by extension, Latin America and the so-called ‘Ibero-Latin tradition’” (*Conta de Mentiroso* 146-47).

To conclude these notes on the writing of an anthropology that DaMatta seems to propose, I reproduce a story told by Fernando Pessoa that appears as an epigraph in *Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis*:

Today on the street I encountered separately two friends of mine who had argued with each other. Each one told me the story of the reason they had gotten angry with each other. Each one told me the truth. Each one told me his reasons. They were both right. It was not that one of them saw one thing and the other, another thing, or that one saw one side of things and the other, another. No: each one saw things exactly as they had happened, each one with an identical criterion, but each one saw something different, and each one, therefore, was right. I was confused by this dual existence of truth.

Notes

¹ *Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis* was published in English as *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma*.

² A type of longing that is considered typically Brazilian. When Brazilians miss someone or something, they have *saudade* for it. (Translator's note)

³ An “illicit” type of lottery that is extensively played by Brazilians. (Translator's note)

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