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Freyre's Brazil Revisited: A Review of *New World in the Tropics: The Culture of Modern Brazil*

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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO Gilberto Freyre reminded Brazilians with a wealth of detail that "Every Brazilian, even the light-skinned fair-haired one, carries about with him on his soul, when not on soul and body alike . . . the shadow, or at least the birthmark, of the aborigine or the Negro." *New World in the Tropics*** is an extended treatment of this and related themes and its review involves some perspective of his earlier works and an evaluation of any fresh insight and subject matter.

After study in the United States where Franz Boas influenced him, Freyre returned to Brazil to continue his career as journalist and to write *The Masters and the Slaves* (1934) followed by *Sobrados e mucambos* (1936) and *O mundo que o português creou* (lectures prepared in 1937). Of these the first was a landmark in the writing of Brazilian social history and introduced Freyre as a modernized social historian aware of the uses of the rapidly changing social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology, in understanding transculturation. With literary vigor and physiological candor he called attention to a major aspect of Brazilian society, rapid and early miscegenation among the three elements of its population—European, African, Indian—and the absence of institutional barriers to this process. Generalizing about Brazilian colonial evolution and focusing upon one region, his native *Nordeste,* he concluded that plantation monoculture and African slave labor had forged an "agrarian, slaveholding and hybrid" society apparently without creating a tradition of racial animosity prevalent where Anglo-Americans, Dutch, and French had colonized in the tropics. In *Sobrados e mucambos* he extended this thesis to monarchical Brazil of the nineteenth century when domestic currents and closer contact with industrializing Great

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** New York, 1960. Alfred Knopf. Index. Pp. 286.

Britain, France, and the United States eroded the patriarchal Nordeste. Basically these two studies drawn from a wide variety of sources, explained and justified miscegenation. That they became best-sellers reflected more than uninhibited realism in treating human physiology, for their publication coincided with greater social mobility of people of mixed racial background and with the strong nationalism and cultural regionalism in post-1930 Brazil. A broader perspective was evident in *O mundo que o português creou* in which Portuguese colonization was viewed as a phase of the larger process of Portuguese experience in Africa and Asia as well as America. Portugal's major contribution was, Freyre concluded, the "democratization of human society through . . . miscegenation." A lecture series at Indiana University (*Brazil: An Interpretation*) permitted Freyre in 1944 to synthesize themes scattered in his previous publications and to introduce new elements. At the height of the Good Neighbor policy Freyre urged that United States policy-makers accept reciprocity in inter-American relations because of the "unique" background of Latin America and especially of Brazil as pioneer in the "ethnic aspect of democracy," a leader in the Portuguese-speaking world, and an "extra-European" type of civilization in America. In the past decade Freyre has concentrated upon the Luso-colonial world or what he has advanced as Luso-tropicalism, the theme of *Um brasileiro em terras portuguesas* (1953).

New World in the Tropics provides a full retrospective panorama of Freyre's thoughts on Brazilian culture as of 1944 and the direction in which he has subsequently moved. The six chapters of *Brazil: An Interpretation,* here reproduced *in toto,* touch a variety of themes. Freyre, as regionalist and Brazilian *modernista,* wished to resurrect and preserve selected elements of the past, for creative regionalism would halt the cultural monotony that United States industrialism threatened to bring as well as the excesses of domestic political centralization. The roots of Nordeste tradition were traced back to the colony and to the Iberian peninsula where diverse ethnic and cultural elements were integrated. The propensity to integration enabled the Portuguese to assimilate African and Asian elements and to "acclimatize themselves in various parts of the world better than almost any other Europeans." In Brazil the fact that Portuguese peasants failed to establish small holdings led them to find compensation in "extraordinary procreative activity as polygamous males." Slave-hunting *bandeirantes* on the frontier "promoted ethnic and social democracy so characteristic of Brazil."

Plantation slavery in Brazil was "less provocative of rebellion," less despotic than slavery in the United States, and less cruel than was the industrial revolution to European labor. Plantation and monarchy permitted social mobility upward for "men of exceptional talent" no matter what their color. The plantation, moreover, was a "powerful republican opposition to any autocratic excesses on the part of the Crown." From this conflict came a healthier democratic condition than in the Spanish American republics whose chief executives enjoyed "absolute power." Above all, material progress was no measure of Brazil's greatness.

The balance of *New World in the Tropics,* four chapters, are but more strident variations on these themes. Gone is the former defensive note in Freyre's writings; the explanation of "mongrelization" and the significance of "hybridization" are now replaced by a note of superiority. Portuguese propensity to integration is now Luso-tropicalism which has helped create in Brazil an extra- or "ultra-European" civilization, "culturally European and sociologically Christian," one of whose characteristics is ethnic democracy. Unlike Mexico, Peru, or Bolivia, Brazil has never had an "ethnic problem." Under the "greatly respected" imperial regime there evolved a "happy combination of monarchy with democracy" and a "system of aristocratic selection" based upon "individual capacity." Brazil has built a "humane, Christian" society and has become in the process "one of the most socially, culturally and technically advanced countries in the world." Comparable assertions on a variety of related and nonrelated topics are scattered throughout.

In the 1920's Freyre was a *modernista,* a propagandist for presenting Brazil as she was, not the superficially Europeanized offshoot some preferred. The true Brazil he saw rooted in the traditions of the region in which he was born and raised, in the "trauma of slavery." By turn brilliant and contradictory, inspired and turgid, Freyre once stated that his interest was social and cultural history. Although he has espoused this discipline, he has avoided discipline in the use of sources and the re-examination of hypotheses. One can condone the fervor of the propagandist of ethnic equality. It is another matter, once the good fight was won, for a social scientist to propagate as fact what are hypotheses about the culture in which random miscegenation occurred, namely slavery, patriarchalism, monarchy, and Portuguese colonialism. The perfervid regionalist who once exhumed the colonial past seems now enamored of a corpse.