



REVIEW

ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO FIGHT RACISM: REVIEW OF THE BOOK “O NEGRO: DE BOM ESCRAVO A MAU CIDADÃO?”

FORMAS ALTERNATIVAS DE COMBATE AO RACISMO: RESENHA DO LIVRO “O NEGRO: DE BOM ESCRAVO A MAU CIDADÃO?”

FORMAS ALTERNATIVAS DE COMBATIR EL RACISMO: RESEÑA DEL LIBRO “O NEGRO: DE BOM ESCRAVO A MAU CIDADÃO?”

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“O negro: de bom escravo a mau cidadão”? is the title of Clóvis Moura’s book, the result of compiling three studies on Black slavery. Structured in three interrelated parts, the work offers a powerful critique of the persistence of colonial and slaveholding structures in Brazilian society even after abolition. Originally published in 1977 and reissued in 2021 by Dandara Editora, the book seeks to deconstruct the traditional view of the African slave as “passive,” demonstrating the active role of Black people in Brazil’s social struggles—both in their fight for liberation and in the country’s independence.

Clóvis Steiger de Assis Moura (1925–2003) was a Brazilian sociologist and an organic intellectual of the working class. The son of a white father and a Black mother, he devoted his theoretical and practical efforts to supporting social movements in defense of oppressed groups, analyzing how stereotypes continue to take shape in the everyday life of Brazilian competitive society. In contrast to

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Gilberto Freyre—who portrayed a supposedly harmonious relationship between enslaved and enslaver—Moura highlights Black resistance dating back to the era of slavery. In Freyre’s view, the Black person is reduced to a servant of the master, in unquestioning submission to the white man’s desires. The Black individual becomes a passive and obedient subject, stripped of any historical agency in their own emancipation. This portrayal of the enslaved-master relationship is challenged by Moura, who argues that such a view not only glorifies Black passivity but also upholds structural racism. For Moura, Africans in colonial Brazil actively resisted oppression.

In the first part of the book, the author invites both the reader and society to reflect on the origin and persistence of stereotypes surrounding freed Black people in contemporary society, to better understand the underlying values at play. According to Moura:

No passado o bom escravo seria aquele que aceitava tudo a mando do seu senhor, sem questionar, protestar as torturas, aceitando-se desta forma, o seu status como sendo eterno e imutável. Que vivia na senzala trabalhando, aceitava sua condição de escravo passivamente, isto é, sem resistência a estrutura ideológica que o oprimia (Moura, 2021, p.18).

From this perspective, the author challenges the notion of Black passivity, arguing that, although oppressed by an alienating system, Black individuals possessed analytical awareness capable of leading them to resistance. He emphasizes examples such as escapes into the forests, the formation of quilombos (maroon communities), and revolts that eventually culminated in revolution.

Building on this, the author deepens his critique by analyzing the defense mechanisms developed in response to disintegrative forces, showing how Black individuals, often labeled and marginalized in the favelas, feel socially wronged due to the harsh conditions they endure. As a result, Moura defends the sentiment behind Black uprisings, including those expressed through criminal behavior. He also highlights responses influenced by Black movements such as Black Power, “os Panteras Negras”, Negritude, and others. According to Moura, it is from this dual situation that Black protest arises – manifesting in multiple forms: from the formation of Black-specific groups and a Black intellectual class confronting this reality, to cultural, religious, and artistic expressions. For Moura, the stereotype of the “bad citizen” emerges from the Black individual’s attempt at self-affirmation, aimed at breaking the historical patterns that have shaped slave-based social relations. It is through the treatment of Black people in contemporary society that rationalizations arise to recast them as bad citizens.

Within this context, Moura introduces the concept of the sociological myths of “racial democracy” as an ideological mechanism of domination that conceals the existence of racial and

ethnic inequalities. He argues that this ideology prevents Brazilian society from confronting racial issues and implementing public policies for historical redress. This false theory is revealed through the systemic restrictions placed on Black individuals in the labor market, in marriage, and elsewhere. Moura also critiques the prejudice directed at Afro-Brazilian religions—so labeled by Brazil’s dominant classes to preserve their privileges and justify their Christian-centric religious superiority. He exposes color prejudice in Brazil as the ideology through which racism is expressed, enforcing a series of restrictive measures—though not legally codified—that remain clearly visible in public life.

In challenging the “bad citizen” stereotype, Moura advocates for a redefinition: the “good citizen” is the Black individual who refuses to accept racial discrimination, confinement to the favelas, and exclusion from employment opportunities based on skin color. Instead, they seek alternative paths through active participation in emancipatory movements. It is important to note, however, that society continues to label as “bad citizen” the Black individual living in the favelas, often stereotyped as a criminal, alcoholic, beggar, or as someone who practices Umbanda or Candomblé, or relies on traditional medicine.

In the second part of the book, Clóvis Moura emphasizes the complexity of the Black experience and its role in the construction of Latin American nations, as well as the consequences for the Black population. He demonstrates that Black individuals played a fundamental role in the struggles for Latin American independence. Their knowledge of the territory, physical strength, and willingness to fight were crucial to the success of those uprisings. Along this path of resistance and struggle, their contributions toward achieving equal rights, human dignity, and citizenship become clear, as the author states:

Mas o escravo não lutou apenas pela sua emancipação, isto é, objetivando livrar-se do cativeiro. No processo da formação da nação brasileira o negro está presente, lutando com outros estratos da nossa população para nos desligarmos de Portugal e, depois da independência, pela instauração da República (Moura, 2021, p. 132).

Considering the above, the author notes that, despite their contributions, Black people were systematically excluded from Brazil’s social and political structures. The white elites who led the independence processes retained power and privileges, relegating Black populations to a marginalized status. Moura then highlights the social and economic structures that continued to benefit whites, perpetuating the exclusion and inequality of Black people. Within the broader landscape of poverty, Black individuals have remained, to this day, among the lowest strata of the social hierarchy. Racism and inequality function as structural elements, and the struggle for their

overcoming defines the Black experience – both as Black, fighting against color-based prejudice, and as poor, confronting poverty and exclusion from the labor market.

In this regard, Moura introduces Afro-Brazilian religiosity as an integral part of Black cultural identity. Without romanticizing these practices, he develops a theoretical approach that demystifies the negative image often associated with Black cultural expressions and reveals the protagonism of Black communities in today’s class-based society. Afro-Brazilian religions serve as forms of self-affirmation and defense within a society divided by class, and Moura highlights the reasons for their wide dissemination in major urban centers of Brazil, particularly São Paulo.

In the third part of the book, the process of cultural struggle and the reaffirmation of Black identity becomes evident through the formation of specific community groups. For Moura, this ongoing process of resistance and organization dates to slavery itself, as Black people sought ways to survive, preserve their cultural patterns, and reclaim their humanity—something that both slavery and the Brazilian state attempted to permanently suppress.

Throughout the work, the author situates the Black individual as being obstructed in multiple ways and at various levels, while also showing how they organize into specific groups in defense of their autonomy and social upliftment. He argues that Afro-descendant religions have been—and continue to be—the foundations of Black life in Brazilian society. These religions are the driving force behind cultural and artistic expressions grounded in sociability and collective identity.

Thus, the trajectory of Black people in Brazil reflects a history of emancipatory struggles, rooted in radical resistance and a determined effort to neutralize the legacy of racism while reclaiming a rightful place in contemporary society. What is most essential in this work is the way Moura interprets the behavior of the current Black population, demonstrating that the image of Black “badness” arises because they break with the traditional behavioral norms of a competitive society that replaced slavery, and because they struggle—on a massive scale—for upward social mobility. The author invites readers to reflect critically and to challenge power structures and social relations, from the judiciary to everyday interactions, in the pursuit of building a more egalitarian and democratic society.

In conclusion, the work reviewed here is of great relevance to contemporary debates on racial issues—not only in Brazil but around the world, wherever Black people are discriminated against, marginalized, and viewed as citizens destined for submission to other racial groups. Moura’s theoretical contributions are of fundamental importance for proposing concrete actions to combat racism.

Racism – especially based on phenotype—is a social ill that must be overcome not only by those who are discriminated against, but above all within the consciousness of the discriminator, the oppressor. Undeniably, the problem does not lie in the color of the other, but in the individual's own awareness. It is a call for social consciousness at all levels—where men and women of all colors recognize themselves and one another as members of a single, diverse human race. In defense of the so-called “bad” citizen, Moura elevates the spirit of resistance and brings to light the current conditions that give Black individuals the power to speak out and confront all forms of discrimination – something they were denied during the slave era, when silence was their only apparent option.

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