

GILBERTO

SOCIAL THEORY IN THE TROPICS

FREYRE



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1 The Importance Of Being Gilberto

What was or is the importance of Gilberto Freyre? He has some claim to be regarded not only as a leading social thinker and historian but also as the most famous intellectual of twentieth-century Brazil or even, as one enthusiast suggested, of Latin America. However, in his long life (1900–87), Freyre played many other parts. In the language of Lewis Mumford, a thinker whom he much admired, he was a ‘generalist’ rather than a specialist. When he was presented for an honorary degree at the University of Sussex in 1965, Asa Briggs called him someone who ‘spans the disciplines’. In fact, he was a ‘one-man-band’ (*homem-orquestra*), as Freyre himself sometimes described people whom he admired, among them the American poet Walt Whitman.

In his reading, Freyre transgressed the frontier between the so-called ‘two cultures’ of science and the humanities, referring in his historical works to studies of physiology, climatology, nutrition and medicine. He was active as a sociologist, a historian, a journalist, a deputy in the Brazilian Assembly, a novelist, poet and artist (ranging from caricatures to watercolours). He was a cultural critic, with a good deal to say about architecture, past and present, and a public intellectual, whose pronouncements on race, region and empire – not to mention sex – made him famous in some quarters and notorious in others. It is difficult to imagine how he found the time for so much reading and writing, as well as other activities, despite the support team of family, friends and disciples who typed his manuscripts (originally written in pencil) or copied documents for him in the archives.

In Brazil he is best known as the author of one of the most influential interpretations of that country’s culture and history, *Casa Grande & Senzala* (1933: literally ‘The Big House and the Slave Quarters’, translated into English under the title *The Masters and the Slaves*). Its central argument about the importance of miscegenation in Brazilian history and of the importance of the Indian and more especially of the African contribu-

tion to Brazilian culture – virtually denied before *Casa Grande & Senzala* (henceforth CGS) appeared in 1933 – helped his compatriots to define their identity. Later books continued the project of interpreting Brazil from the perspective of social history or historical sociology. From the 1930s onwards, the author was commonly described, like Henry James, as ‘The Master’, or alternatively ‘The Master of Apipucos’ (his little ‘Big House’ in a suburb of Recife). A documentary about his life was launched under that title.¹

Freyre knew how to appeal both to academic readers and to a wider public. CGS was received with enthusiasm by the anthropologists Alfred Métraux and Georges Balandier, the critic Roland Barthes and the historians Fernand Braudel, Asa Briggs, Lucien Febvre and Frank Tannenbaum. In Brazil, the book’s twenty-fifth and fiftieth anniversaries were marked by academic celebrations. CGS also enjoyed a popular success that few history books can match. Besides more than forty editions and translations into nine languages, this study has been ‘translated’ into a comic book and a television mini-series, while two directors (one of them Robert Rossellini) planned to turn it into a film.

As for Freyre’s later publications, a newspaper survey made in 1948 showed that his new book about the British in Brazil, *Ingleses no Brasil* (‘The English in Brazil’; henceforth *IB*) was the best-seller of the week, ahead of a new novel by the Scottish writer A. J. Cronin (then at the height of his reputation) and the autobiography of Rachel Mussolini, the wife of the late Duce, telling the story of her life with Benito. Another historical study, *Ordem e Progresso* (*Order and Progress*; henceforth *O&P*) sold 10,000 copies in the six weeks following its publication in 1959.

Freyre has been described as a ‘national monument’ and – by the modernist writer Oswald de Andrade – as ‘our literary totem’ (*nosso escritor totêmico*). No wonder then that the Committee on Education and Culture of the Chamber of Deputies chose him as Brazilian candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947, or that the Brazilian government declared the centenary of his birth, 2000, to be ‘The National Year of Gilberto de Mello Freyre’, in which a postage stamp was issued in his honour. Less attention was apparently given to the five-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of Brazil by the Portuguese than to the discovery of Brazil by Freyre for the Brazilians. Gilberto – as he is often called, even by people who never knew him – has also become a local hero. In 2004 the new international airport in his native city of Recife, in the state of Pernambuco, was christened ‘Gilberto Freyre Airport’. School parties regularly visit his house, while taxi-drivers, proud of their local celebrity, offer to take tourists there.

The totemic writer was also a breaker of taboos. His colloquial style offended some of his first readers in the early 1930s. His blunt writing about sex was condemned as pornographic. His statements about the influence of African culture on Brazilians – all Brazilians, without exception – were quite shocking at the time that they were first put forward.

Freyre deserves the attention not only of readers concerned with Brazil or South America but also of readers with a general interest in history or social theory – even if he is better described as a ‘quasi-theorist’, as we shall explain later. Essential to his project was the focus on the everyday, on private life, or as Freyre himself said (following the Goncourt brothers) ‘intimate history’ (*historia íntima*). Intimate history, including the study of food, clothes, housing and the body, was a reaction against the traditional assumption of the ‘dignity of history’ and a plea for the study of ‘the Cinderellas of history’, ordinary people, as well as humble objects and apparently trivial yet significant details. This style of history has enlisted many recruits in the last few years under the banner of the ‘new cultural history’, but in the 1930s and 1940s it was still relatively unusual, if not downright eccentric.

One of the central arguments of this book is that the histories of historical writing, histories that emphasize contributions from the ‘centre’, in other words Europe and North America, need to be redrawn in order to take account of the pioneering work of this gifted sociologist-historian from the periphery. However, the fact that he was a pioneer of approaches that are now acceptable or even orthodox is not the only reason or even the best reason for reading the former heretic today. Some of his ideas are more shocking now than when he first put them forward. Others have not been taken up, or taken up only to be abandoned – yet we can still learn from them.

Freyre was a major social theorist or more exactly – given his aversion to system – a major social thinker, one of the few who have not come from Western Europe or the United States. It has often been noted that social, cultural and political theories that claim to describe the human condition are usually formulated on the basis of the experience of those parts of the world alone. How different would the history of sociology or anthropology have been if Max Weber (say) had come from India, Emile Durkheim from Cuba or Norbert Elias from Martinique? The problem is that even when social and cultural theories have been produced in the ‘Third World’ – by M. N. Srinivas, for instance, Fernando Ortiz or Frantz Fanon – they have taken a long time to travel to the Western centres of social studies. Even today, despite the rise of Postcolonial Studies, these ideas of the three scholars are not as well known in the West as they deserve to be.

A similar point might be made about Brazil and about Freyre. Brazil's Carnival and popular music (not to mention sex and violence) are in the limelight of publicity, but the country's scholars and thinkers remain in the shadows, Freyre among them. Best known in his own country for his positive evaluation of miscegenation and cultural hybridity, together with his controversial theories or quasi-theories of 'racial democracy' and 'Luso-Tropicalism', he also put forward original and provocative ideas on such topics as the sociology of architecture, language, medicine, leisure and time and the problems of post-industrialism, post-capitalism and – to use a term that he was employing long before it became fashionable – 'postmodernism'. His career shows that problems and controversies that we often think belong to our own time alone have been discussed for generations, while the analyses and the solutions that he put forward have not lost their relevance.

In a recent study of Islamic fundamentalism, Roxanne Euben has argued the case for what she calls 'comparative political theory', in other words the introduction of 'non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together, thus ensuring that "political theory" is about human and not merely Western dilemmas'.² To write about Freyre's work is to make a contribution to a comparative social theory in the same spirit.

Freyre's ideas are of particular relevance today for both political and academic reasons. His suggestion that Brazilians should accept themselves as a mixture of ethnic groups and cultures, rather than fragment into Italo-Brazilians, German-Brazilians, Afro-Brazilians and so on, remains a topical issue in Brazil, but globalization has made it relevant to many other parts of the world as well. In the academic world, his mixture of sociology and anthropology with history and literature (another form of hybridity!), was unorthodox in his own time – the moment of the rise of quantitative methods – but is taken more seriously today. His interest in gender, ethnicity, hybridity, identity, cultural patrimony and the problems of the periphery ensure that his ideas are still topical.

Freyre's achievement has been assessed in very different ways. It has often been simplified, thus ignoring its paradoxes and ambiguities and it has sometimes been utilized to support some cause, regional, national or ideological, as in the notorious case of the Salazar regime in Portugal, to be discussed in detail later in this book.

His admirers have presented Freyre as if he had always been a follower of the great German-American anthropologist Franz Boas, replacing race by culture as the key to the interpretation of Brazil, thus suppressing the many hesitations, qualifications and ambiguities in Freyre's thought.³ In

opposed yet similar fashion, critics, especially Marxist critics, have focused on – and in a sense invented – a reactionary Freyre, ignoring his many references to social antagonisms and treating his famous trilogy about Brazil as a simple description of a society marked by social harmony, consensus or ‘racial democracy’. These opposite interpretations are equally reductive and simplistic.

Freyre himself might be described as an accomplice in this process of simplification. The invention of Freyre included his self-invention. For example, he too presented himself as if he had been a follower of Boas ever since his student days. He liked to spread rumours about himself, such as the story current in the early 1930s that he was about to marry the daughter of an American millionaire and was going to buy an island, a sugar factory and a major newspaper in Recife. In the 1940s, he was criticized in a newspaper for his ‘exhibitionist’ pleasure in appearing in public and posing for photographs.

Thanks to this tendency, Freyre left a great deal of material for future biographers – the first biography (written by his cousin Diogo Meneses) appearing as early as 1944, when the protagonist was in his early forties.⁴ The prefaces to his many books include a good deal of autobiographical material. As he grew older, Freyre wrote and spoke about himself more and more. In his sixties, he published reflections on his career under the title *Como e porque sou e não sou sociólogo* (‘How and why I am and am not a sociologist’). In his seventies, he published what he claimed was a slightly edited version of the diary that he kept as an adolescent and young adult, a text that is now known to be a later autobiography in diary form.⁵ At eighty, he gave interviews to the press (including *Playboy*) in which he spoke openly about sexual experiments.

As in the case of all self-presentations, it would obviously be a mistake to interpret these texts literally or believe every claim that they make: claims to have been the first to put forward certain ideas, for instance, to have been close to famous writers such as W. B. Yeats or H. L. Mencken, or to have been the victim of a conspiracy of silence. On the other hand, since self-images play an important role in everyone’s life, they have a place in any biography or portrait. In any case it is quite difficult to say something about Freyre, even something critical, that he had not already said himself somewhere or other: about his lack of system, his penchant for calling long books ‘essays’, his mania for prefaces and so on.

In spite of his egocentrism, it is fair to say that there are signs, dispersed among Freyre’s many writings, of a person who did not take himself too seriously and even made fun of his notorious vanity. He was quite

aware that he could perform too much and mocked the way in which he savoured praise 'like a child savouring sweets'. In fact, his friend Simkins made a perspicacious remark about Freyre's sense of humour when referring to his self-presentation as a 'Federal Senator of Brazil' in the 1940s. 'As he struts and poses I am sure there is at least one person laughing. That person is the senator himself.'⁶

Another major source tells us about Gilberto the reader. To the despair of librarians and the delight of his biographers, Freyre was an active reader who often dog-eared the pages of his books. He had the habit of reading with a pencil or pen in his hand in order to mark passages of particular interest. When a pencil or pen was not within reach, he not infrequently scored passages with his fingernail. He also wrote comments in the margins of books, allowing us to catch his thought in flight, as it were. Thanks to this evidence, together with his letters, it is possible to identify the thinkers most important for Freyre's development, his 'masters', as he sometimes called them, and to see more clearly than before what attracted him to these thinkers and how he used, qualified or developed their ideas.

Among the conclusions that emerge from this source, two should be singled out here at the start. The first concerns Isaiah Berlin's much-employed distinction between two types of intellectual: the hedgehog, concerned with one big idea, and the fox, who is many-sided. At first sight Freyre is a classic instance of a fox, a voracious reader with many interests, a 'intellectual sponge' as the writer Bruce Chatwin once called him, soaking up ideas as well as information, absorbing them and making them part of himself.⁷ However, some of his annotations reveal the hedgehog inside the fox, showing that when he was reading about England or the United States, for instance, he was thinking about Brazil. Reading G. M. Trevelyan's *English Social History*, he marked the pages on country houses, travel and child labour. Reading Wilbur J. Cash's well-known study of the United States, *The Mind of the South* (1941), he sometimes wrote in the margin 'Brazil'. His mind was less of a sponge than a filter, selecting what would be useful for his work.

Freyre was not a marble statue but human, sometimes 'all too human', in his intellectual life as in his life more generally. In this study we aim at being critical, at pointing to what we consider to be the weaknesses of our protagonist. However, we also consider it our duty to present his point of view and to concentrate on his strengths, the positive aspects of his work from which readers from different cultures can still learn today.

What follows is not an intellectual biography in the strict sense – that is, a chronological account of the development of an individual, like the

detailed account of the young Freyre that one of the authors has already published, *Gilberto Freyre: Um vitoriano dos trópicos* ('Gilberto Freyre: a Victorian from the Tropics'; henceforth VT). What we offer is what Gilberto himself might have called a 'semi-biography'. It presents an intellectual portrait of Freyre in the manner of the portrait of Max Weber by the American sociologist Reinhart Bendix.⁸ In other words, this is a book concerned more with the thought than the thinker, and consequently organized by themes rather than by decades.

All the same, it would be a mistake to ignore the intellectual development of a man whose publications were spread over some seventy years and whose views changed more than he ever cared to admit, most obviously in the case of his conversion from a belief in the importance of race, and in the superiority of the white race in particular, to a belief in the importance of culture, including the contribution of the slaves to the culture of their masters. To reinforce this sense of development we have included a brief chronology of his life and writings. This intellectual portrait is also the portrait of an intellectual in the sense of an individual who, as we have said, was attracted not only by literature and scholarship but also by public affairs, moving between the two realms with apparent ease.⁹

Freyre often thought in a comparative mode. In order to understand Brazil better, he made comparisons and contrasts with Spanish America (especially with the plantations of Cuba), with the United States (especially the South), with Britain (noting a similar art of compromise, but also, he thought, a lack of adaptability to the tropics). Viewing Brazil as a kind of tropical Russia, a huge country with slaves instead of serfs, he acquired books about Russia, from Georgi Plekhanov to Richard Pipes. In order to help identify Freyre's distinctive approaches and achievements, we have adopted a similar approach, suggesting comparisons between his work and that of other Brazilians (Mário de Andrade, Jorge Amado and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, for instance) and Latin Americans (Jorge Borges, Fernando Ortiz).

Freyre's work also has affinities with that of some European historians and theorists. As a portrait of an age, we might – and indeed will – compare CGS to the Dutchman Johan Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages*¹⁰. In other ways its approach resembles that of Philippe Ariès, the French historian of childhood and the family. As a social theorist, Freyre's style resembles that of Georg Simmel, a master of the impressionistic approach to sociology; while his interests in the history of material culture and everyday life ran parallel to those of Norbert Elias. Like Pierre Bourdieu, he viewed his own culture with foreign or anthropological eyes and focused on what Freyre called the 'insignia' of social distinction.

In fact, Freyre had a life-long interest in foreign writers and thinkers, especially the English and French, appropriating and transforming, or as he said, 'tropicalizing' their ideas. His gradual discovery of this intellectual world is the main topic of the chapter that follows.

2 Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man¹

Precisely because of his wide curiosity and interests, the young Gilberto Freyre found the Recife of his time too narrow for his cultural ambitions. He saw not only his 'village in the provinces', as he called his city, but the whole country as too backward to offer the educational opportunities he longed for. 'Why was I not born an Englishman, a German or American?' he once lamented to a friend.²

Freyre's close relatives were willing to help him to overcome the obstacles to his development and, following a long tradition among the Brazilian elite of sending their sons to study abroad, paid for him to live five years away from home. Indeed, to travel and study abroad was, not only for Freyre but also for his family, a means for the unquiet, talented and promising youngster to develop his great potential fully and realize his ambitions. As his older brother made clear in a letter sent from the United States to the sixteen-year-old Freyre in Recife, to study abroad for a few years was a necessary step for his important, albeit still unknown, future role in the country's so much needed development.

Freyre was born in Recife in 1900 into a relatively impoverished upper-middle-class family that had been part of the rural aristocracy of the state of Pernambuco in the North-East of Brazil, which was once the most important region of the country. His mother Francisca was descended from one of the most distinguished plantation owners, the Wanderleys of Serinhaém, their Dutch name, Van der Ley, going back to the Dutch occupation of Pernambuco in the seventeenth century. His father, Alfredo, was a judge as well a professor of political economy in the Law Faculty of Recife. Despite this academic background, it did not seem at first that Freyre was destined to achieve any intellectual success. Like W. B. Yeats, Einstein and so many other great men, the young Gilberto did not excel right from the start. His grandmother, as his father recalls, had died almost certain that the young Freyre was 'mentally retarded'. Indeed, much more interested in drawing than in the three Rs, he learned to count, read and write only at the age of eight, thanks to an English teacher, Mr Williams,

who recognized his 'unusual intelligence', stimulated the boy's enthusiasm for English literature and culture and would be always remembered with gratitude by Freyre and his father for the stimulus and understanding he had provided.³

The Education of Gilberto Freyre

Freyre's school, where his father also taught, was the American Baptist College in Recife, which attracted children of the best families of the region. Baptist schools, which had been founded in different parts of Brazil, were part of the Protestant missionary project of the late nineteenth century. Although they failed to convert large numbers of people, as they had hoped, the Baptists were successful in their educational enterprises, which were open to Catholics. The Freyres chose the Baptist school for their children on account of its high academic standards and innovative methods, not its religious affiliation. All the same, Freyre did become a Protestant for a short time in his late teens, to the dismay of his mother, for whom Protestantism was equivalent to heresy. At that time, as he later confessed, he had been seduced by the example of the missionary and explorer David Livingstone, who was, for a time, his great hero. His school years were years of voracious and precocious reading (including Tolstoy, Kant and Nietzsche) not to mention writing for his school magazine and even, at the age of fifteen, giving a public lecture on Herbert Spencer.

It was thanks to the connections of the American College with sister institutions in the United States that Freyre was sent to Baylor, a Baptist university in Waco, Texas, known as the 'Baptist Vatican', which had already accepted a number of Brazilian students, some of them from the leading families of Recife. Europe would have been his family's first choice for him, and his too, but the year in which he turned eighteen was 1918, not exactly the ideal moment for a prolonged stay in France or England.

Freyre found Baylor and Waco very disappointing and, ironically for someone who was trying to escape from the narrowness of Recife, 'terribly provincial', as he put it. The majority of his fellow students he considered mediocre and, although he admitted that the racial prejudices he shared with the Brazilian elite grew even stronger in Texas, the violence against black people that abounded in the region was certainly disconcerting. It was there that he lost his brief enthusiasm for Protestantism, having realized that there was little in common between his admired Livingstone and the students – whom he described as 'Bible-maniacs' – who were being prepared to become missionaries. He rejected the pretentiousness of their claim to be 'giving lessons' to the Catholics.

On the other hand, Freyre's interest in books in general and in English literature, in particular, was greatly encouraged by the one professor at Baylor whom he admired deeply and who became his most long-lasting American friend and interlocutor, the head of the English Department, Andrew Joseph Armstrong, a convinced anglophile, at least as far as literature was concerned. Armstrong shared with his students his belief in the power of books to enlarge one's mind, stressing in his lectures that by reading widely, without prejudice against this or that cultural tradition, an individual would not only live his own limited life, but would be able to 'live the lives of every race!'

Thanks to this professor's dynamism, Baylor, and even Waco, was spared from the total monotony and 'banality' of a province, as Freyre soon noticed. The many concerts, plays and visits by major cultural figures, national and international, that Armstrong organized on the campus – more than a hundred of them in the course of his academic life – were a way for him to widen the horizons of the students, one of the main roles of a university, as he saw it. During Baylor's Jubilee, in 1920, Freyre was delighted to hear lectures by W. B. Yeats and the American poets Vachel Lindsay and Amy Lowell, who would all play a part in his development as a writer.

In Armstrong's department, which was far from conventional, Freyre studied – along with Shakespeare – authors as different, for instance, as Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Goethe, the medieval German poets known as the *Minnesinger*, the now obscure German novelist Sudermann and three genres of English literature that would be extremely important for his intellectual development: the novel, the essay and the travelogue. All of these were approached, in a typical Armstrong style, not only through their formal or literary aspects, but as a kind of cultural history.⁴

Freyre's passion for English literature certainly took root at Baylor, although he did not devote all his time to its study. He followed courses in history and sociology, he read widely on his own, and he wrote regular articles for a Recife newspaper, the *Diário de Pernambuco* (founded in 1825, making it the oldest newspaper in Latin America). He also observed the culture around him, that of a small town in the American South, with its wounds from the Civil War still unhealed, at a time when the First World War was ending, the Ku Klux Klan growing and the lynching of African-Americans was not uncommon.

When the time came for him to decide where to go and what to study after graduation, Freyre chose the Faculty of Political Science at Columbia University. His letters reveal his excitement at living in a metropolis and participating in its rich cultural life after two years in a small town. New

York itself, as he told his newspaper readers, was 'full of educational opportunities' and in the middle of it he felt as a 'greedy child in front of a huge bowl of ... pudding'. Another reason for his choice of university was his intention of writing a dissertation on the history of South America under the supervision of a leading Columbia historian, William R. Shepherd.

Disappointed with his performance in the English language, which was not as outstanding as he wished, and aware of the limitations that a foreign language entails for someone with high literary ambitions, the young Freyre soon decided to give up the successful career as a 'new Conrad', on which Professor Armstrong had wagered, turning his efforts to the study of a discipline in which he had received better grades at Baylor. 'I can walk in English, but not dance on tiptoe. I have to content myself with walking – nothing more – and even then, badly; falling down sometimes', he lamented. Little did he know that the great Conrad also fought a daily battle with English grammar and syntax.

In 1921 and 1922 the majority of the courses that Freyre took at Columbia were in history, including some given by Carleton Hayes, who, like Charles and Mary Beard and James H. Robinson ('one of the great innovators in the study of history', as Freyre wrote later), was associated with the early twentieth-century movement known as the 'New History', drawing on the social sciences in order to analyse economic, social and cultural as well as political aspects of the past. For example, in a study of the Germanic invasions of the Roman Empire, Hayes emphasized 'the contact between religions rather than between races'.⁵

At the same time, Freyre was following courses in sociology given by Franklin Giddings, and courses in anthropology by Franz Boas. Giddings is more or less forgotten now, but at this time he enjoyed a reputation as one of the leading American sociologists. A follower of Herbert Spencer who dedicated most of his writing and teaching to the spreading of his mentor's ideas, Giddings' most original contribution was to stress the importance of identity, which he called 'consciousness of kind'.⁶ Boas, who continues to enjoy a high reputation, was the leading anthropologist in the United States. Nevertheless, he was not successful at that time in the almost solitary battle that he fought against the growth of racism and its institutionalization throughout the country. Trained in geography in Germany, and at home in museums as well as in universities, Boas was not only an outspoken critic of racism but also of simple evolutionary theories that had no place for regional variation.

It is worth emphasizing that at this point in time both sociology and anthropology were closer to history than they would become a generation later. In their lectures in the early 1920s, both Giddings and Boas devoted

considerable attention to the development of civilization. The introductory course in anthropology attended by Freyre, for example, stated very clearly that one of its aims was to deal with the 'problem of the progress of civilization, and of the controlling causes that influence characteristic lines of cultural development'.

An important event in Freyre's Columbia days was the lecture he heard in November 1921 by the British classicist turned pacifist campaigner, Alfred Zimmern, on the relation of Greek political thought to modern problems. So relevant was this encounter for his development that in his later memoirs Freyre misremembered it as a course that he had followed at Columbia. Author of the once famous *The Greek Commonwealth* (1911), a work that Harold Laski considered essential reading for the new generation, Zimmern had the unusual gift of making the past come alive and of showing its relevance to the present. As his former student Arnold Toynbee confessed, this talent made Zimmern's lectures 'one of the most sensational experiences' of his Oxford years.

Zimmern's major work was extremely innovative in its attempt to understand ancient Greek politics as the result of geographic, economic and social factors. Like other pioneer classicists from Cambridge and Oxford, among them Gilbert Murray, Robert Marett and Jane Harrison, Zimmern had an anthropological approach to historical understanding. For instance, he considered the Greek patriarchal family to be an extremely resilient social and religious system which remained in vigour from the age of Homer to that of Plato.

For Freyre, the experience of hearing Zimmern was, although brief, extremely significant. This was perhaps the first time that he had heard a historian who did not exclude from his interest everything that was not political or military and who would not hesitate to mix history with poetry and philosophy, citing writers such as Browning, Nietzsche, Unamuno and Tolstoy in order to 'extract truth from fiction'. Freyre was soon reading Zimmern's major work and drawing analogies between the histories of ancient Greece and Brazil, two societies composed of masters and slaves and of patriarchal families.⁷

It would take some time for other ideas of Zimmern's to bear fruit – such as the harmony and humanity that counteracted conflict in the relationship between master and slave – but Freyre's later development reveals the rich contribution they made to his new paradigm for the interpretation of Brazil. It is interesting to note that the expression 'Big House', which Freyre would make emblematic of the Brazilian patriarchal system and of the 'feudal' power of the plantation owners, was used by Zimmern as a synonym for the master of the Greek patriarchal family.

Also important for the intellectual development of the young Freyre were two friends he made in the Columbia years. Together with Armstrong and the Brazilian diplomat and historian Manoel de Oliveira Lima, then living in Washington, DC, who were Freyre's oldest and dearest mentors and confidants, two students of history whom he met in 1920 became important interlocutors for him for many years to come.

Francis Butler Simkins (born in 1897) came from South Carolina, went to Columbia to write a Ph.D thesis on the history of his own state and became a respected historian of the Old South. Rüdiger Bilden (born in 1893), was an immigrant from Germany, who impressed his teachers at Columbia by his humanist education, analytical capacity and rare linguistic knowledge, but for many reasons, mostly beyond his control, he did not succeed in the career in which he seemed so promising.

Bilden was writing a doctorate under Shepherd's supervision on the history of Latin America, but having a wide range of interests, from ancient history to American political theory, he became a kind of mentor to his friends, introducing Freyre, for instance, to a number of German writers and thinkers. It was perhaps thinking of Bilden that Freyre wrote to a friend that he was determined to study like 'a Friar or a German'. Aware that both of them owed a great deal to Bilden, and regretting the difficult life of the most promising of the three friends, Simkins reminded Freyre of their great debt years later: 'God knows, Rüdiger helped educate you and me, and we owe him something.'

In his New York period, although Freyre's studies were aimed at achieving a doctorate in history, he continued his love affair with English literature, voraciously reading works of fiction, literary criticism and biographies of artistic and literary figures. It is revealing of this love that when writing to friends, Freyre's enthusiastic comments about what he was reading refer almost exclusively to literary and biographical texts.

The long list includes works by or about Oscar Wilde, Matthew Arnold, Lafcadio Hearn, H. L. Mencken, John Ruskin, William Morris, George Moore and Walter Pater.⁸ In the case of Pater and Wilde it was especially their aesthetic approach to the world that attracted Freyre, an interest that was also revealed in his bohemian appearance. As his friend Simkins put it, 'he had almond eyes, the black and heavy hair of a part South American Indian, and the shabby and unseasonable clothes of the bohemian. One expected him to write decadent verse which no one could understand.'

It was thanks in part to Pater that Freyre developed an interest in the history of childhood. Reading, in the early 1920s, the beautiful autobiographical and allegorical story 'The Child in the House', Freyre was made

aware, perhaps for the first time, of the importance of childhood experiences for the mental and spiritual trajectory of all human beings.⁹ No fewer than four of the articles he wrote for *DP* in the 1920s were concerned with children and their books and toys. Visiting New York Public Library, for instance, Freyre was impressed by the section devoted to children's books and contrasted the situation with that obtaining in Brazil. The history of the child seems to have interested him partly as an opportunity to discuss his own childhood, and partly as a microcosm of the history of Brazilian culture, while the house, discussed so sensitively by Pater, would become a major theme in his later work.

Freyre abandoned the idea of taking a doctorate for financial reasons. He had to content himself with a master's thesis, which seems not to have upset him, since he was never much interested in academic grades for their own sake. The most tangible result of Freyre's New York years was the historical essay he wrote on a theme that was probably stimulated by homesickness, the social history of his own region, Pernambuco. The dissertation, published in 1922, was entitled 'Social Life in Nineteenth-Century Brazil' and offered a brief discussion of a number of themes that would continue to preoccupy the author for most of his life.

One of these themes is childhood, more exactly the lack of a real childhood for the sons and daughters of the planters. Another is the Big House and its furnishings. A third theme that would recur in Freyre's later work is what some German thinkers have called 'the contemporaneity of the non contemporary', in other words the idea that different social groups in the same society live effectively in different periods. 'In their material environment and, to a certain extent, in their social life', he wrote, 'the majority of Brazilians of the [18]50s were in the Middle Ages: only the elite was living in the eighteenth century.' Elsewhere in the essay the author refers to 'medieval landlordism', 'baronial style' and 'feudal' plantations. Finally, this essay already argues for the existence of a relatively gentle slaveholding regime in Brazil. In his usual vivid style, Freyre writes that 'The Brazilian slave lived the life of a cherub if we contrast his lot with that of the English and other European factory-worker [*sic*] in the middle of the last century.' The confident judgements of the young man are also worth noting, from the 'almost total absence of critical thought' in Brazil from 1848 to 1864 to the description of the plan of the *sobrado* (mansion) as 'a masterpiece of architectural stupidity'.

Some of the points just mentioned had been made by earlier writers, among them the parallel between the Brazilian slaveholding regime and European feudalism, already noted by the statesman Joaquim Nabuco. Again, when the author suggested that nineteenth-century Brazilian slaves

were treated better than European factory workers, he was probably, as he later suggested, 'unconsciously following the lead of José de Alencar [a famous novelist of the nineteenth century], whose books I had read with enthusiasm, even fervour, as a child.' The older Freyre also noted that the comparison had been made by English travellers of the time and also by Carleton Hayes, 'my old teacher in Columbia University'.¹⁰

Despite these precedents, 'Social Life' remains a master's thesis of remarkable precocity and originality, which was published almost immediately as an article in the *Hispanic American Historical Review*. This social history of Pernambuco was constructed from travelogues, memoirs and what is now known as oral history, Freyre's sources including his father's father, described as 'a sugar planter', and his mother's mother. In its concern with everyday life, unusual at this time, the essay reveals the inspiration of the New History, Giddings (on 'consciousness of kind') and Walter Pater, from whom he borrowed the phrase which sets the tone of the work in the very first paragraph, saying that in studying history his ambition was the same as the British essayist, who wanted to know 'how people lived, what they wore and what they looked like'.

The Scholar Gypsy

If being unable to take a doctorate did not bother Freyre, the possibility of not going to Europe worried him a good deal. For someone like him, so self-conscious about the importance of his formative years, a trip to the Old World was essential. From Nietzsche, as the marginalia he left in his copy of *Human, All Too Human* reveal, he had learned that talent or even genius was not enough by itself to produce a great man. A great deal of effort and experiences would have to be added. On the same lines, Freyre's mentor Oliveira Lima emphasized that his education would be incomplete without the experience of Europe. When the rise of the dollar against the Brazilian currency made his family consider cancelling the so much awaited visit to the Old World, the young Freyre was disconsolate and talked about going there anyway, even if it meant travelling like a 'tramp'. His plans for the trip were extremely ambitious and seem to follow Nietzsche's recommendations about the importance of seeing the world from different perspectives (*verschiedene Augen*). Inspired by Matthew Arnold's poem, *The Scholar Gypsy*, Freyre confesses in his notebook that he planned to travel as a 'scholar gypsy' [*cigano de beca*], looking for a variety of contacts with the objective, as he put it, of 'understanding the most diverse points of view'.¹¹