

# Balance of Antagonisms versus the Myth of “Racial Democracy” in *Casa Grande & Senzala*: A Hypothesis that a Hasty Reading Inspired the Myth

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**Antonio Carlos Rocha de Sousa (2020), “Balance of Antagonisms versus the Myth of “Racial Democracy” in *Casa Grande & Senzala*: A Hypothesis that a Hasty Reading Inspired Myth”**

## ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss the hypothesis which centers on the interpretation of Gilberto Freyre’s democratic ideas, proposed by Arthur Ramos and Roger Bastide, which led to the emergence of the myth of “racial democracy.” The basis of the interpretation is the author’s concept of “social democracy,” found in his writings of the mid-1930s; however, this concept is not found in his essay that *Casa Grande & Senzala* published in 1933, although many claim to find it there. Due to its importance, the book was translated into English as *The Masters and Slaves*, and published in 1946. We try to demonstrate that the origin of the myth of racial democracy cannot be found in the book, not even as an implicit idea; however, it originated from the interpretation by its critics. Therefore, in this paper we show that Gilberto Freyre proposed a balance of opposites, in a negotiated relationship that was not peaceful, but violent; however, in a relationship which Freyre conceptualized as a “balance of antagonisms” rather than as the “racial democracy,” which was interpreted by his critics.

**Keywords:** Brazil, Balance of antagonisms, Racial democracy, Freyre.

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of “balance of antagonisms” as opposed to the myth of “racial democracy” in the book *Casa Grande & Senzala*. We know that in this essay Gilberto Freyre discusses many concepts such as: miscegenation, questions about latifundium, slavery, among others. However, our focus is to discuss the concept of “balance of antagonisms”; that, as will see in this paper, it was interpreted, in our hypothesis, as the myth of “racial democracy”; myth never proposed by author, and not even found in his literary work, however it was attributed to Freyre.

The relevance of discussion proposed here, it is justified by the fact, of being widely propagated in the academic and intellectual environment; to attribute the origin of the myth of racial democracy to this book first published in 1933; that by your rich description of the racial ethnic formation of

the Brazilian, it was translated into several languages, including English, where it was titled *The Masters and Slaves* in 1946.

Thus, we consider it necessary to question which theoretical and rhetorical elements are used by Freyre's main critics, such as: Thales Azevedo, Florestan Fernandes, Roger Bastide, among others, who transfigured the concept of “balance of antagonisms” which is well defined in the book *Casa Grande & Senzala*, in so criticized myth of “racial democracy”. For this reason, we tried show in this paper to that Freyre did not propose this myth of racial democracy; but, on contrary, tried to highlight that race relations between masters and slaves did not occur as a relationship of equals; but in balanced conflict, where enslaved blacks articulated means of “negotiation” in relations with masters, in balance of antagonisms during the colonial period of slavery in Brazil. Thus, the “balance of antagonisms” is a central concept to understand this essay by Gilberto Freyre.

## BALANCE OF ANTAGONISMS

When we observe that the “balance of antagonisms” is one of the main concepts created by Gilberto Freyre among several concepts found in *Casa Grande & Senzala*, to understand the formation of Brazilian society. We can understand the importance of this concept / idea in the book; Freyre innovates in socio-historical-anthropological analysis; Gilberto takes

these studies on Brazil's social formation as a mission; he uses several official sources, official extras, photographs, letters, to describe the history of everyday life and private life while telling the official story of colony and the Catholic Church.

Freyre describes eating habits, of hygiene, how the master's relationship with slaves occurred in the Big Houses, and in this relationship, he identifies that the negro was not only passive; but that there were spaces for agency which could be accessed by slaves. Gilberto wants to understand and, at the same time, explain Brazil; but in terms culturally, culturalism was an extremely important theoretical framework for Freyre's formulations about Brazil: "According to culturalists, there is no biological or physical determinism in the constitution of each person. Similarly, society alone does not form the individual.<sup>1</sup> (Zuccolotto 2012, 40). In this sense, culturalism was an important theoretical framework for the very balance of antagonisms; it was also in the United States that Freyre began to observe that culture was more explanatory than the notion of races:

It was my studies in anthropology under the direction of Professor Boas that 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. I learned to regard as fundamental the difference between race and culture to discriminate between the effects of purely genetic relationships and those resulting from social influences, the cultural heritage and the milieu. (Freyre 1986, xxvii)

*Casa Grande & Senzala*, besides being Freyre's germinal essay, became the book "founder" of Brazil; Gilberto bases his argument on racial culturalist bias, resulting from this direction of Franz Boas; the author creates the "founding myth" of Brazil and Brazilians; seeks to demonstrate how miscegenation provided emergence of a people more adapted to inhabit the tropics (Sousa 2013). Gilberto proposes to "reveal" Brazil, he saw as a mission to explain Brazil and The Brazilian; takes on this challenge to himself, as we can see in the preface to the Second Edition in English "The Masters and Slaves": "It was as if everything was dependent upon me and those of my generation, upon the manner in which we succeeded in solving age-old questions. And of all the problems confronting Brazil there was none that gave me so much anxiety as that of miscegenation". (Freyre 1986, XXVI)

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1 **Free translation.** Original {segundo os culturalistas, não há determinismo biológico ou físico na constituição de cada pessoa. Do mesmo modo, a sociedade isoladamente também não forma o indivíduo}

Gilberto Freyre had as characteristic “plastic” form of analysis and being a “plastic author”, his concepts/ideas are plastic, in contrast; in our opinion to “harsh” concepts like “racial democracy” that would not fit in Freyre's theoretical elaboration. This plastic characteristic becomes to more evident the misinterpretation of the author's ideas by the critics identifying the proposal, although indirect of “racial democracy”.

Therefore, where did the myth of racial democracy come from? According to Antônio Sergio Guimaraes, they are a free interpretation made by Arthur Ramos and Roger Bastide of Gilberto Freyre's ideas about Brazilian democracy (Guimaraes 2001). Bastide and Ramos lend to “racial democracy” the meaning of “social democracy”, concept in which Gilberto Freyre would not be praising Brazilian democracy, but as Oliveira explains:

Osorio de Oliveira also takes the opportunity to 'clarify' an aspect of Freyre's thought that, in his opinion, has been distorted and lends itself to confusion. It is the term **social democracy**. Using this expression, the Brazilian sociologist did not intend to praise political democracy, nor to associate it with Portuguese colonization.<sup>2</sup> (Castelo 2000, 89) **[emphasis added]**

As we can see, social democracy by Freyre has the sense of characterizing the Lusitanian colonization and the process of miscegenation of the three great races in the formation of Brazilian colonial society. Later in the 1940s, after Bastide and Ramos coined the expression racial democracy, Gilberto begins to speak of ethnic democracy; which Antônio Sergio Guimaraes classifies as synonymous with “racial democracy” (Guimaraes 2001). But; how points Claudia Castelo, Freyre's ethnic democracy is an ideal, not a proposal existing in society, thus refutes the idea Guimaraes that ethnic democracy and racial democracy would be synonymous.

In sense also, of the affirmation or reaffirmation of a policy of ethnic democracy that prevails in all members of the **Lusotropical** community; the resistance to the ethnocentrism of neighboring peoples or ethnic-cultural minorities that are concentrated in community itself, in disharmony with genuinely Portuguese traditions and feelings. Really, the civilization that Gilberto Freyre describes and interprets does not exist, it is rather an aspiration, a destiny.<sup>3</sup> (Castelo 2000, 87)

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2 **free translation.** Original [Osório de Oliveira aproveita também para 'esclarecer' um aspecto do pensamento de Freyre que, em sua opinião, tem sido deturpado e se presta a confusões. Trata-se da expressão democracia social. Com o uso de tal expressão, o sociólogo brasileiro não pretendia elogiar a democracia política, nem associá-la à obra de colonização lusitana]

3 **free translation.** Original [No sentido, ainda, de afirmação ou reafirmação de uma política

We believe, therefore, that the misreading of *Casa Grande & Senzala* allowed the critics of Freyre to affirm that there was a myth of racial democracy in his germinal essay; that, in our opinion; it was only possible due to the interpretations by Roger Bastide and Arthur Ramos of Gilberto's democratic ideas, which in turn led to distorted readings that created and disseminated the "myth" itself.

This reading of Gilberto's democratic ideas by his critics becomes possible when we understand the concept of democracy as being "empty of signifier"<sup>4</sup> (Gomes 2016), because it enabled the academic group formed by researchers from USP (University of São Paulo) —which worked on the UNESCO Project in 1950, which aimed to verify the veracity of the absence of social conflict between races in Brazil when compared to what happened in the United States of America and South Africa— disseminate the idea of "racial democracy" born of this critical interpretation of Freyre ideas, even objectively the author never made such a proposal.

Even though it was interpreted that way by its critics; what Freyre proposes in his essay is a balance of antagonisms, which has as its synonym the term "balance of opposites"; concept "plastic" and relativistic that allows the author to understand the complexity of Brazilian social formation, as Fernando Henrique Cardoso remind us in the preface of the 48th Brazilian edition of *Casa Grande & Senzala* (2003): "The notion of balance of opposites is extremely rich to understand the way of apprehending the real used by Gilberto Freyre; especially since it is also "plastic" and it has everything to do with the way Gilberto Freyre interprets his objects of analysis."<sup>5</sup> (Freyre 2003, 24)

Freyre has in miscegenation the basis of his "plastic vision", used in

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de democracia étnica que vigore em todos os membros da comunidade luso tropical a resistência aos etnocentrismos vindos de povos vizinhos ou de minorias étnico-culturais que se concentrem dentro da própria comunidade, em desarmonia com as tradições e os sentimentos castiçamente lusitanos". Na verdade, a civilização que Gilberto Freyre descreve e interpreta não existe, é antes uma aspiração, um destino. (Castelo 2000, 87)].

- 4 [free translation]- comprehend democracy as an empty signifier, since the term ends up becoming a multiple articulator, condensing around itself polysemic elements, in the specific case, of a technical and moral nature, which deprives it of the possibility of having a precise meaning./ original [compreender a democracia como significante vazio, uma vez que o termo acaba por se tornar um articulador múltiplo, condensando em torno de si elementos polissêmicos, no caso específico, de natureza técnica e moral, o que lhe tira a possibilidade de ter uma significação precisa. (Gomes 2016, 7)]
- 5 free translation. original [A noção de equilíbrio dos contrários é extremamente rica para entender o modo de apreensão do real utilizado por Gilberto Freyre. Até porque também ela é "plástica". E tem tudo a ver com a maneira pela qual Gilberto Freyre interpreta seus objetos de análise.]

his analysis of Brazilian society; having the balance of antagonisms as the main concept to understand how happens: Socials relations; family relationships; sexual intercourses; relations of violence, etc. Gilberto tried to dialectically understand the process of formation of Brazilian society. In our opinion, Freyre was not understood by his critics as Strieder show us:

Some professors of sociology and history at USP (University of São Paulo) question the “**benignity**” with which slaves in Brazil were treated. According to these intellectuals, the problem of slavery must be analyzed by the not so much from the concept of “race”; but much more, based on the perverse system of production and discrimination to which black descendants were subjected. The emphasis was placed more on the structures of oppression, and on unfair competition with the whites, to whom the descendants of slaves were subjected, even after the abolition of slavery.<sup>6</sup> (Strieder 2001, 22) [emphasis added]

One of the USP professors who questioned this “benignity” in *Casa Grande & Senzala* was Florestan Fernandes, this author questions the “myth of racial democracy” contained in this “benignity”, in his interpretation exposed in the book *The Integration of Blacks in Class Society (A integração dos negros na sociedade de classes, 1965)*; in the topic “The myth of racial democracy”. Fernandes as a Marxist, has a historical materialist view; he sees in Freyre a conservative of the former agricultural oligarchies of northeastern Brazil, and sees the book *Casa Grande & Senzala* as a “romantic” book, which “sweetens” the relations of violence of the colonial period; creates stereotype of black, and brings obstacles to affirmative action on the part of blacks. In this sense Florestan writes:

In the consolidation of competitive social order in São Paulo, a block perpetuation of patterns of relations under the aegis of slavery and senhorial domination, so harmful to the “man of color”, has been produced regardless of any fear on the part of the “whites” of the probable economic, social or political consequences of racial equality and free competition with the “blacks”.<sup>7</sup> (Fernandes 1978, 250).

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6 **free translation.** original [Alguns professores de sociologia e de história da USP (Universidade de São Paulo) questionaram a “benignidade” com que teriam sido tratados os escravos no Brasil. Segundo estes intelectuais, O problema da escravidão deveria ser analisado não tanto a partir do conceito de “raça”, mas muito mais a partir do sistema iníquo de produção, e das discriminações a que foram submetidos os descendentes dos negros. A ênfase foi colocada mais nas estruturas de opressão, e na concorrência desleal com os brancos, a quem ficaram submetidos os descendentes de escravos, mesmo após a abolição da escravidão]

We note that Florestan assumes that the "myth of racial democracy" somehow proposes the existence of some level of equality between "whites" and "blacks" in Brazilian society and that this idea exists in the book *Casa Grande & Senzala*. In this sense, in our opinion, Fernandes is wrong to think about Freyre's "plastic concepts" in a way so "harsh"; especially when he talks about "white people". This becomes even more evident after reading *Casa Grande & Senzala* and seeing how Freyre uses the concept of balance of antagonisms:

Portugal is the country par excellence of the transient or half-blond European. In the deepest regions of Nordic blood, many children are born blond and pink like a Flemish baby Jesus to become, after large, in the color brunette with dark hair. Or else -what is more characteristic- duality, the balance of antagonisms, is revealed in that Minho people that Alberto Sampaio speaks of: men with blonde beards and dark hair. Brunette men with blond hair. These half-breeds with body hairs of two colors that formed, in our opinion, the majority of the Portuguese colonizers of Brazil, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> (Freyre 2003, 295)

This "white" that Florestan Fernandes speaks of does not exist in the essay *Casa Grande & Senzala*, because this "white" in Gilberto Freyre is not so white, he before reaching what would become Brazil was already hybrid, already lives in balance of antagonisms; and certainly, in no kind of democracy. This hybrid "not so white", as Gilberto Freyre points out, is more apt to colonization than other Europeans; but in colonial relations, this white man was the dominator; who with impulse and encouraged by the lack of white women to "fraternize" in sexual relations; it related first to the Indies, and then to the black woman; and this ease for the miscegenation of the Lusitanian would come from its hybrid formation with great Moorish and Jewish influences, undecided between

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7 **free translation.** original [Na consolidação de uma ordem social competitiva em São Paulo, perpetuação em bloco de padrões de relações sob a égide da escravidão e da dominação senhorial, tão nociva ao "homem de cor" produziu-se independentemente de qualquer temor por parte dos "brancos" das prováveis consequências econômicas, sociais ou políticas da igualdade racial e da livre competição com os "negros"]

8 **free translation.** original [Portugal é por excelência o país europeu do louro transitório ou do meio-louro. Nas regiões mais penetradas de sangue nórdico, muita criança nasce loura e cor-de-rosa como um Menino Jesus flamengo para tornar-se, depois de grande, morena e de cabelo escuro. Ou então - o que é mais característico - revela-se a dualidade, o equilíbrio de antagonismos, naqueles minhotos de que nos fala Alberto Sampaio: homens de barba loura e cabelo escuro. Homens morenos de cabelo louro. Esses mestiços com duas cores de pelo é que formaram, a nosso ver, a maioria dos portugueses colonizadores do Brasil, nos séculos XVI e XVII]

Europe and North Africa, the Lusitanian was already hybrid; how Freyre's show us in the Preface to the 1st Edition:

[...] Europeans and their descendants, however, had to transgress with indigenous and Africans as for relations genetic and social. The scarcity of women created zones of fraternization between winners and losers, between masters and slaves. Without ceasing to be relationships –white man with women of color- of “superiors” with “inferiors” and, in the largest number of cases, cheeky and sadistic masters with passive slave women, were sweetened. However, the need for many settlers to start a family in these circumstances and on that basis. The miscegenation that was widely practiced here corrected the social distance that would otherwise have been enormous between the Big House and the tropical forest; between the Big House and the slave quarters.<sup>9</sup> (Freyre 2003, 33)

The balance of antagonisms is one of the fundamental concepts to apprehend how Gilberto Freyre understands the process of shaping Brazilian society in conflict. It is the concept that allow to explain the complex relationship of miscegenation that occurred between the three great races of Brazil; “What a mixture with pleasure,” formed the miscegenated colonial society, which in turn formed a civilization of the tropics. However, as Marcia Rodrigues tells us, Freyre seeks with this concept to identify the ethos of the formation of Brazilian society.

[...] the notion of “balance of antagonisms”. This will be the basis of the paradigm created to interpret our social formation from identification of ethos; moral and ethical aspects of a given culture, based on the principle of positive miscegenation through the mix. Freyre considers the balance of antagonisms an integral and fundamental part of the English ethos taken as a paradigmatic model to think about the Brazilian case. He understood that the balance of antagonism was “the lesson of the English to the world”, that is, the English tradition of balance, moderation and the “good sense to oppose excess”.<sup>10</sup> (Rodrigues 2014, 245-246)

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9 **free translation.** original [os europeus e seus descendentes tiveram, entretanto, de transgredir com índios e africanos quanto às relações genéticas e sociais. A escassez de mulheres brancas criou zonas de confraternização entre vencedores e vencidos, entre senhores e escravos. Sem deixarem de ser relações - as dos brancos com as mulheres de cor - de “superiores” com “inferiores” e, no maior número de casos, de senhores desabusados e sádicos com escravas passivas, adoçaram-se, entretanto, com a necessidade experimentada por muitos colonos de constituírem família dentro dessas circunstâncias e sobre essa base. A miscigenação que largamente se praticou aqui corrigiu a distância social que de outro modo se teria conservado enorme entre a casagrande e a mata tropical; entre a casa-grande e a senzala.

10 **free translation.** Original {...} a noção de “equilíbrio dos antagonismos”. Essa vai ser a base do paradigma criado para interpretar nossa formação social a partir da identificação do ethos, aspectos morais e éticos de uma determinada cultura, calcado no princípio



This concept, of balancing antagonisms or balancing opposites as mentioned by Fernando Henrique, is used by Freyre to "oppose excess". Brazil for the first Portuguese was only antagonism: of climate, of food, etc. However, the concept is broad and "plastic", in this sense, is also used by Gilberto Freyre as a concept that encompasses the meaning of miscegenation; as we see in Rodrigues.

Gilberto sees this idea of balance as an English heritage to "oppose excess"; with the concept of balance of antagonisms; Freyre has a relativistic and plastic expression to apprehend and explain the relationships that occurred between masters and slaves and of these with the indigenous and of the indigenous with the Portuguese; so that, no matter how many excesses occurred in these relations; they were balanced to the extent that they were antagonistic, in an idea of complementarity. Thus, the idea of a balance of antagonisms is much broader than a simple "democratic idea" wider than the Freyre's critics propose for the essay *Casa-Grande & Senzala*.

In this way, we remember what Menezes proposes to us: "Therefore, I believe it would be much more enriching to see Gilberto Freyre of the 'antagonistic balances' that, in fact, as he makes a point of pointing out, can result in conflicts, than to remain this eternal repetition of the 'myth of racial democracy'."<sup>11</sup> (Menezes 2000, 182)

We agree with Menezes; it is more enriching to see the balances of antagonisms in the essay *Casa Grande & Senzala* [The Masters and Slaves] than to discuss a "myth" with little basis in Freyre's literature. We agree that the concept of balance of antagonisms is paradigmatic to interpret the social formation of Brazil, how Rodrigues points out. Furthermore, it is such a fundamental concept in the book *Casa Grande & Senzala* that Menezes pays attention to a detail that goes unnoticed by many; but this has its explanation in the concept / idea of balance of antagonisms.

The balance of antagonisms can be seen in the title of Gilberto Freyre's main essay, *Casa Grande & Senzala*, where the symbol appears in place of "E", which is an additive, but also a combination adversity. The "&"

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da miscigenação positiva por mistura. Freyre considera o equilíbrio dos antagonismos parte integrante e fundamental do ethos inglês tomado como modelo paradigmático para pensar o caso brasileiro. Entendia ser o equilíbrio dos antagonismos "a lição dos ingleses para o mundo", ou seja, a tradição inglesa do equilíbrio, da moderação e do "bom senso de se opor aos excessos."

11 **free translation.** Original [Assim sendo, acredito que seria muito mais enriquecedor enxergar o Gilberto Freyre dos "equilíbrios antagônicos" que, aliás, como ele faz questão de apontar, podem desandar em conflitos, do que permanecermos nesta eterna repetição do "mito da democracia racial].

in common use in legal language refers to the idea of summation, of union of interests and efforts. (...) It is not by chance that the anthropologist exchanges the “&” for “E” when in “Sobrados e Mucambos” (1939) **[The Mansions and the Shanties, 1963]** he will describe precisely the process of decay of the Brazilian patriarchal system.<sup>12</sup> (Menezes 2000, 182) **[our highlight]**

We see then that the concept of “balance of antagonisms” guides the book *Casa Grande & Senzala*. We would like to emphasize here; that the concept / idea of balance of antagonisms is plastic and dialectical; making it synonymous with “racial democracy” is unfounded; to think of a concept so “harsh” in the context of an essay that values relativity -for the cultural and not for the racial- that has a concept / idea of balance; even in an antagonistic society.

Economic and cultural antagonisms. Antagonisms between European culture and native culture. Between the African and the native. Between an agrarian and a pastoral economy, between that of the agrarian and that of the mining regions. Between Catholic and heretic. Jesuit and fazendeiro. The bandeirante and the plantation-owner. The Paulista and the emboaba. The Pernambucan and the mascate. The landed proprietor and the pariah. The university graduate and the illiterate. But predominam over all these antagonisms was the more general and the deeper one: that between master and slave. (Freyre 1986, 79-80)]

As noted, Freyre, when proposing a balance of antagonisms, he did not propose a consensus or a society without socio-racial conflicts, how your critics assumed at “racial democracy”. Gilberto Freyre doesn't let to report the horrors of colonization or slavery, it is a mistake to imagine that *Casa Grande & Senzala* is an essay that romanticizes social relations or softens conflicts; the descriptions of physical and symbolic violence are explicit, as noted by Viana: “How can we say that *Casa-Grande & Senzala* created an idyllic image of Brazilian society if, in the preface to its first edition, we were shown that the masters ordered “to burn alive, in sugar mill ovens, pregnant slave-girls, children exploding in the heat of the flames.”<sup>13</sup>(Vianna 2000, 21-22)

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12 **free translation.** Original [O equilíbrio dos antagonísticos pode ser percebido no próprio título da principal obra de Gilberto Freyre, *Casa Grande & Senzala*, onde o símbolo aparece no lugar do “e”, que é uma conjunção aditiva, mas também adversativa. O “&” de uso comum na linguagem jurídica remete à ideia de somatória, de união de interesses e esforços. (...) Não à toa o antropólogo troca o “&” pelo “e” quando em Sobrados e Mucambos vai descrever justamente o processo de decadência do sistema patriarcal brasileiro]

Vianna reminds those who had opportunity to read *Casa Grande & Senzala* or its English version *The Masters and the Slaves*; will easily identify detailed descriptions of punishment and torture, sexual abuse, sadism and masochism. Freyre seeks with his concept / idea of balance of antagonisms; to describe, to tell, how the formation of the Brazilian family and society occurred, having as models the figures of the Big Houses and slave quarters (Senzalas), stage where the Brazilian patriarchal family was formed.

Gilberto does not hide the violence, and the condition of captivity of blacks, however, not only admits to victimizing them, but seeks to describe, show that black slaves created spaces of ascension; how to become slaves of Big House, which in the space da Big House influenced the creation of "sinhôzinhos" and "sinhás", however, we have to make it clear that this did not mean any kind of "democratic myth", but rather a balance of antagonisms.

A problem that arose with the "myth of racial democracy" and its connection with Gilberto Freyre and his 1933 book, is that his study was taken practically from Brazilian universities, especially from USP; which created an academic prejudice against the book and its author, as Menezes remind.

Since my graduation years, when I spent several days reading Casa Grande in amazement and admiration, I kept hearing people say: "Reading Gilberto Freyre? Isn't he talking about 'racial democracy'?" Since these years, countless generations of Social Sciences students have finished their courses without having read a single line written by Gilberto Freyre. It's a pity.<sup>14</sup> (Menezes 2000, 177)

Racial democracy would be, then, in the sense given by Gilberto's critics, the fraternization that the author usually reports in the book. This is a hasty misguided reading that ignores violent and sinister passages contained in the essay. The interpretation that Freyre at some point thought of a democracy in the Brazilian colony; is in our opinion, to underestimate

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13 **free translation.** Original [como dizer que "Casa-Grande & Senzala" criou uma imagem idílica da sociedade brasileira se, logo no prefácio de sua primeira edição, aprendemos que senhores mandavam "queimar vivas, em fornalhas de engenho, escravas prenhes, as crianças estourando ao calor das chamas]

14 **free translation.** Original [desde os anos de minha graduação, quando passei vários dias lendo o Casa Grande com espanto e admiração, não deixo de ouvir as pessoas dizerem: "Ler Gilberto Freyre? Não é ele que fala de 'democracia racial'?" Desde aqueles anos, inúmeras gerações de alunos de Ciências Sociais terminaram seus cursos sem terem lido uma única linha escrita por Gilberto Freyre. E uma pena]

the efficient and talented researcher. In this sense, I would like to remind you again that talking about democratic proposals in the book *Casa Grande & Senzala* is a mistake, and to think that it is a literature that “softens” the relationship between master and slave, is to ignore the descriptions of violence that begin already in the preface of the book, as Vianna reminds us: “From what way is it possible for many people to describe Brazil from *Casa-Grande & Senzala* as a “tropical paradise”? How was it possible to create, from a book that contains such sinister passages, the optimistic myth of “racial democracy”?”<sup>15</sup> (Vianna 2000, 21-22).

As already noted, Freyre did not propose a “racial democracy”; or any other type of democracy at *Casa Grande & Senzala*, so much so that the term “democracy” appears once in more than 700 pages of the book. In this sense; the critics' formulations are refuted with emphasis and efficiency when parallel to the balance of antagonisms. Thus, when placed in parallel, Thales de Azevedo's definition of “myth of racial democracy” and the balance of antagonisms; we see that Azevedo defines the myth as:

This myth of racial democracy, that is, equal opportunities for whites, blacks, and half-breeds. It does not seem to have felt or supported by two orders of arguments: first -the strong determination of classe criteria in the process of attribution of status and individual relationship; second -the absence of manifest hostility and violence between whites and people of color.<sup>16</sup> (Azevedo 1975, 35-36)

Observing Azevedo's definition of the myth of “racial democracy”, we can refute from the beginning the argument that there would be equal opportunities between representatives of the different “races” or the absence of hostility and violence. Freyre clearly states that there were conflicts, that the black was seen as inferior, and that the mulatto was seen as degenerate -mulatto being a term derived from the mule, a hybrid and sterile animal. About the argument: the classes in the assignment of status of personal relationships. “classes” did not exist in the colonial

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15 **free translation.** Original [“como então é possível que tanta gente descreva o Brasil de “Casa-Grande & Senzala” como um “paraíso tropical”? Como foi possível se criar, a partir de um livro que contém trechos tão sinistros, o mito otimista da “democracia racial”?”]

16 **free translation.** Original [Esse mito da democracia racial, isto é, da igual oportunidade para brancos e pretos e mestiços, parece ser sem sentido ou apoiado em duas ordens de argumentos: primeiro - a forte determinação dos critérios de classe no processo de atribuição de status e de relacionamento individual; segundo - a ausência de hostilidade manifesta e de violência entre brancos e pessoas de cor]

period, what did exist were masters, slaves and a mass of free mestizos who lived under the tutelage of plantation owners.

The patriarchal society, represented by the Big House that functioned as an inn, hospital, asylum, church, etc. provided a closer relationship between people; however, we must not forget that it is a patriarchal family, and in this sense, there is a hierarchy, where the plantation master is the owner of the house, the family and the community. And even in that context; we can verify the balance of antagonisms. Finally, the concept of balancing antagonisms is emblematic in the book *Casa Grande & Senzala*, it is the central concept for understanding the reality exposed by Gilberto Freyre; as Araújo reminds us:

We already know, it is true, that this closeness cannot be attributed to the absence of despotism, much less to the evangelizing impulses of the Christian faith. Why, then, would the countless antagonisms in balance; using a virtually emblematic expression in Gilberto's perspective, such number of times and the places -strategic- in which he is pointed out throughout the book, for it would be; I repeat, that this never balance breaks?<sup>17</sup> (Araújo 1994, 58).

The book *Casa Grande & Senzala* made scholars from Brazil review their opinions; Freyre's literary work is known not only as the origin of the "myth of racial democracy"; but like the book that "invented" Brazil; it created its founding myth, which changed the discussion of racial locus to culture; in this sense asks, Menezes:

Let's ask, then, why exactly did Gilberto Freyre, the anthropologist who moved the axis of discussion about Brazil from "races" to "culture," become responsible for the "myth of racial democracy?" Why is race such a fundamental issue among us? Why do we continue to define this country by race? Anyway, it would be better to think about how and why the myth becomes history, since, "if the eye is the organ of tradition", as Boas says, maybe "we are really cultural myopic", as Lilia Schwartz warns.<sup>18</sup>

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17 **free translation.** Original [já sabemos, é bem verdade, que está proximidade não pode ser debitada à ausência de despotismo, nem muito menos aos ímpetos evangelizadores da fé cristã. Por que seria, então, que os incontáveis antagonismos em equilíbrio, para usar uma expressão virtualmente emblemática da perspectiva de Gilberto, tal o número de vezes e os lugares — estratégicos — em que ela é apontada por ele ao longo de todo o livro, por que seria, repito, que este equilíbrio nunca chega a se romper?]

18 **free translation.** Original [Questionemos, então, por que justamente Gilberto Freyre, o antropólogo que deslocou o eixo de discussão sobre o Brasil das "raças" para "cultura", tornou-se o responsável pelo "mito da democracia racial?" Por que a raça é uma questão

(Menezes 2000, 183)

Although Freyre did not proposed any kind of democracy in the *book Casa Grande & Senzala*, as we've seen in the paper so far. The author, however, is crossed by racial ideas, was the responsible for changing the axis of discussion of the formation of Brazilian society from racial to culture; he was so criticized, and even credited with producing ideas and concepts that are not found in his literature.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As we can see in this paper, the essay *Casa Grande & Senzala* (1933), by Gilberto Freyre; among the various concepts that the book brings us, we focus on the concept “balance of antagonisms”; this “plastic” and relativistic concept helps us understand how Freyre seeks to “unravel” the formation of Brazil. The balance of antagonisms is the concept that allowed Gilberto to describe all the conflicts that existed during the formation of Brazil, in a way, “sweetened” his narrative of the social relations that existed during the colonial period; however, it did not fail to narrate the atrocities and violence committed by the colonizer.

In the book it is easy to find narratives of violence against Amerindians and blacks; Freyre in literary way shows how Brazil was formed, but privileges the ethos (conciliation), causing the coverage of pathos (passion, suffering), as Marcia Rodrigues (2014) argues. This suffering is present in the descriptions of violence narrated throughout the book, in sections marked by sadisms and perversities, as we see below.

There are not two or three but many instances of the cruelty of the ladies of the Big House toward their helpless blacks. There are tales of *sinhamoças* who had the eyes of pretty *mucamas* gouged out and then had them served to their husbands for dessert, in a jelly-dish, floating in blood that was still fresh. (Freyre 1986, 351)

How relations between the Big House and slave quarters are always described in conflict and conciliation; although his critics point out that Gilberto Freyre described a colonial Brazil very “idealized”, by the fact that the author highlights the points of antagonistic balance, seen by

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tão fundamental entre nós? Por que é que continuamos a definir este país pela raça? Enfim, melhor seria pensar como e porque o mito se faz história, já que, “se o olho é o órgão da tradição”, como nos diz Boas, talvez “sejamos mesmo míopes culturais”, como nos alerta Lília Schwartz.]

his critics as an idyllic view of colonial society. But they ignored that Freyre does not cease to show and describe in great detail the violence imposed on Indians and blacks, violence that is often "justified" as penance or punishment for "bad made".

The maltreatment of the person, even to the point of pulling out the tongue or scarifying it with a sharp animal's tooth, was for the primitive a process of purification and of conjuration, applied with especial rigor to the boy or girl upon initiation into puberty. The same thing, according to Rafael Karsten, may be said of the violent physical exercises of the Indians—their dances, wrestling matches, races, the arm-breaking game — calculated, all of them, to produce abundant perspiration. For the primitive supposed that, by means of sweat as well as blood, he would be able to cast out the demon from the individual's body. (Freyre 1986, 150)

Freyre, does not spare its reader, nor the violence committed by children, the violence perpetrated by the little people to the black people in the "games" of children.

[...] the favorite sport of the plantation **lads**<sup>19</sup> of a former day: that of mounting horseback on sheep —and lacking sheep, it was the muleque who served. Their games were often brutal ones, and the Negro boys served every purpose; they were cart-oxen, saddlehorses, beasts for turning the millstone, and burros for carrying litters and heavy burdens. (Freyre 1986, 350) **[our emphasis]**

As we can see in the excerpt, the little "**sinhozinhos**"<sup>20</sup> exercised his sadism against the black children of the slave quarters, forming the violent character of the future man; as Freyre points out.

The sadism of the small boy and the adolescent was transformed into a taste for administering thrashings, for having them pullout the teeth of the Negro who had stolen his sugar-cane, for having capoeiras, cocks, and male canaries fight in his presence—tastes that were frequently manifested by the plantation-owner after he had become a grown man. It would also come out in his passion for giving violent or perverse commands, either as lord of the manor or as the university-educated son occupying an elevated political or public administrative position. Or else it would

19 "lads" in the Brazilian Portuguese version, Freyre refers to children, which the author calls a "sinhozinho".

20 Form of treatment with which the slaves addressed the master's son: lads, *sinhô-moço* or *sinhozinho*.

show, purely and simply, in that fondness for ordering people about which is characteristic of every Brazilian born and reared in a plantation Big House. (Freyre 1986, 76) We observe then that Freyre does not fail to show the violence exists in the relations between masters and slaves, between whites and blacks, between Portuguese and indigenous; however, even with the wealth of details of violence, while reading *Casa Grande & Senzala*, marks more its balance of antagonisms; where the author attaches greater importance to characteristics and cultural relationships to the detriment of race relations, which is one of the marks of his balance of antagonisms.

Taking into account such antagonisms of culture; flexibility; the resulting indecision, balance or disharmony, the very special character of the colonization of Brazil is well understood, the *sui generis* formation of Brazilian society, equally balanced in its beginnings and to this day on the antagonisms.<sup>21</sup> (Freyre 2003, 69)

As we see in the quote, Freyre's proposal is that we understand Brazil through its conciliation and its balanced conflicts, even in disharmony; it was this balance of opposites that allowed the success of the Portuguese colonizers. It is clear, then, that Freyre does not propose any kind of democracy; but rather a balance of antagonisms, the idea of "racial democracy" is shown to be erroneous, given a closer look at this essay by Gilberto Freyre. *Casa Grande & Senzala* is a book that aims to "unveil" Brazil, creates a "myth" of formation, creates a Brazilian genesis, based on conflicts, violence, dense descriptions of everyday life, social, family, lordship and sexual relations. However, ethos beats pathos.

All this description of the antagonistic relations between different civilizations, which in the Brazilian colony are miscegenated; as the Amerindian and African civilizations that were dominated by the Portuguese colonizer; that even with a small human contingent it was successful in its colonizing effort. It was only possible; thanks to a balance of antagonism that allowed the colony to prosper and become Brazil. The Brazil that Gilberto proposed to reveal in his essay; on case; the concept of balance of antagonisms can be considered, one of the main ones, perhaps the main concept to understand Freyre's proposal on the formation of Brazil.

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21 **free translation of the Brazilian edition.** Original [Tomando em conta tais antagonismos de cultura, a flexibilidade, a indecisão, o equilíbrio ou a desarmonia deles resultantes, é que bem se compreende o especialíssimo caráter que tomou a colonização do Brasil, a formação *sui generis* da sociedade brasileira, igualmente equilibrada nos seus começos e ainda hoje sobre antagonismos. (Freyre 2003, 69)]



*Casa Grande & Senzala* is a dense essay, because it proposes many concepts and ideas, which help us understand this process of formation of Brazil. However, we find that in none of the more than 700 pages of the book, we can accept the idea of "racial democracy", in the sense proclaimed by the USP Sociological School<sup>22</sup>, represented mainly by its greatest intellectual, the sociologist Florestan Fernandes and his disciples Octavio Ianni, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, among others. I believe their opponents based their criticisms on a misreading of the concept / idea of balancing of antagonisms, led them to believe that Freyre somehow proposed "equality" between races (a "racial democracy"). But the author's theoretical-methodological proposal is different: our antagonisms are balanced in complementarity and conciliation: this is the fundamental principle of miscegenation that makes Brazil the greatest civilization in the tropics, according to Gilberto Freyre.

## CONCLUSION

We propose in this article the hypothesis that a hasty reading of *Casa Grande & Senzala*, influenced by the erroneous interpretation of Arthur Ramos and Roger Bastide of the democratic ideas of Gilberto Freyre, inspired the creation of the myth of racial democracy, which from 1950, with the Project UNESCO, disseminated the myth in universities, creating an academic prejudice against Freyre, mainly at USP.

We demonstrate that the concept of balance of antagonisms is emblematic in the essay *Casa Grande & Senzala*, and is the central concept for understanding the reality exposed by Gilberto Freyre in the book; even if it was crossed by racial ideas; he was responsible for changing the axis of discussion of the formation of Brazilian society from racial to culture; and he was unjustly credited for producing ideas and concepts that are not found in his vast literature.

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22 USP Sociological School refers to the theoretical tradition that has always maintained a critical distance in relation to "Casa-Grande & Senzala"; as opposed to "Escola do Recife", which, on the contrary, values the anthropological heritage of Gilberto Freyre.

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