

**THE OTHER ROOTS**  
**SÉRGIO BUARQUE DE HOLANDA AND THE**  
**PORTUGUESE**

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The idea of “roots” clearly has a powerful appeal. Here I attempt to show how the metaphorical field evoked by the title of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s book, *Raízes do Brasil*, points towards an indistinct, difficult origin, traumatic due to its own lack of definition.

As with all metaphors, the “roots” of the title transport us to a particular imaginary country. When reading *Raízes do Brasil*, we realize that this country, or this territory, is above all transcontinental and transcultural. It is part America, part Europe, part Africa. However, what is interesting is that Sérgio Buarque de Holanda does not restrict his investigation purely to the concepts of miscegenation and the mythical fusion of the so-called “three races” on the American continent. From the beginning, he is more concerned with a hybrid space which is the real starting point to the Luso-Brazilian or Luso-Afro-Brazilian civilizational adventure.

This space is more than mere hybrid, it is “indecisive,” oscillating between Europe and Africa, neither here nor there. Through it, Portugal emerges as a “bridging-territory,” an image which Gilberto Freyre had already made famous by the time the first edition of *Raízes do Brasil* was published in 1936, drawing inspiration from a pantheon of authors, amongst the most notable of whom was Alexandre Herculano (Freyre 81).

The issue of origins—the roots of Brazil—clearly brings into focus the problem of pertaining, or not pertaining, belonging or not belonging, so dear to contemporary theory. In this sense, it is no exaggeration to say that the anguish and the theoretical and poetical hesitation of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in *Raízes do Brasil* reveal something that we can, nowadays, recognize as the impertinence of pertaining. The

fact is that we are all, whether we like it or not, especially those in the academic Anglophone world, informed and trained by a type of sensibility that emerges from post-colonial studies and poststructuralism. It is a sensibility that makes us profoundly distrustful of any origins that are fixed. Indeed, the notion of a clear and unequivocal identity is, quite rightly, anathema to the discourses of the contemporary academy.

*Raízes do Brasil* was published when Sérgio Buarque de Holanda was already a well-known intellectual fashioned by Brazilian modernism, occasionally working as a literary critic for the newspapers of Rio de Janeiro. During the year of the book's first edition, he was affiliated with the Universidade do Distrito Federal, which would be closed shortly thereafter, in the wake of the *Estado Novo* coup. There, he taught both history and literary studies.<sup>1</sup> However, the year and a half he spent in Berlin as a journalist, between 1929 and 1930, was really the formative experience which evoked in him feelings of estrangement towards his home country. The experience of exile (both voluntary and involuntary) is vital to our appreciation of the creative processes involved in the elaboration of a work such as *Raízes do Brasil*, or even Gilberto Freyre's better-known *Casa-grande & senzala*. The latter came about not only as a result of Freyre's experience as a Ph.D. student at Columbia University, but above all because of his time as a visiting lecturer at Stanford University in California.<sup>2</sup> Both works are representative of the major syntheses of social interpretation that flourished in the 1930s, and are dominated by the need to explain Brazil through a sense of contrast substantiated by foreign experience.<sup>3</sup> We should remember here that the whole of the first chapter of *Raízes do Brasil* is dedicated to what is suggestively entitled "Fronteiras da Europa."

Of course, this *liminal* space reverts back to an image full of implications which places the Iberian Peninsula, and specially Portugal, as a sort of front line and fantastical point in which Europe can barely recognise itself. It is the "reserva do sonho" in Eduardo Lourenço's words, or, more pointedly, the poor and underdeveloped country, scarcely capable of

## *The Other Roots*

cooperating in the desperate Spanish attempt to “re-attach” the peninsula to “*próxima Europa*.” That liminal space inspired and underscored José Saramago’s narrative imagination in his *A jangada de pedra*. It is a space that always fades away on the horizon.

To understand *Raízes do Brasil* fully, or at least to understand its portrayal of Portugal, we must remember that Max Weber’s images provided a backdrop for the young Sérgio Buarque de Holanda.<sup>4</sup> The importance of Buarque de Holanda’s time in Germany cannot be underestimated. As a result of that stay, at the turn of the 1930s, the future Brazilian historian was immersed in an intellectual ambiance saturated in the major ideological questions of the day, particularly those concerning the spirit of peoples, race and identity, national character, founding myths, and collective essences. It was the sort of theoretical swamp in which the monstrous shadow of the Third Reich is retroactively projected, and it was also an environment in which Europe foresaw itself as divided in two. Against that backdrop, Weber was always an available counterbalance, far from those nationalist essentialist concerns. What interested him—in works which still held an enormous appeal at the time Sérgio Buarque de Holanda was at university in the last years of the Weimar Republic—was the individual’s internalisation of the monastic ethic, and that religious asceticism which the protestant reformation elevated to its maximum potency. The main conceptual path is very well known: Weber tried to understand the moment when the Protestant ethic was to become secular, setting a new world-vision (*Weltanschauung*) and, strictly speaking, a whole new world: that of modern capitalism. In a way, Weber tried to understand how the individual gives himself up, throwing himself into daily and methodical work in a struggle which is at the same time religious and secular, sacred and profane. In sum, the reference here is the work ethic within the capitalist world.

However, there is a territory which is left outside this world and this ethic. Figuratively speaking, the Catholic shadow of the Counter-Reformation spreads itself over *another* Europe, reaching in particular its extremes, that is, the

imaginary space of the radical alterity, of “another West,” in José Guilherme Merquior’s words, words that continue the long tradition of debates about the Iberian origins of Portuguese and Spanish America. The theme, as is known, is ever-present within Latin-American social and literary imagination. All *arielismos* are therein potentially present, as part of a broad conception which insists on seeing Latin America in relation to its double: a protestant America, sometimes emulated, sometimes rejected, but always desired, even if secretly.<sup>5</sup>

The first chapter of *Raízes do Brasil* is a profound, hermetic and a somewhat impressionistic investigation of a world and a culture in which the individual never relinquishes himself. In Francisco Rodrigues Lobo’s work, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda finds attributes such as “a inteireza, o ser, a gravidade, o termo honrado, o proceder sisudo,” all of which exalt the Portuguese “nobre escudo” (28) and leads us to believe that Iberian man never dedicates himself to a task unless it is for himself.

Politics itself, underscored by this notion, is something that does not transcend Iberian men. A collective solution, if reached, will be achieved through the endeavours of an extraordinary individual:

Efetivamente, as teorias negadoras do livre-arbítrio foram sempre encaradas com desconfiança e antipatia pelos espanhóis e portugueses. Nunca eles se sentiram muito à vontade em um mundo onde o mérito e a responsabilidade individuais não encontrassem pleno reconhecimento.

Foi essa mentalidade, justamente, que se tornou o maior óbice, entre eles, ao espírito de organização espontânea, tão característica de povos protestantes, e sobretudo de calvinistas. Porque, na verdade, as doutrinas que apregoam o livre arbítrio e a responsabilidade pessoal são tudo, menos favorecedoras da associação entre os homens. Nas nações ibéricas, à falta dessa racionalização da vida, que tão cedo experimentaram algumas terras protestantes, o princípio unificador foi sempre representado pelos governos. Nelas predominou, incessantemente, o tipo de organização política artificialmente mantida por uma força exterior, que, nos tempos modernos, encontrou uma das suas formas características nas ditaduras militares (27).

## *The Other Roots*

If we accept these Weberian propositions, we might think that the “Iberian peoples” shaped the universe of work and politics, culture and society in a way that Sérgio Buarque de Holanda finds unique.

Those who know *Raízes do Brasil* are aware that this initial lack of distinction between the Portuguese and the Spanish will give way, in the body of the work, to a whole chain of differentiations. These differentiations will, in turn, delineate the terms of reference for comparing Portuguese and Spanish America. They are the foundation for the analysis of the myth of paradise on Earth in *Visão do paraíso*—Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s masterpiece, published in 1958.

What interests us here is not so much the debate about the “originality” of Brazilian civilisation, whose miscegenated character alludes to the original porosity of the Portuguese people, a people who were apparently always open to the Other, as Gilberto Freyre, and more recently, Darcy Ribeiro, want us to believe. This dubious *tropicologia*, which nevertheless continues to seduce even the most unsuspecting critics, is subject for another study. What really interests us is simply to note how this indecisive space between continents, and also between cultures, creates a sort of indefinite, oscillating territory. It is here that Gilberto Freyre would ultimately identify a democratic space. While Sérgio Buarque de Holanda does not go as far, he does draw on a passage by Gil Vicente, and on Alberto Sampaio’s analysis of Portugal’s ancient history, to remind us that the social hierarchy in the *Finisterra* was always less rigid than in the rest of Europe, where the distance between nobles and peasants was always clear and profound (*Raízes*, 24-27).

The final question I raise is the following: what does the oscillation of Brazil’s “roots” mean? To play on Roberto Schwarz’s famous expression, what does it mean that roots are “misplaced,” neither here nor there, or rather, in a space that is by definition undefined? For historical and chronological reasons, Brazil did not suffer the shadow of Portuguese colonial power for as long as the rest of the Lusophone world. As for the Lusophone world itself, those of us who

teach in the Anglophone academy know that our discomfort with the term “*Lusofonia*” forces us to name all our courses as courses on the literatures of the “Portuguese-speaking world”—as if we could vanquish ghosts by simply shifting titles. The colonial period is a remote memory zone for a secondary-school child in Brazil. But it becomes a phantasmagorical zone for a college student, and it can crudely and cruelly reveal itself within the striking anachronisms of the Brazilian social and racial, or ethnic, structure of today. In short, the Portuguese-speaking postcolonial world is not totally exclusive to the regions that belonged to modern Portuguese colonialism. Ironically, Brazil can reclaim its part in the same dismantled Portuguese Empire, despite knowing that Brazilian modernists, from the 1920s onwards, invented the fantasy of a major break, of profound separation, as if we, “*nós, brasileiros,*” had nothing to do with Portugal.

The merit of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s work is that it pointed out, over a decade after the juvenile and exuberant fantasy of the modernist feast in Brazil, that whether Brazilians like it or not, Portuguese history does have something to do with them. It is obvious that the usage of pronouns of the first and the third person plural (“*nós,*” “*eles*”) is problematic. But it is exactly here, within the hide-and-seek game of words, that the universe of politics may be found. We are ourselves, but we are also the Other.

Up to this point we are only at the same common sense level of Brazilian modernism, with its ingenious, yet at times innocently conceived idea of *antropofagia*. According to this idea, in the face of the Other, I devour and absorb it to become myself. What Sérgio Buarque de Holanda asserts, in the 1930s—a time when there was already disenchantment with Modernism in Brazil—is that the moment for the construction of the “I” points towards a mythical moment of a constitution that in itself is unreachable.

Actually, those whom I devour carry on threatening me, and it does not matter that they have lost their fighting power. Those whom I devour carry on threatening me phantasmagorically, insisting on reminding me of the indecisive

## *The Other Roots*

zone from where I hail, an oscillating zone which, as with Borges's question about time, puts us at the centre of a paradox: when I want to find myself, I cannot; when I do not want to find myself, I find myself there.

The position I am advocating as that of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in *Raízes do Brasil* refers to the idea that the "sign"-Brazil present in the title of his book is submitted to the oscillating and imprecise nature of roots that never root, and perhaps have never taken root. It calls to mind Derrida who, serving as a starting point for Luís Madureira's recent study, claims and defends the ability of the sign to disempower the "context" from all its traditional strength.

As Madureira reminds us in his *Cannibal Modernities*, every sign, according to Derrida, "carries with it a force of breaking with its context" (1). The crisis that is developing here is not only linguistic. Or rather, as it is a crisis of meaning, it is also a political crisis: the reference which we hoped to find in the *root* of the word, of the sign-Brazil, is lacking. It is not just a question of imagining that the roots are loose, and that it would be good to re-plant them in national or international soil. The problem is that these roots continue to point towards an Other that challenges me. It is an Other which takes root in me, at the very time that I recognize and I assume him as another.

Notes:

1. On Buarque de Holanda's tenure at the Universidade do Distrito Federal, see Carvalho.

2. On Freyre's experience abroad, see Pallares-Burke, Larreta, and Gomes. On Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's experience abroad, see Barbosa, Monteiro 2006, and Wegner.

3. On the importance of being a "stranger" to his or her own country in order to explain it, see Rocha, and Santiago.

4. On the importance of Max Weber's theses in the work of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, see Machado, and Monteiro 1999.

5. On the more or less secret passion of the "other side of the mirror," see both Morse and DaMatta.

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*The Other Roots*

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