Gilberto Freyre (1900‒1987) dealt, in his extensive opus, with the process of coexistence and amalgamation between Whites and Blacks in Brazil. The former – at first overwhelmingly Portuguese – came to the country, beginning in the first years of the 16th century, and soon became large-scale planters of sugar cane. The latter were imported from Africa in order to work, as enslaved persons, in the plantations and the households of the Whites.

A similar process took place in the English colonies of North America that gave rise to the Southern states of the United States. In both hemispheres the coexistence of Blacks and Whites has led to issues that have not been fully solved in the first years of the 21st century. Such issues have represented major political and academic problems. But their characteristics have not been identical. In accordance with the thought of Gilberto Freyre (though not with his terminology), we can recognize, in race relations and racial prejudice in the United States a metaphoric character, with a strong tendency toward a binary opposition between White and Black. In Brazil, Freyre recognizes the prevalence of metonymic relationships. Metonymy is full of gradations, interpenetrations, and lots of browns. It is governed by subtle forms of etiquette, permitting the negotiation of identities and of the social relationships associated with them.

Metonymical systems are porous, with not infrequent shifts from the Black to the neighborhood of the White extreme of the continuum and vice versa. In Brazil, those who are considered Whites, even when they are the bearers of a modicum of Black features, are generally more affluent, enjoy a higher level of education, and are more powerful than those who are considered Black. In spite of its alleged racial democracy, Brazil represents a leucocratic country.

For Brazilians, the most exciting problem of social science can be summed up in one question: “Why are we not the United States?” What could have been lacking, or excessive, in Brazil’s historical development, to explain the gap between American and Brazilian development in practically every field of knowledge or activity? It was inevitable that the attention of observers and scholars would turn toward race relations. It is certain that, to mention only Whites and Blacks, there has been a plentiful mixture in both countries. It seems that the totality, or near totality, of the African–American population of the United States has a certain proportion of European co-ancestors. On the other hand, it is not at all certain that the White population of the United States, unlike the population held as White in Brazil, possesses any significant proportion of African co-ancestors.
Gilberto Freyre stands out among the “interpreters of Brazil.” The treatment he gave to the Brazilian system of race relations, the influence he exerted on other authors, and the opposition he has aroused, in Brazil and abroad, single him out among those interpreters. Since the publication of his main book (Freyre 1933), almost nothing else has been published about Brazil, concerning race, culture, and economic development, without explicit or implicit, favorable, or unfavorable, mentions of Freyre.

In the formerly slavocrat states of the United States the logic of caste was exacerbated and reached its ultimate consequences as discrimination and segregation. In Brazil the opposition between the racial groups did not entirely vanish. But it was softened due to racial mixture which is not stigmatized. Segregation is also attenuated by people sharing the superidentities that derive, irrespective of race or color, from belonging to groups of an ethnic, religious, political, or other character.

This is largely a paradigm that Freyre claims to have borrowed from Franz Boas, reinterpreting it with adroitness and the occasional addition of other ingredients. The following passage, while expressing the quintessence of Freyreanism, also represents, to our mind, an example of our author’s effusive Boasianism:

> What took place in our country was a deep-going and fraternal association of values and sentiments. … This was a kind of fraternization that could only with difficulty have been realized under any other type of Christianity than that which dominated Brazil during its formative period; a more clerical type, more ascetic, more orthodox, Calvinistic or strictly Catholic, would by no means have been so favorable as that mild brand of household religion … always having feasts, baptisms, marriages, with banners, saints, chrisms, and novenas. It was this domestic, lyric, and festive Christianity, with its humanly friendly male and female saints and its Our Ladies as godmothers to the young, that created the first spiritual, moral, and aesthetic bonds between the Negroes and the Brazilian family and its culture.

_Freyre 1986: 372_

Freyre had been influenced by passages like the following one, drawn from a paper by the Sage of Columbia:

> The student of race relations must answer the question whether in societies in which different racial types form a socially homogeneous group, a marked race consciousness develops. This question cannot be answered categorically, although interracial conditions in Brazil and the disregard of racial affiliation in the relation between Mohammedans and infidels show that race consciousness may be quite insignificant.

_Boas 1982: 15_

Let us now turn to another quotation from Freyre concerning Boas and other subjects:

> Of all the problems confronting Brazil there was none that gave me so much anxiety as that of miscegenation. Once upon a time, after three straight years of absence from my country, I caught sight of a group of Brazilian seamen – mulattoes and cafusos – crossing Brooklyn Bridge. … They impressed me as being the caricatures of men, and there came to my mind a phrase from a book on Brazil written by an American: “the fearfully mongrel aspect of the population”. That was the sort of thing to which miscegenation led. I ought to have had someone to tell me … that these individuals were not simply mulattoes or cafusos but sickly ones. It was my studies of anthropology under the direction of Professor Boas that
Race relations in Brazil: Gilberto Freyre as Their Interpreter

first revealed to me the Negro and the mulatto for what they are — with the effects of environment or cultural experience separated from racial characteristics.

Freyre 1986: xxvii

The essence of the influence exerted by Franz Boas on Gilberto Freyre lies in the application to the social history of early Brazil, by Freyre, of some Boasian theses. Those theses concerned the superidentities resulting from membership in a religious community and/or from belonging to a patriarchal and polygamic extended family, whether or not polygamy was accepted without restrictions by the dominant form of religion. Although slavery represents a supreme form of exploitation of man by man, it does not necessarily prevent, according to Boas and Freyre, the tendency toward the rise of identity communities comprising people, free and enslaved, of diverse racial or ethnic extraction. It did not prevent, either in Muslim countries or in Brazil, cultural and genetic interpenetration.

However, it is not because he claimed Boas as his mentor that Freyre is opposed by many Brazilian and Brazilianist scholars. The great debate turns around philosophies of history. In fact, many of the adversaries of Freyre have written under the influence of a paradigm which, in the broad sense of the term, may be considered Weberian, connoting, among other ingredients, the superiority of the “Protestant Ethic” associated with economic and other forms of development. In point of fact, what we are calling here the Weberian paradigm (Freyre never does) is, in Brazil and other countries, older than Max Weber's own writings. This paradox is due to this paradigm having been a Protestant one a long time before being adopted and given a scientific formulation by the German sociologist. This is what Freyre was against in his writings, especially, but not only, in his last writings, which pullulate with implicit antiweberianisms and explicit anti-Protestant utterances.

To that Weberianism, Gilberto Freyre opposes a radically different way to interpret and evaluate the development of Brazil. He refuses to extol a modernity characterized by rationality and productivity, summed up in what he calls, with a quaint archaism, “a hora inglesa,” the English time, and praises tradition, represented by what he calls the “Iberian time.”

Concerning his traditionalism, he is in diametrical opposition to Max Weber, who opposes, not without some vehemence, tradition and rationality, taking the side of the latter against the former. Franz Boas is a progressivist author, although he often deals with traditional societies. Should one care to study in a comprehensive way Gilberto Freyre’s intellectual genealogy, I believe that one should look for it in a place where Freyre seems to have been imbued with traditionalism – New York City, especially (of all places) the Department of History of Columbia University. There Freyre studied for his Master’s degree in History (February 1921 through February 1922). Carlton Hayes was a leading professor, and often chairman, of the Department of History at Columbia. Hayes was well known for his connections with the French traditionalist right. It is quite plausible that Freyre’s traditionalism was acquired, or reinforced, at Columbia University.

Gilberto Freyre has concerned us from two different angles. First, as a student of race relations in Brazil who never quite loses sight of race relations in the United States. But Freyre has also concerned us from another point of view: This is Freyre seen as a thinker within the context of studies not only of race relations, but also of modernization. We have found three intellectual persons within the same individual. First, the Freyre who is, or claims to be, a disciple of Franz Boas. The second Freyre is the traditionalist Freyre, who, implicitly or explicitly, is mainly concerned with the fight against what he calls the “biblicism” or the Protestantism of the modernizers. The third Freyre adds to the second a close connection with the traditionalism of Action Française, founded and headed by Charles Maurras (1868‒1952). This tendency was well represented, at Columbia, by Carlton Hayes (1882‒1964), a militant Catholic, a professor who seems to have exerted a strong influence upon Freyre, despite the latter’s tendency to obscure Hayes and to highlight Boas. Traditionalism is certainly already present in Freyre’s main book, The Masters and the Slaves, but it comes very much to the fore in Freyre’s late writings, mainly in the books and papers he published after 1950 (e.g., Freyre 1962).
As we have already stated, the issue of racial relations in Brazil (and elsewhere) turns into a problem of Philosophy of History. What is at stake is not so much whether Freyre’s metonymic paradigm can or cannot be confirmed by empirical evidence. What really matters, among many commentators, is the fact that Freyre’s paradigm results not from a philosophy associated with the Enlightenment, but rather from an archaic culture, the Luso-Catholic, influenced by Muslim polygamy and patriarchalism.

Notes
1 Many would point straight to racial mixture as the excessive factor of Brazil’s history. I remember a classmate of mine in a middle-class primary school at Recife. He said, in a language typical of Northeastern Brazil, “negro é a desgraça do Brasil” [Blacks are the misfortune of Brazil]. Although not myself the target of the remark, I have never been able to forget it. Several short sentences of this kind are reproduced in Harris 1952. I have not either been able to forget – I was about four or five when this took place – that my nanny was forbidden to kiss me. I still, so many years later, have a poignant remembrance of Doba’s caresses and lullabies.
2 This is a leitmotif in An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (Myrdal 1944).
3 We do not believe we are the first commentator to doubt that the mulatto and cafuso seamen, of whom Freyre caught sight on the soft snow of Brooklyn (according to the Brazilian original of that passage), were so sickly as he claims. The Brazilian navy certainly possessed, by that time, good services of selection and health care for its personnel. (The São Paulo and the Minas Gerais he refers to, in the Brazilian original, were not two states of the Brazilian Federation, but two battleships of the Brazilian navy.) The mulattos and “cafusos” Freyre caught sight of belonged to the small fry of the ship. The Brazilian navy kept for a long time the reputation of admitting only lily-white candidates to its officer corps. I also imagine Freyre did not meet the seamen due to pure haphazard. He probably, like other members of the Brazilian elite of New York, had been invited to a reception on board the ship. It seems likely that Freyre used the alibi of sickness to justify his own shock, as he admits it, with “the fearfully mongrel aspect” of those seamen, whose “illness” was very probably nothing but miscegenation as caught sight of by a distinguished White Brazilian gentleman.
5 This is all the more surprising since Alfredo Freyre, Gilberto’s father, was closely connected with the Baptist Church in Recife. Gilberto was a student at Colégio Americano-Batista. He converted to Protestantism and became, when still a teenager, a lay Baptist preacher. His Baptist future looked so promising that he was sent with a scholarship to Baylor College, a prominent Baptist institution in Waco, Texas. There he spent a few semesters before qualifying for a BA degree, on the strength of which he was admitted to working toward a Master’s degree in History at Columbia University. He then renounced Protestantism, becoming, for the rest of his life, a non-practicing, but avowed Roman Catholic of a conservative bent, having received the last rites previous to his death in 1987.
6 Freyre’s intellectual genealogy is the subject of Motta and Fernandes 2013.
7 The leading movement that represented those tendencies in the early 20th century was called Action Française, founded and headed by Charles Maurras.
8 Even more so than with Marxism.
9 The literature on Action Française is very extensive. Eugen Weber 1962 enjoys a good reputation among cognoscenti, both in the U.S. and France.

Bibliography
