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# BLACKS IN SALVADOR: Racial Paths<sup>1</sup>

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Jeferson Bacelar

This essay has certain limitations and advantages in terms of understanding the trajectory of the Black population in Brazil. Limitations because although Brazil is an immense country with considerable variation in its historical, economic, social, and regional circumstances, the essay deals only with a single north-eastern city, Salvador, a fact that obviously hinders possible generalizations. It focuses on Blacks in two distinct and different time frames and social settings: (1) the preindustrial society of the years that followed abolition, and (2) the modern, capitalist society of the 1960s to the present. It also has certain advantages, because of the specificity of the situation of Blacks in Brazilian society as a whole: extreme privation of the most basic necessities of life; inequality in the labor market and the world of consumption; and the constant and marked presence of racism and racial discrimination.

## I. Blacks in the First Republic

Salvador emerged from slavery (1888) and the Empire (1889) without major alterations to its social and economic order, which remained largely the same throughout the First Republic (1889–1930). A new bourgeois order was not constituted, there was no large demographic growth, nor were there large numbers of foreign immigrants. Blacks and *mestizos* composed the majority of the population, as they do today.

The city continued to function as a port city and commercial center, mainly for the export of agricultural products. The

industry that did exist was an activity "in involution," with a low level of capitalization and greatly dependent on the mercantile sector. The city's economy was controlled by the high commerce of the export of primary goods (especially cacao, but also sugar, tobacco, salt, and leather) and by low commerce (*comércio grossista*), the importation of merchandise from other countries or states for local consumption. Political power remained in the hands of the rural oligarchies, even when their representatives lived in the city.

Bahia was a stratified society (*sociedade estamental*) in which traditional families of large landholders, wealthy merchants (most of whom were of European decent), high-level government employees, and politicians composed the central nucleus, the dominant sector (*estamento*). Formed almost exclusively by Whites, the rare *mestizos* who reached their level confirmed the rule by whitening themselves: they worked hard to redefine themselves as Whites. At the other extreme of society were the masses, predominantly Black and working class, forming what was called the little people and the riffraff. Between the two was an intermediate sector including small and middle-sized merchants, liberal professionals, public servants, and commerce employees. This middle sector included many *mestizos* who identified with the dominant groups through their loyalty and solidarity.

A limited social mobility did exist, and, in general, ascension was possible within the sector (*estamento*) itself, although it was almost impossible to penetrate the higher sector. Hierarchically defined social distances were maintained and reinforced by the traditional expectations of treatment and behavior emanating from the dominant groups. They were the ones who established private power, supplanting or becoming confused with the public order, and personal relations were the basic elements in the sedimentation of that power. These relations were characterized by the use of favors and concessions in exchange for subservience and an unequal extension of power based on the hierarchies and controls established by the holders of power.

Despite the existence of free labor, there was no labor market. Workers were contracted not because of their professional qualifications or capacity for work, but above all because of their personal and moral situation. They should be obedient, moderate,

and good-mannered. Forms of remuneration were always mixed—money plus food, housing, loans, and so forth—which reinforced the primacy of personal relationships. This is the society that reminded Donald Pierson of medieval Europe because of its order and stability (it is a shame that Pierson did not also think of feudal lords). And, not surprisingly, the dominant groups were not interested in change.

Still in the heat of the celebration—or in the drying of tears—of Abolition, on May 16, 1888, the president of the province created a May 13 Society, which established the following prerogatives: (1) former slave owners determined the remuneration or form of retribution of the labor force; (2) former slaves should fulfill the contract (generally verbal) with their employer even if it was a simple reproduction of slave relations; (3) those who refused to submit to labor contracts would be criminally charged for vagrancy. The social order was thus maintained without substantial reforms, preserving a paternalistic perspective. The private sector continued to define labor relations with the support of public powers when coercion was needed.

With the Republic, slightly more than a year after Abolition, changes began to be made in the power structure, with clear repercussions among the working masses. The extension of the right to vote propitiated a multiplicity of party factions representing the interests of dominant groups, and struggles between those groups generated a climate of political effervescence in the city, with each party attempting to form bases of support among sectors until then excluded from participation.

The mobilization of the “people,” however, unexpected events notwithstanding, cemented established structures rather than providing for the representation of subaltern categories. Political clientelism, an extension of the private order and of personal relationships in the public field, divided the working masses, making the world of politics virtually impossible. The generalized control and manipulation of the public sector became evident and was extended to labor and relations. Since the Constitution of 1891 established that labor contracts were free, it became the state’s responsibility to assure only that they were fulfilled.

This broad process of domination of the working masses clearly affected the Black population. Since they were the demo-

graphic majority in the city and among the workers, and since they had revolted in the past, it became critical for the dominant groups to impede their social organization.

With Abolition and the Republic, racism became a “natural” component of society, with its discriminatory practices built into the social structure itself, and constituted as the basic principle of stratification. If, with Abolition, nothing happened in relation to the racial question, with the Republic, the situation changed somewhat. Starting at that moment, Blacks would have rights and duties before the law and society just like anyone else, and their equality was to be defended by all, with the dominant groups having the responsibility of protecting and sanctifying their new position in society. This was accomplished with propriety and efficacy: through indignation at police violence “against a poor old man”; by strongly reacting to Epiácio Pessoa’s vote during the Paris conference for the inequality of races; through the encouragement of protests against the racial situation in the United States; and by saying that others — i.e., foreigners living in the city — were the true racists. Brazilian racial democracy — that is, the formed equity and democratic coexistence of different racial origins — was beginning to take shape.

However, in terms of the daily life and habits of Blacks and Whites in the city of Salvador, where racist behavior was internalized in all parts of the city, a “pact of silence” was elaborated. The situation of Blacks in the labor market, where they occupied the lowest positions, was not discussed. They were not denied access to certain professional categories that did not require high levels of qualification, such as that of “stockboy” in the city’s major stores and commercial establishments. It was not a question of segregation in public spaces, expressly delineated in the field of leisure. Also left undiscussed were unequal forms of treatment and relationships — with all cordiality, of course, as long as Blacks stayed in their place — between Blacks and Whites.

In view of the dramatic framework of accommodation in a society with consolidated strategies of domination, what was the situation of Blacks, and what were the mechanisms used for their affirmation in Salvador? According to data on the occupancy of Salvador’s cemeteries in 1892 and those gathered by Donald Pierson in 1936, the general trend is uniform even

though they reflect two distinct historical moments. In both, Blacks occupy the lowest categories of occupational stratification, and, in a generalized sense, activities that are largely dependent on physical strength or that require a low level of specialization.

In a society where social and occupational structure was openly discriminatory, raising the racial question was seen as an affront to a social order that considered Blacks as formally "equal," and could have uncontrollable consequences. The road would have to be another one. For Blacks as employees, this would be the acceptance of various forms of subjugation, including the creation of the figure of the "good worker." Many Blacks did just that, attaining, under the protection of the "holders of power," a certain occupational and economic stability. Nonetheless, many others rejected such a possibility.

The disciplinary and subservient character of the reigning standards of labor relations conflicted with Blacks' desire for autonomy and political freedom. They knew they earned little in the time and effort dedicated to labor that produced wealth for others. They had already had the experience of free men who, through anonymous labor, "on their own account," had managed to assemble a reasonable patrimony. In the occupational positions mentioned above, one of the essential strategies of Blacks in the world of labor was configured: their involvement in activities that made autonomous labor possible. In the primary sector, work in the fields and at sea; in the secondary sector, artisan activities and occupations; in the tertiary sector, ambulatory commerce, the transportation of products, and domestic service.

It would be in these activities—which were vital for the city's economy (e.g., the transportation of products) — that Blacks would imprint their own measure, creating their own rhythm and the amount of time allotted to production. This, evidently, conflicted totally with the disciplinary logic that bosses would like to have imposed on labor. Even worse, this rhythm extended to factories, commercial establishments, and public service. Against efficiency, Black workers fought back with slowdowns or absenteeism; against productivity with delays; and against submission with silent behavioral autonomy. The political formulation or form of resistance, that is, without con-

frontation, that Blacks established in relation to the world of labor and Whites was used to confer one more negative attribute on them: laziness.

From autonomous labor, as confirmed in information gathered in the period's wills and inventories, there emerged the possibility for accumulating capital and a patrimony, although obviously limited in scale, not to mention the significance of Black women in the constitution of families and capital because of their participation in the world of labor. Blacks maintained a symbolic, interactive, and dynamic field alive in society based on the time and economies deriving from the "culture of work." Here, a Black world appeared, in *Candomblé*, carnival, religious and secular festivals, cuisine, popular medicine, cosmology, forms of treatment and solidarity, samba and *capoeira*, and familial matrifocality. Although certainly significant in the construction of the "Black world," an additional element of reinforcement must be added to free time and money: the cultural practices of dominant groups.

The higher segments (*estamento*) desperately sought an identification with European culture. They copied fashions and modes from Europe and the advanced countries of the West, even to the point of rejecting as a model their primary matrix, the Portuguese. This was evidently an ornamental culture, out of place and entirely inappropriate for the totality of groups that composed the society. However, it was adopted not only because of dependence on European values or because it came to constitute a common social repertoire. Europeanization represented above all the preservation of social distances through culture. Clearly, this meant that as long as Blacks did not violate reigning behavioral standards and publicly expose their abominable practices, they could do whatever they wanted behind closed doors. And this opened a large space for the autonomous formulation of a Black Bahian world, with roots in Africa.

## II. Blacks in Contemporary Society

Starting in the 1950s and especially in the 1960s, Bahia witnessed a complete transformation of its society with clear repercussions in the lives of Blacks in Salvador. The new industrialization, an extension of the industrial development of the Southwest, pro-

voked profound changes in the city and its space. The modern companies established in the Aratu Industrial Center and later in the Camaçari Petrochemical Complex—with a great concentration of capital and oriented toward production of intermediate goods—became the dynamic pole of the regional economy. With modern industrial development, which required a superabundance of labor, the city's demography was radically transformed by a large influx of people from rural zones.

Alternative modes of production were crushed—although they still persist—by the new industrialization and modern services. Self-employment became at most a means of survival, although it was increasingly used. Jobs could not be turned down, nor could the demands of the “culture of work,” since there were so many people available to accept the limited number of jobs. The urban landscape, in turn, was transformed with a significant expansion of the city and a devastating “peripheralization” without the minimum provisions in terms of services and housing for the poor population. The city was enveloped by a large poverty belt.

Soon, cities developed a deeper class structure, with a local bourgeoisie identified with national and international interests; the middle sectors and the new working classes (associated with the dynamic pole of the economy) concerned with social and economic mobility; and the urban working classes, not incorporated into the affluent pole of the economy, nurturing a feeling of belonging to a group of co-inhabitants of a social region, that is, the group of poor workers. The local bourgeoisie is made up of Whites and light *mestizos*; Blacks and dark *mestizos* appear in the middle sectors and the new working class, but with Blacks in general occupying the least valued positions; and Blacks constitute the clear majority among urban workers.

In Salvador's modern society, racial discrimination against Blacks continues through spacial, economic, and social “peripheralization,” which is rapidly exacerbated in these heady and colorful times. Nevertheless, with the introduction of new dynamic areas of the city's economy, formulations about race relations were altered. Individuals are now categorized according to their position vis-à-vis relations of production and consumption as well as the historical position of the diverse groups to which they belong in the broader context of Bahian society.



Objectively, for the dominant groups and the ascendent social categories, Blacks remain tied to the lowest positions in society and are negatively identified through images, stereotypes, and expression.

The myth of racial democracy is reinforced in an articulated and legitimizing, rather than contradictory, manner. Its permanence has a very old factor, now endowed with a new function, as a base, that is, the numerical expressiveness of the Black population. Thus, Blacks seem to be fundamental elements in the maintenance and growth of capitalist relations of production, which, with their "subtle" mechanisms of selection in the labor market, do not provide reasons that justify open discrimination. Correlated with this aspect is a concern with the danger that the exacerbation of racial conflict could provoke in the heart of Bahian society.

The state ideological apparatuses, in their multiple forms, emphasize the equality of relations between different individuals and groups, promoting an idealized image of Bahian society that they identify as a model of racial coexistence and humanism, and undertaking its national and international diffusion. Associated with racial democracy is cultural democracy, that is, permitting Blacks to cultivate their African heritage. The celebration and exaltation of Africa and foreign Blacks, so much to the liking of Bahian intellectuals, emphasizes, as a counterpoint, the cultural equality of races in Salvador.

What are the mechanisms at this new historical moment for the affirmation of being Black in Salvador? Attempts have been made in the political field, but all candidates who based their campaigns on racial issues have failed. The participation of Blacks, *qua* Blacks, in the new union movement has run directly into forms of corporatism oriented toward better salaries and privileges for organized workers. The Black movement itself, because it comprises a sector that ascended socially and has an intellectualized perspective, does not always attract the poor and largely illiterate Black masses. Furthermore, the movement's polarized vision of the Bahian racial situation—divided rigidly into Blacks versus Whites—along with its position of radical political militancy, confuses social identity with color, which runs the risk of distancing many Blacks from their daily existence. Urban social movements, in turn, associated with

demands for the satisfaction of immediate and basic survival needs, see race as a secondary issue. Thus, many spaces continue to be closed to the affirmation of being Black.

Nonetheless, something remained alive with a solid foundation; it survived slavery and overcame the political reaction for more than forty years. Now, even confronted with new technologies, it continues to exist: real and experienced history, passed down in the social imaginary, and to a large extent based in cultural practices, with *Candomblé* as the central axis.

Thus, starting in 1970, Blacks elaborated a new proposal for carnival, reviving in a contemporary form the old *afoxés*. *Ilê-Aiyê* was born as a form of reaction to White carnival and with the objective of celebrating the values of national and international Black culture. It was created in the working-class district of Liberdade, which has an enormous Black population and *Candomblé* at its doorstep. The sense of belonging of Black urban workers based in this social region took on a racial texture through the new *bloco*. Culture became ideology and politics in the construction of the social identity of Blacks in Salvador. Its power of attraction was enormous because of its proximity to the daily life of the Black population. In a dynamic form, African roots are revived in dreadlocks, rings, clothes, and music, creating a sense of negritude with a clearly identified point of reference.

Starting with *Ilê*, other *afoxés* and *blocos-afro* were created in the city with a number of variations, all retaining the perspective of negritude. It was in the 1980s, however, that their primacy among Blacks was affirmed with the vertiginous expansion of the city. The affirmation of negritude spread through the social body as vanity and pride at being Black, and the creation of determinate "Black spaces," such as Liberdade and Pelourinho, "invaded" the city of Salvador. Composed primarily of young people, they were united; they had strength and a capacity for identifying themselves as a group. They no longer needed to distance themselves from their color since they had their own spaces, and they finally recognized the possibility of exercising their citizenship as Blacks.

However, besides these unique aspects, which are extremely positive of the culture of affirmation of being Black in Salvador, it is imperative to see the other side of the story. Unlike in the

past, the central axis of cultural production in capitalism is economics; it obeys an expansionist and standardizing logic with a definite political nature. The culture of the dominant groups not only maintains supremacy, but traverses the entire social body, seeking its direction and control. Its authority and capacity for dissemination—tastes, lifestyles, fashions, values—is reiterated through measures of the government itself, which seeks to control the market of symbolic goods. If in the past, in the first phase, we cannot forget the imposition of culture of dominant groups in relation to the subalterns, that has now become a totalizing and coercive force.

But domination does not necessarily imply—and this is flagrant in the case of Bahian Blacks—an absence of creativity and resistance among popular cultures. It is worth emphasizing that the striking inequality and discrimination in relation to Blacks in Salvador makes their culture a kind of “response” to the White’s manner of being, above all because of its roots and firm foundations in their daily life. Because it is part of the larger universe, Black culture, as an alternative mode of social experience, is reinforced under the prism of contrast.

It makes little sense to discuss questions such as “authenticity,” “purity,” or “originality”; what matters is understanding how the cultural elements deriving from other sources and groups are incorporated into Black reality and its values. For example, while in the first decades of the Republic the higher strata were the importers of foreign culture, today, because of the enormous expansion of the means of mass communication, foreign influences have deeply penetrated subaltern categories among Brazilian Blacks. The fundamental thing to understand is that these external influences—Latin American, American, African—are now incorporated into and “function” adequately in the Black culture of Bahia.

In Salvador, in view of the creativity and expansion of the Black culture, the dominant groups have taken note—they are appropriating their symbols and attributing a new meaning to them. The intellectuals are substituted by new forms of dissemination of culture, the media, the commercialization of the exotic and the different. The cultural production of Blacks—music and dance above all—are transformed into “portraits of Bahianness” and inserted into the capitalist circuit of consumption of

symbolic goods transmuted into commodities, thus changing the cultural consumption of all classes.

The year 1993 marked the national and international consecration of Bahian carnival, with the diverse channels of media exploiting this different, exotic society: “*axé-music*,” “*timbalada*,” and the “song of the city” of its muse, Daniela Mercury, “the blackest little white girl of Bahia,” as she has called herself. Defining the carnival as a basically Black product, the image of an egalitarian festivity, the *extraordinary* expression of racial and cultural democracy, has been solidified. But there is more to this. The mythical, romanticized valorization of Black culture *qua* product has not changed many things, such as racial segregation and a total lack of change in the position of Blacks in the class structure. While, superficially, Bahian carnival seems to convey an affirmation of racial equality, it is, nonetheless, structured in a way that is deeply concerned with gradations and hierarchies. The official organization of the parade itself is organized along lines marked by social distinctions articulated with the racial criteria in the formation of groups: on one side, the *blocos de trios* (popularly known as *blocos* of “barons,” or “whites”); on the other, the *blocos* of the poor and the Black, that is, the *afoxés*, the *blocos-afro*, the *blocos de índios*, etc. Internal social gradations and separate forms of participation are established in each group within the parade’s seemingly global compositions.

All join together in the world’s greatest carnival — everyone participates, “each in his or her place.” There is no social interaction between the groups, and ropes mark the physical limits of each. In view of Blacks’ affirmation in carnival, the middle and upper classes, self-identified as Whites, react by establishing rigid criteria of social and racial discrimination for participation in their organizations. The more Black values take shape and gain space in carnival, the more distinguishing marks are solidified, ranging from phenotype, economic position, network of social relations, habits, behavior, and place of residence to insertion in the “group of Whites.” To further cement barriers, they stress the sense of “security behind walls” offered by the easily distinguishable protective barricades (i.e., ropes) that separate them from Blacks. While Blacks affirm their negritude, Whites do not want to mix. Finally, in carnival, Blacks’ position in the social hierarchy is poignantly rendered evident, with the clear

and marked construction of exclusive walls by groups who identify socially and racially with each other.

The festival of carnival is not, in my view, an extraordinary moment, but rather an illumination of the ordinary that makes *visible* our society's true character and destiny.

### III. Conclusion

The transformation of Black culture into a product of the cultural industry has a great impact on Blacks themselves. The industry makes the selection, the choice of groups and individuals for insertion or ascension in the artistic and cultural world, generating divisions and disputes within the Black community in relation to access to the capitalist market of symbolic goods. The status and prestige of individuals and *blocos* has begun to be measured by their acceptance and by the stage of cooptation in the world of the dominant.

Nevertheless, a more serious problem has emerged from the current situation in Bahia, and that is the perspective among Blacks of the supervalorization of the limited economy that derives from culture, confusing it with the participation of Blacks in the labor market. The question is that, besides limited participation of the labor force in the cultural world, there has occurred a reaffirmation and consecration of "natural" characteristics of Blacks. Among dominant groups the process of stigmatization is repeated along with attempts to definitively characterize Blacks as incapable of reason in such a way as to justify their lack of upward mobility and ascension in society and the world of work.

Culture is the texture of life. Those who are familiar with Salvador in the 1950s and '60s, when "Blacks knew their place," know the advances that culture has provided and the significance of being able to say that one is Black. Cultural assertion has been, and continues to be, the path of Blacks in the construction of their racial identity in Salvador. What will come in the future, only God—that is, Ogum—knows, but I am certain that the long and hard battle for Black emancipation will continue in many sites of social existence.

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## Notes

1. This text is a preliminary and simplified version of the introduction to a study titled "O negro na Primeira República em Salvador: a luta na liberdade," which is currently in progress in the Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais with support from the Ford Foundation.

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