

A Genealogy of Black Organizing in Brazil

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Abstract

This article argues that the vast literature on “new social movements” misrepresents the historicity of identity-based organization in Latin America. Such organizing is indeed much older than the literature suggests. To prove this argument, I provide a genealogy of black, identity-based organizing in Brazil. This genealogy makes clear that black organizing started when Africans first arrived in Brazil. To explain the ebbs and flows of this organizing, the theoretical frameworks of Sidney Tarrow and Susan Epstein, who focus on political opportunities and changing repertoires, respectively, prove to be more useful.

Keywords: New Social Movements, Brazil, black organizing, slavery, resistance

Resumo

Uma genealogia de organizações negras no Brasil

Neste artigo argumento que uma vasta literatura sobre os "novos movimentos sociais" falseia a historicidade de organizações baseadas em identidades na América Latina. Organizações que usam identidade como catalisador de mobilização são mais antigas do que esta literatura sugere. Para provar este argumento, apresento uma genealogia de organizações negras no Brasil. Esta genealogia mostra que os negros começaram a se organizar desde quando os primeiros Africanos chegaram ao Brasil. Para explicar os reflexos destas organizações, as teorias de Sidney Tarrow e Susan Epstein, que focalizam as oportunidades políticas e diferentes repertórios de protesto, respectivamente, provam ser mais úteis.

Palavras-chave: Novos movimentos sociais, Brasil, organizações negras; escravidão, resistência.

Resumen

Una genealogía de las organizaciones de negros en Brasil

En este artículo discutimos que una vasta literatura sobre los "nuevos movimientos sociales" falsea la historicidad de organizaciones fundadas en identidades en América Latina. Esas organizaciones son más antiguas del que esta literatura sugiere. Para probar éste argumento, presento una genealogía de organizaciones negras fundadas en identidades en Brasil. Esta genealogía muestra que negros empezaron a organizarse desde que los primeros Africanos llegaron a Brasil. Para explicar los reflexos de las organizaciones, las teorias de Sidney Tarrow

y Susan Epstein que enfocan las oportunidades políticas y diferentes repertorios de protesta, respectivamente, prueban ser mas útiles.

Palabras-llave: Nuevos movimientos sociales, Brasil, organizaciones negras; esclavitud, resistencia.

Introduction

According to Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar (1998), “new social movements” emerged and spread all over Latin America and Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s. These authors echoed the finding of Johnston and Klandermans (1995), Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield (1994), Melucci (1996), and McAdam (1996) who had studied new social movements in other regions and countries. The novelty of these movements, they argue, lied in their critique of their own society’s values and goals and in their focus on identity. According to these authors, new social movements often stress solidarity, ecology, and libertarian values and challenge mainstream economic growth theories. Dalton (1990) found new social movements overall decentralized, open, and democratic and most new social movement authors highlight their horizontally deluded decision-making and non-bureaucratic organizational structures.¹

In this article, I argue that identity-based social movements in Latin America go back much further. In the case of Brazilian black power movements there is evidence for identity-based mobilization during slavery, as João José Reis (1986) has shown. Hence, the aim of this article is to provide a genealogy of Brazilian black organizing and resistance in order to highlight the historicity of identity-based organizing in that country, which in turn raises important questions about the applicability of the new social movements frameworks for the analysis of Latin American social movements in general. I thus seek to demonstrate that at least for the case of racial identity, the concept of new social movements is misleading. To put it bluntly: there is nothing new about black organizing in Brazil.

Instead of applying the theoretical frameworks of the authors mentioned above, I rely on the frameworks laid out by Sidney Tarrow (1998) and Susan Eckstein (1989). From Tarrow, I borrow the insight that social movements form whenever they encounter political opportunities and I take inspiration from Eckstein, who demonstrates that political organizing to contest power uses different repertoires, depending on what is possible and effective at different times under changing political conditions.

Darien Davis (1999) has already applied these frameworks to explaining why Brazilian black power movements ebbed and rose again at different times in history. In addition, David Covin (2006) has more recently provided an account of the Unified Black Movement (MNU), but his focus on only one organization limits our understanding of black organizing in Brazil. Although Davis applied a less restrictive lens, his discussion remains equally incomplete and the history of black organizing in Brazil remains to be written. This article seeks to offer a small step in that direction. Its main goal, however, is to provide an approach that allows for a more complete capturing of identity-based, black organizing in Brazil. Hence, the main argument I seek to advance here is that in Brazil, black organizing against different forms of oppression, slavery, racism, and discrimination never stopped and that racial solidarity and black group identity are much older than the new social movement theorists have us believe. To the contrary, throughout the long history of black presence in Brazil, Afro-Brazilians and Africans took advantage of whatever opportunity they encountered to resist and organize, thus relying on and forging collective identities.

¹ Dalton, 1990: 11.

Instead, black organizing in Brazil took varying forms throughout history – depending on what form of protest and resistance was possible at a given time. Over the last 500 years the repertoire of black resistance in Brazil thus ranged from sabotage, non-cooperation, running away for short periods of time, running away for extended periods of time, revolt, fighting and sometimes killing their oppressors, and organizing. Although I briefly discuss all these, this article is mostly concerned with identity-based organizing. Black organizing in Brazil, just like all other forms of resistance, took various forms at different times and Brazilian blacks created a broad variety of associations, clubs, and religious orders to oppose their oppressors and contest their oppression. Early on, Brazilian blacks thus found in African religion a form of resistance (Braga, 1995). The Catholic Church also provided a framework that ensured, although limited, protection to organize. Culture and music also provided for outlets, as well as opportunities for organizing and protesting the status quo. Finally, broader and more vehement political organizing arose whenever the Brazilian state allowed for it. At the same time, although the Brazilian state acted as the main institution to rather facilitate or block black political organizing, opportunities at times also were provided above and beyond the state level, namely locally, by permissive slave holders or benevolent local politicians, or internationally by such far-reaching events as the American, the French, and even more importantly the Haitian revolutions and in more recent times, and more recently by the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa, in September of 2001.

Identity-based Social Movements

Many of the authors contributing to the edited volumes of Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (1995), as well as those writing for Sonia Alvarez, Evelyn Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar (1998) have described and explained a shift in both academic approaches, as well as a shift in real-life phenomena towards culture. According to Johnston and Klandermans (1995), “The movement toward cultural analysis was first perceptible in the early 1980s... Gary Fine (1985) noted that small groups produce a culture of their own that shapes the interaction and course of development. Ann Swidler (1986) later comprehensively examined what could and could not be done with cultural analysis, but without specifically addressing social movements. Lofland (1985) sought to classify types of social movement cultures, and in this volume he moves toward the kinds of measures that permit comparison between movements.”² Alberto Melucci (1996), as well as Dalton, Kuechler, and Bürklin (1990), however, applied this framework of identity only to Western industrial societies. Dalton thus says: “The challenge that new movements pose to the political order in Western democracies springs from within... It manifests itself in the proliferation of citizen-interest lobbies and single-issue groups in America, civic associations in France, *Bürgerinitiativen* in West Germany, and citizen-action groups in other industrialized democracies.”³ In the chapter called “The Challenge of New Social Movements,” Dalton, Kuechler, and Bürklin explain how the term “New Social Movements’ (NSM) entered the English research vocabulary as an identifier for this new type of interest organization.”⁴ Along the same lines, Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield (1994) argue that, “a more systematic approach to NSMs requires stronger conceptual development regarding identity, especially if the linkages between the social actor and structural changes characteristic of

² Johnston and Klandermans, 1995:4.

³ Dalton, Kuechler, and Bürklin, in Dalton and Kuechler, 1990:3.

⁴ Dalton, Kuechler, and Bürklin, 1990:4.

postmodern society are to be specified.”⁵ A focus on identity, so goes the reasoning, is what makes the new social movements new.

This focus on identity can be traced back to such authors as Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci. Melucci argues that, “the empirical unit of a social movement should be considered as a result rather than a starting point, a fact to be explained rather than evidence.”⁶ For Melucci, “individuals or subgroups contribute to the formation of a “we” (more or less stable and integrated according to the type of action) by rendering common and laboriously adjusting three orders of orientation: those relating to the ends of the actions (...); those relating to the means (...); and finally those relating to the relationships with the environment (...).”⁷ However, Melucci, who is probably the central proponent of the “new” focus on identity visible in postmodern, western, societies, expresses “dismay” with the fact that the idea of newness has indeed be reified. In his essay “A Strange Kind of Newness: What’s “New” in New Social Movements?” Melucci contends that, “If analysis and research fail to specify the distinctive features of the new movements, we are trapped in arid debate between the supporters and critics of newness.”⁸ To him, the newness of new social movements hinges on structural change typical of advanced western societies that have produced a need among actors to “conduct their search for identity by transforming them into a space where they reappropriate, self-realize, and construct the meaning of what they are and what they do.”⁹ Similarly, David Slater, in his contribution to the same book, quotes Melucci and argues that new social movements “have emerged in many different societies.”¹⁰ Quoting yet another new social movement theorist, Slater further finds that “the possibility of the newness of social movements is circumscribed by a ‘specific rendition of what it means to be political, and of where the political is to be found’ (Walker 1995, 312).”¹¹

Indeed, this reasoning seems adequate and helpful for capturing and explaining the European post-materialistic youth movements emerging during the late 1960s, which are strongly related to the advanced welfare and security such countries as Germany and France were now able to offer.

From there, however, the idea of new social movements swept over to Latin America and was applied to explain identity-based social movements based on race, gender, ethnicity, and certain “post” issue areas in that region of the world. Sonia Alvarez (1998), for example, when writing about the Latin American feminist movement, ponders that, “some of the so-called new social movements that emerged in Latin America over the past two decades – such as the environmental and human rights movements – may have been similarly reconfigured since the late 1980s.”¹² Similarly, in their 1992 edited volume, Arturo Escobar and Sonia Alvarez concluded that, “at the most basic level, social movements must be seen as crucial forces in the democratization of authoritarian social relations. This influence is most evident, of course, in the cases of feminist, gay, and racial/ethnic movements. Several of the studies collected in this volume document the spread of issues and ideas first articulated by social movements into a multiplicity of political and social spaces (see Sternbach et al., Chapter 12; Chinchilla, Chapter 3; see also Jaquette, ed. 1990; Jelin 1990).”¹³ Their follow-up volume entitled *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures. Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*, applies this framework of new social movements to the analysis of Latin American phenomena that took place, according to the authors, during the 1970s and 80s, thus connecting them to European and North

⁵ Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield, 1994:28.

⁶ Melucci in Johnston and Klandermans, 1995:43.

⁷ Melucci in Johnston and Klandermans, 1995:43f.

⁸ Melucci in Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield, 1994:105.

⁹ Melucci in Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield, 1994:101-102.

¹⁰ Slater in Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998:380.

¹¹ Slater in Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998:385.

¹² Alvarez in Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998:316.

¹³ Alvarez and Escobar 1992:326.

American new social movements. The image that emerges from this transfer of analytical frameworks, however, is distorted. Thus, one of the central arguments advanced by several of the new social movement theorists represented in this edited volume is that the cultural movements emerging in Latin America during the late 1970s and early 80s were “identity-based.” Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar “concur with the definition of cultural politics advanced by Jordan and Weedon,” which, among other things, stresses that, “for marginalized and oppressed groups, the construction of new and resistant identities is a key dimension of a wider political struggle to transform society. (1995, 5-5).”¹⁴ Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar all seem to agree that “class, race, and gender” are the new battlegrounds where subaltern groups struggle for the right to have rights and organize in new social movements. In the introduction to the edited volume, they argue that “popular movements, along with feminist, Afro-Latin America, lesbian and gay, and environmental movements, have been instrumental in constructing a new conception of democratic citizenship...”¹⁵ It is this version of new social movements that made it into the American textbooks on Latin American politics. Vanden and Provost, for example, write under the subtitle *Mass Organizations*: “The growth and development of mass organizations also introduced a new category of political actor in the political scene. As suggested previously, powerful indigenous groups like CONAIE in Ecuador or rural groups like the Landless Movement in Brazil have proved themselves capable of mounting major mobilizations and demonstrations on a national basis... Likewise, organizations representing Afro-Latins in countries such as Colombia and Brazil are also developing strong regional and national power bases.”¹⁶

Culture has indeed always been a contested field, especially in highly divided societies, where small groups of elites have been able to define what “culture” should be, thus stigmatizing the cultural expressions of historically marginalized groups and silencing their cultural expressions – especially when these expressions had political content. This element of new social movement theorizing is thus fairly unproblematic and offers helpful insight into the dynamics of subaltern protest and resistance, as demonstrated by the accounts provided e.g. by Kim Butler (1998), Michael Hanchard (1998) and John Burdick (1998), and more recently Reiter (2009). However, the identity component of the new social movement framework does not fit Latin American realities and runs the risk of producing erroneous findings, especially when attributing novelty to identity-based organizing. To support this point, the following discussion will focus on the historicity of black organizing in Brazil and thus present a crucial case, which invalidates the usefulness and veracity of the new social movements framework for Latin American identity-based organizing.

Brazilian Black Power Movements: Struggling against Racism ever since 1530

Black resistance against slavery started as soon as slavery began. To adequately take account of this fact would require a discussion of different forms of resistance against the attempts of slave merchants and traders to capture and buy slaves in African towns and cities; on the way from the African hinterland to the merchants and forts at the coast; and most importantly, during the passage from Africa to the Americas on slave boats – the middle passage. The scope of such a systematic study by far extrapolates the available space, and even the boundaries of the discipline, as it would lead into historiography. Luckily, the available accounts of slavery in Africa and the slave trade allow us to understand that resistance against it was as common as the phenomenon itself.

Joseph Miller (1988), for example, has provided a comprehensive study of the Angolan

¹⁴ Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998:5-6.

¹⁵ Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar in Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998:12.

¹⁶ Vanden and Provost, 2002:214.

slave trade between 1730 and 1830, from which we learn that during the transportation from the places of capture to the African ports, “twenty to over one hundred frightened and angry captives, each ready to flee at the slightest opportunity and all prepared to harm or slay captors who blocked efforts to regain their liberty, presented real dangers.”¹⁷ Once on the slave boat, attempts at resistance and revolt continued. According to Miller (1988), an average slave ship leaving Angola for Brazil transported 400 to 500 captives and had a crew of twenty to twenty-five.¹⁸ The same author tells us that, “against all these odds the slaves occasionally succeeded in mounting revolts.”¹⁹ Mills further explains, that

The rebels sometimes mustered the competence to kill all whites on board and run the ship aground north of Luanda. Most spared a few Europeans to beach the ship for them. In one reported revolt the slaves did not slay their captors but, rather, put them in longboats and left them to make their own way back to the shore; inexplicable magnanimity, as well as considerable nautical skill, must be assumed in these cases.²⁰

None of this is, of course, surprising. Black resistance, like any other resistance, was a direct response to the oppression suffered and it aimed at freedom by any means available. Resistance against oppression required collaboration between different African ethnic groups and was hence only possible based on a minimal sense of collective destiny. Collective identities that were trans-ethnic and thus more “racial” than ethnic thus emerged as early as on the slave ships bringing Africans to the Americas, which allows for the conclusion that the middle passage was indeed the beginning of identity-based social movements in the Americas.

Once slaves arrived on Brazilian soil, this “leitmotif,” did not change. What indeed changed were the strategies of resistance and revolt available to them, as slaves now had to adapt to the new circumstances and opportunities. Among the best documented strategies of black organizing against slavery, oppression, racism, and exclusion during slavery were the creation of *Quilombos*, free communities of runaway slaves, and the 1835 Muslim Revolt, known as the “Male Revolt,” involving the city of Salvador, Bahia and its surrounding plantations. To shed light on the continued resistance and the changing repertoires of black organizing, it is worth looking in some more detail at those two major strategies.

The most known and influential attempt of establishing a Quilombo in Brazil was the “Quilombo of Palmares,” a conglomerate of free, fortified cities in the northeastern hinterland of the current states of Bahia, Pernambuco, Sergipe, and Alagoas. It is difficult to obtain a realistic description of these free cities from the only source available: the accounts of Portuguese and Dutch army members describing what they saw, but did not understand or cared to understand, during the several attempts of destroying Palmares. Available accounts are tainted with the chauvinism of the winner, as well as that of the colonizer and slaveholder. Nevertheless, it is by now broadly accepted that Palmares consisted of several cities, all created around 1630. The Dutch, who controlled this part of Brazil from 1630 to 1645, destroyed the first settlements in 1644, but runaway slaves continued to re-settle in the same region, mostly because of its proximity to the major plantation centers of Olinda and Recife, but also because of the geographical conduciveness of this area, as it facilitated hiding from intruding armies and establishing fortified cities. A detailed description of Palmares was published in 1859, in Rio de Janeiro, in the journal of the newly founded Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute, the *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico do Brasil*, based on the account provided by the Portuguese commander Drummond, who partook in the colonial army’s expedition against

¹⁷ Miller 1988:193f.

¹⁸ Miller 1988:409.

¹⁹ Miller 1988:410.

²⁰ Miller 1988:410.

Palmares during the 1670s.²¹ Furthermore, Alfredo de Carvalho (1902) published a diary written by a soldier who also participated in the Portuguese expedition against Palmares in 1645, under the command of Captain João Blaer.²²

From these accounts, it becomes apparent that what was called Palmares referred to a conglomerate of at least nine free cities, of which the following have been documented: Zambi, Arutirene, Tabocas, Dambrubanga, Subupira, Macaco, Osengá, Amaro, and the Palmares of Antalaquituxe, brother of the leader who resided in Macaco.²³ Macaco was the capital of what has been called a “Federation” by early Brazilian researchers, such as Nina Rodrigues, with more than 1,500 houses and a church. Other cities were smaller, ranging from having 800 houses in Subupira, to one with 220 houses, described in the above-mentioned diary. All cities were fortified and highly organized. Each city had a well-structured government, which include a legislative, a judicial, and an executive branch, with a police force. The leader of the Federation held the title “Zambi.” The sophistication of the internal organization of these cities and their successful regional cooperation and interaction among each other, as well as with surrounding plantations and settlements, led some 18th and 19th century historians to refer to Palmares as a free, “black republic” or a “black state.”²⁴

Palmares was destroyed in 1697, but its mere existence and the complexity of its internal organization allow us to perceive that the creation of free communities and cities was an important and constant strategy of resistance during slavery. According to the Brazilian historian João José Reis (1993), “Quilombos, or runaway slave (maroon) communities, had existed since the beginning of Bahian slavery, and slave rebellions became more frequent in the early nineteenth century.”

The Brazilian state currently recognizes 1,739 Quilombo communities, with an estimated total population of about 2 million.²⁵ Contemporary Quilombo communities are officially termed “Reminiscent Quilombo Communities” and the sheer number in 2008 testifies to their continued importance as a repertoire of resistance against slavery, and discrimination. To many such communities, claiming land rights and maintaining strong community ties are still perceived as efficient tools of resistance and indeed of survival. The “Malungu” Quilombo association of the state of Pará, for example, has the following specific objectives (article 4 of their statute):

- To struggle together with the Quilombo associations and communities for land rights and to monitor the legal process of land title recognition;
- To support the Quilombo associations and communities so that they get to know the complete set of rights that the law provides for them;
- To fight all forms of prejudice and racial discrimination;
- To valorize, promote, stimulate, and disseminate the traditions, culture, and religion of Afro-Brazilians in Quilombo communities, and thus to reconstruct the history of black populations;²⁶

Forming Quilombos must thus be seen as a continuous repertoire of black resistance

²¹ The original title of this account is “Relação das guerras feitas aos Palmares de Pernambuco no tempo do governador D. Pedro de Almeida de 1675 a 1678,” Vol. 22, p.303.

²² Carvalho, Alfredo. 1902. “Diario da viagem do capitão João Blaer aos Palmares em 1645 (a translation from the Dutch “Brieven en Pepieren ui Bresilien), *Revista do Instituto Arqueologico e Geografico Pernambucano*, Vol. X, N. 56, page 87, March

²³ Rodrigues, Nina 1988 [1906]: 74.

²⁴ Sebastião de Rocha Pita. 1730. *Historia da America Portuguesa*.

²⁵ This number comes from the Brazilian “Special Ministry for the Politics of Promoting Racial Equality – SEPPPIR.” News communication from June 4, 2008. Available online at:

http://www.presidencia.gov.br/estrutura_presidencia/sepppir/noticias/ultimas_noticias/asq_lancada

²⁶ My translation. This is not the complete list, but an excerpt. The complete list can be accessed at: http://www.cpis.org.br/comunidades/html/brasil/pa/pa_malungu_estatuto.html.

that focuses on separation from the hegemonic society as the main strategy of survival, both physical and cultural. As such, Quilombism represents a strategy of Black Nationalism that is a genuine New World repertoire to white oppression. This repertoire has inspired black resistance in the New World ever since 1512, when the first free communities of runaway slaves were reported in the Caribbean and it made a late, but massive, entrance into the United States with the Jamaican-born black leader Marcus Garvey.²⁷ The creation of free black republic is not conceivable without the presence of an underlying shared identity. Given that the strategy of resistance chosen by Quilombolas was to remain in the country and create free republics, their identity already was Afro-Brazilian, especially if we contrast this option with the strategy of other former slaves who chose to return to Africa after conquering their freedom.

Separatism and Black Nationalism were, of course, not the only repertoires of black organizing and resistance in the New World and in Brazil. Open revolts and attempts at overthrowing the system were common throughout the colonial New World.

The massive uprising against slavery and its representatives in Hispaniola was merely the most successful, large-scale, and thus widest known among a plethora of similar revolts. In Brazil, an 1835 slave revolt in the city of Salvador failed to overthrow the system, but it still provides evidence of yet another very common repertoire of black organizing in the Americas, namely revolution. In his analysis of this attempted revolution, Brazilian historian João José Reis (1993) reveals that this revolt was masterminded by Haussa slaves (an ethnic group residing in what is now northern Nigeria) and supported by the then dominant African ethnic group in Bahia, the Yorubas. In his detailed account of this event, Reis demonstrates that West African slaves living in Bahia prepared for over one year towards the day of the revolt and had created a variety of organizations to further their ends, most importantly Koran study circles. According to Reis, some distinguished British residents of Salvador hosted these Koran study circles in the backyards of their mansions, thus providing Muslim slaves with the opportunity they needed in order to organize. Explains Reis:

In some cases slaves took advantage of their masters largesse and met in their own quarters, where they received friends and spent time reading and writing. That went on in the house of an Englishman names Stuart. Another Englishmen, Abraham, let his slaves James and Diogo construct a hut on his property. In 1835, thus hut was perhaps the most important Malê community center in Bahia.²⁸

A massive concentration of Yoruba slaves, produced by a belated sugar boom that was caused by Haiti's drop-out from the international sugar market and further facilitated by the lifting of trade restrictions after the Portuguese crown had moved to Brazil in 1808, all provided the basis upon which such a revolt could be envisioned. As Reis demonstrates, in 1835 about 80 percent of Salvador's population was black and although the black population was internally divided, Yorubas were able to establish a cultural hegemony among this population, based on

²⁷ The first Maroon societies were established in the Caribbean as early as 1512, according to the travel report of Sir Francis Drake, reproduced in Eliot, Charles William.1909-14. *Voyages and Travels: Ancient and Modern*. Vol. XXXIII, paragraph 21. Drake's report is available online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/33/34.html>.

In Colombia, the Palenque Maroon society of San Basilio was established around 1600, by a runaway slave called Benkos Bioho and his followership. It was never conquered by the Spanish colonizers and still exists at the same location today (Friedemann 1979:35).

The history of Jamaican maroon societies is well established and documented, reaching back to the mid-17th century. What during the early 20th century came to be know and Black Nationalism in the United States, initiated by the Jamaican black leader Marcus Garvey, thus stands in a long tradition of creating separate free communities, a tradition to which Garvey was certainly well acquainted.

²⁸ Reis 1993:105.

their massive influx during the first half of the 19th century. As Yoruba became the lingua franca among Bahian blacks, language barriers that had long complicated communication were broken down and organizing was facilitated. Increased levels of urbanization provided another element facilitating black organizing during this time, enabling secret encounters in shielded backyards and secret meetings in the houses of free Africans and blacks and in general in the backyards and shadows of the slave-holding society.

According to Reis, the Muslim who masterminded the 1835 revolt in Bahia did not seek to return to Africa, but rather attempted to establish a Bahian Caliphate, a “Bahia for the Africans.”²⁹ To them, Islam provided the social glue able to forge a trans-ethnic and transnational, yet already Brazilian black identity. According to Reis, “Islam was not just a class ideology, not just a slave ideology; it was rather, the ideology of many peoples of non-European civilizations. It confronted the Brazilian master with a full-length portrait of an undivided Other.”³⁰

Pierre Verger (1987) lists a total of ten slave revolts between 1807 and 1830, leading up to the big revolt of 1835 in the state of Bahia alone, but Bahia was not the only state built on slave labor that had erected plantation societies where enslaved and free blacks by far outnumbered whites and there is no reason to believe that Bahia was at all extraordinary in this regard. Slave revolts, just as the formation of free communities and cities, in other words, were common phenomena wherever slavery existed.

Open revolt and revolution must thus be seen as the second major repertoire of black resistance to oppression in the Americas. This strategy was applied wherever political opportunities arose and where slaves and free blacks were able to gather enough resources and build up enough momentum for large-scale uprisings, as the cases of Haiti and Salvador demonstrate.³¹ To be sure, among the facilitating factors in Salvador were the establishment of Yoruba as a lingua franca among slaves of different linguistic background; the proximity created by increased urbanization, which allowed for gatherings and coordination; the opportunities created by lax authorities; and finally the overcoming of internal divisions and the creation of a pan-ethnic, and pan-racial solidarity. This solidarity was crucial for mobilization, as Reis demonstrates. It was also its weakest point, which becomes clear considering that it was a slave from a non-dominant ethnic group (Bantu) that prevented the success of the Malê revolt by alerting the police. In Haiti, according to Dubois (2005), the revolution also became possible when racial divisions between blacks and mulattoes were overcome, allowing for a broad mobilization.

Were opportunities for large-scale rebellion and the creation of free communities were not present and resources for mobilization not readily available, slaves had to resort to other strategies. Given that achieving freedom must be seen as the main goal for slaves, it comes to no surprise that under most circumstances, the achieving of this goal required much cunning and compromise. Seeking manumission and achieving status in white society through mixing with whites or achieving higher-ranking jobs must be seen as the most quotidian strategy of resistance to systematic oppression and exclusion for all those not able to resort to more drastic means. Running away for short, or sometimes extended, periods of time also comprises the rather unspectacular and common strategies of resistance. So does sabotage, as is illustrated, for example by the description of Brazilian sugar plantation life, by the Jesuit Father André João Antonil (1976), first published in 1711. Pierre Verger (1992) has provided an elucidating account of different strategies used by former slaves to achieve their freedom. Among those, the buying of one’s freedom rates salient.

²⁹ Reis 1993:121.

³⁰ Reis 1993:113.

³¹ Dubois, Laurent 2005.

Post Abolition

Once freedom was achieved for all Brazilian slaves (in 1888), Brazilian blacks continued to struggle for their rights and against the racist institutions and attitudes of their white counterparts. According to Butler (1998), who carried out a comparative historical study on post-abolition black organizing in São Paulo and Salvador, the industrialized context in São Paulo allowed for a more political response to exclusion on the side of the excluded Afro-Brazilians in the post-abolitionist time period of 1888 to 1930, whereas the barely industrialized context of poor Bahia led to Afro-Brazilian organizing in the cultural realm. Butler finds that,

Abolition brought a new sense of freedom for Africans and their descendants to fully express themselves and their culture. In so doing on the public streets of Salvador during Carnival, they crossed a tacit boundary, unleashing a floodgate of anger at what was perceived as the Africanization of Bahian culture. White elites, supported by the legal system, government, and armed forces, were determined to stamp out Africanisms, particularly the rapidly growing Candomblé. Despite such opposition, Africans ultimately succeeded in making Salvador the city in the Americas most closely associated with African-based culture in the twentieth century.³²

Butler shows how the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion that is widely practiced in Bahia, along with other cultural activities, such as Carnival, functioned as spaces of resistance for the local black population.³³ According to Butler,

Manifestations of self-determination outside the strictly defined political world of formal parties and electoral processes could nonetheless have had important political repercussions. The most visible ethnic activism on the part of Afro-Bahian collectives between 1888 and 1938 was directed toward the protection of cultural freedoms. These included what became known as the “African” Carnival clubs and the many congregations of Candomblé. The simple act of manifesting African-based cultural forms was a political act of self-determination in that it counteracted the restrictive ideologies of the dominant culture. Viewed in that light, the underlying objectives of Afro-Brazilians did not differ so dramatically in the northeast and the south. Afro-Brazilians viewed abolition as an opportunity to redefine their position in Brazilian society and culture. In both areas, when the promise of freedom fell short, they staked out social spaces to be conquered through collective activism. By so doing, they forced Brazilian society to open its doors to a population of African descent no longer willing to accept the terms of its exclusion.³⁴

Culture and religion both provided for spaces for protest and organizing, where political organizing was just not an option, for several reasons. Not only was political organizing outlawed at times, it was also typically dependent on organizing opportunities provided at the workplace. Given that Brazilian blacks remained marginal at the labor market, their potential for political organizing was severely restricted. Wherever these two factors changed, political organizing followed. In the city of Sao Paulo, with its industrial growth after abolition, blacks found opportunities to organize politically, whenever the states, and even more concretely, the police, did not make it impossible. Examples of early twentieth century black organizing include the *Frente Negra Brasileira*, the “Brazilian Black Front,” which was created in 1931 and had a

³² Butler 1998:169.

³³ Butler 1998:206.

³⁴ Butler 1998:133.

membership of about 200,000 members in 1936 – until the government of Getúlio Vargas started to suppress and finally outlaw the *Frente*.³⁵

When the Vargas regime finally loosened its grip on Brazilian society and initiated a transition to democracy, identity-based black organizations almost immediately took advantage of this opening. One of the most salient organizations created under this climate of political *abertura* (opening) was the *Teatro Experimental do Negro*, the “Experimental Negro Theater,” (TEN) which was co-founded by one of the most important and influential of all Brazilian black activists, Abdias do Nascimento. In 1950, TEN organized the First National Negro Congress, held in Rio de Janeiro.³⁶

In the city of Salvador, the first black political organizations emerged during the times of the “Old Republic,” namely the Typesetter Association of Bahia, created in 1870 and Worker’s Center of Bahia, created 1894, but suppressed by the Vargas regime as of 1930. According to Borges (1992),

Early Brazilian unions had developed out of mutual-aid associations and Catholic brotherhoods, and they retained a strong concern with survivors’ and burial benefits. The leading labor organization in Bahia, the Associação Tipográfica da Bahia and the Centro Operário, were accommodationist unions, the latter particularly close to J.J. Seabra.³⁷

The proto-fascist “Estado Novo” regime, which lasted from 1937 to 1945, vehemently suppressed and streamlined all forms of labor organizing, as well as all associations that focused on ethnic, racial, or otherwise potentially divisive loyalties in the name of an all-embracing, and some might say suffocating, nationalism, projected and sold to the broader public as the only way to be Brazilian, namely to be part of a “Racial Paradise.” However, after the fall of the Vargas regime in 1945, political organizing re-started. The São Paulo-based *Teatro Experimental do Negro* is but one of many black power organizations emerging in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In Salvador, black organizing was advanced, for example, by the dockworkers – the first predominantly black workforce able to achieve certain labor rights in the city of Salvador. In 1949, they created the Carnival Society “Sons of Gandhi” (“Filhos de Ghandy”), which provided an important space for the display and projection of black pride, as the Club members took the street during Carnival, playing African rhythms and dancing according the African rhythmic tradition, known in Salvador as *Ijexa* and preserved in city’s *Candomblés*.³⁸

Religion provided yet another institutional framework for resistance and organizing, on many different levels. The practice of African religion, which is very widespread all over Brazil but especially in urban centers like Salvador, provides a space for the renewal of self-esteem for all those exposed to the daily mistreats and discrimination by the privileged classes. At the same time, African religion provided for institutional spaces to organize, rebuilt, and renew community (Braga, 1995). According to Butler,

The *Candomblés* also offered practical assistance to the poor people who made up *Candomblés* membership base. Ruth Landes recalled the comment of Edison Carneiro that “the *Candomblé* organization offered the only social insurance of value to the blacks ... if a man, or a woman, were poor, his temple group would try to help him out. They would try to get him a job or introduce him to somebody useful or, if he were in trouble with the police, would hide him with

³⁵ Davis 1999:187

³⁶ Davis 1999:192.

³⁷ Borges 1992:144.

³⁸ <http://www.degandhy.com.br/home/>.

no questions.” In this respect, the ability of Candomblés to deliver vital services and resources ensured their popular support in much the same fashion as the Frente Negra Brasileira.³⁹

The same is true for the still dominant Roman Catholic Church. Even though this church was heavily involved in the exploitation of Africans in the Americas, it also provided an institutional framework for organizing under difficult conditions, when no other institution could grant even minimal protection. Under the protection of the Roman Catholic Church, Brazilian blacks created church-related lay organizations, called “orders of the third degree,” brotherhoods, and solidarities as mutual aid societies and to seek protection and status. According to Marjo de Theije (1990), who conducted a case study of lay brotherhoods in the city of São João del-Rei, Minas Gerais. Theije found that in São João del-Rei, “the first brotherhoods were organized by the inhabitants of the settlement before the town acquired official status (1713) and even before the parish was formed.”⁴⁰ According to this author, “the first inhabitants were the Portuguese and their slaves. The first brotherhood was the Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosario, founded in 1708 for and by black slaves and freemen.”⁴¹ Patricia A. Mulvey (1980), who studied slave confraternities in colonial Brazil, equally demonstrates their importance as mechanisms for black organizing. She finds that “like modern trade unions and medieval guilds, the black sodalities provided needed social welfare services and protection for the African population in Brazil.”⁴²

Afro-Brazilians also created their own social clubs, the first of which emerged in 1872, in the southern city of Porto Alegre, namely the black social club *Sociedade Beneficente e Cultural Floresta Aurora* (“Beneficent and Cultural Society Floresta Aurora”), which until today promotes social and cultural event for their members.

Black organizing thus never ceased – even if it was at times severely difficult to achieve. As pointed out earlier, in 1937, Getúlio Vargas outlawed such organizations as the Frente Negra. In 1945, once Vargas’ “new state” collapsed and democracy was restored and restrictions on black organizations were lifted, black organizing responded by once again creating visible organizations. During the time of official restrictions however, black organizing did not stop but rather had to change its repertoire as activists and militants had to find innovative ways to pursue their goals. As Zelbert Moore (1989) demonstrates, during the years of the Brazilian military regime (1964-1985), when overt organizing was outlawed, Brazilian blacks resorted to culture as a way of promoting black identity. According to Moore, during the 1960s, “they adopted the trappings of Afro hairstyles, clothing, Soul music, and even the language of “Black Power.”⁴³ During the harshest years of the military regime, overt political organizing was impossible and culture became the main arena for black organizing. However, when the iron grip of the military started to soften, in the late 1970s, political organizing once again became a central tool of black organizing. According to Moore, “in 1975, Blacks in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo established two organizations in order to facilitate communication within the various communities. These were the *Sociedade de Intercambio Brasil-Africa-SINBA* (Brazil-Africa Interchange Society) and the *Instituto de Pesquisas das Culturas Negras – IPCN* (Research Institute for Black Cultures).”⁴⁴ Other, similar black consciousness organizations were formed in other parts of the country – such as the *Centro de Cultura Negra do Maranhão* (Center of Black Culture of Maranhão), in the city of São Luis, which was created in September of

³⁹ Butler 1998:206.

⁴⁰ Theije 1990: 192.

⁴¹ Theije 1990:192f.

⁴² Mulvey 1980:41.

⁴³ Moore 1989:403.

⁴⁴ Moore 1989:404.

1979.⁴⁵ Even more importantly, in 1978, black activists founded the *Movimento Negro Unificado* – *MNU* (Unified Black Movement), the first nation-wide organization of organized black resistance.⁴⁶

Brazilian Black Power after 1979

1979 marks the beginning of the Brazilian “abertura,” the beginning of the redemocratization process. Under the military regime, all political organizing was severely restricted and any organize along ethnic line outlawed, in an effort to undermine potentially disruptive social movements. Thus, during the 1970s and 80s, when Brazil transitioned back to democracy, not surprisingly, identity-based black activism re-surfed and many black organizations were created all over the country. In an interview conducted in November 7, 2003, Edna Santos Roland, long-time Brazilian black power activist and since 2003 Coordinator of the *Struggle against Racism and Racial Discrimination in Latin America and the Caribbean*, an UNESCO organization, explained that Brazil’s participation in the Third World Conference against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa in September of 2001, provided political opportunities back home, once the Brazilian state was forced to officially admit that Brazil was a racist country. According to Roland, “Durban was a watershed experience for the Brazilian Black Power Movement,” because it forced that state to revise its traditional discourse of racial democracy and triggered the production of official data and statistics by such governmental organizations as the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA). Since 2001, the Brazilian Black Power Movement has been able to successfully challenge the hegemonic doctrine that Brazil is a racial paradise⁴⁷ and this recognition has created the possibility of discussing issues of affirmative action and group rights.⁴⁸

After Durban, the Brazilian state indeed radically changed its approach towards ethnic minorities, replacing the age-old strategy of simply denying the very existence of racial inequality, to openly admitting to problems of racism and even responding to this newly admitted problem by crafting public policies to address racism and racialized exclusion in Brazilian society. The Minister of Education under the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), Paulo Renato Souza, for example, addressed the topic of affirmative action in a public letter, published in Brazil’s most respected daily newspaper, the *Folha de São Paulo*. In an open letter, published on August 30, 2001,⁴⁹ Souza discusses different strategies to combat racism in Brazil, thus providing evidence that issues of race and affirmative action are no longer taboo in Brazilian public discussions. On January 24, 2002, The *Folha de São Paulo* published another article about racism in the Brazilian industry entitled “Brazilian Company is white and male,” providing further evidence for the gradual dissemination of a new racial common sense in Brazilian society.⁵⁰ Furthermore, in 2002, the Ministry of Agriculture and several Federal and State Universities adopted affirmative action policies in their admissions, a policy that was subsequently adopted by numerous Universities across the country.

These examples demonstrate that the Anti-Racism Conference held in Durban in 2001 opened the door for a broader discussion of racism in Brazilian society. At the same time it is important to recognize that identity-based activism is much older than the accounts on new social movements suggest.

⁴⁵ Interview with Maria Raimunda Araujo, co-founder, conducted on July 30, 2008.

⁴⁶ The history of the MNU has been documented by Covin, 2006.

⁴⁷ Several articles in Hanchard 1999 tell the story of the Brazilian black power movement. Hanchard (1994) has also written a book about the black power movement of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, covering the time-period from 1945 to 1988. Lélia Gonzales has discussed the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) in her contribution to the book edited by Pierre-Michel Fontaine (1991). George Reid Andres (1991) has included a history of the São Paulo black power movement into his analysis of Brazilian race relations, and Kim Butler (1998) has compared Afro-Brazilian Post Abolition organizing in São Paulo and Salvador.

⁴⁸ Articles like these have appeared since the mid 1990s in several major Brazilian newspapers and journals, such as *Veja*, *Isto É*, and *Folha de São Paulo*.

⁴⁹ *Folha de São Paulo*, January 24, 2002, page A3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, page B10.

Identity-based black power movement in the Americas is as old as the institution of slavery and has achieved outstanding victories against state elites as early as in the 17th century, when the free republic of Palmares was founded in the Brazilian hinterlands.

Conclusion: Brazilian Black Power: A Constant with Varying Repertoires

Black organizing in Brazil has a long history of contention that responded, whenever possible, directly to the racist and exclusionary practices of white society and the state. Furthermore, whenever direct confrontation was made impossible by an authoritarian state or an extremely pervasive cultural hegemony able to de-legitimize any discourse around issues of racism, identity-based black power movements responded by shifting their strategies away from the political realm into other field of organizing, namely into the field of culture and religion, thus transforming African-based religion into an instrument of political resistance and making even Carnival a podium to protest white supremacy and exploitation, as Butler has demonstrated. Black, and thus identity-based, organizing was indeed extremely persistent and consistent in Brazil, even in the face of extreme exploitation and control. Under slavery, when even public gatherings and drumming were outlawed, Brazilian blacks – slaves and free persons – were able to create such identity-based organizations as black lay orders (*ordens terceiras*) that used the only institutional framework able to grant minimal degrees of protection, the Catholic Church. The idea of “new” social movements emerging in the Americas during the 1970 and 80s is thus misleading and the case of black organizing in Brazil raises important question about the applicability of this framework for the analysis of other, related identity-based social movements in Latin America.

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