

# Review

## ***The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil***

Barbara Weinstein. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. 472pp.

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This *The Color of Modernity* is an outstanding examination of the role of race, regional, and nationalistic ideologies in the creation of modern-day Brazil. Barbara Weinstein focuses on the rise of the mainly white elite of the State of São Paulo as the prominent economic, political, and intellectual leader of the region and the country. The analysis articulates methodical theoretical approaches of cultural studies, discourse analysis, and politics of identity. It investigates the intricacies of how the coffee barons and intellectual *Paulistanos* managed to construct an image of modernity, entrepreneurship, and success as the paradigm of a new Brazil. What appears is a representation of an exceptional *paulistano* identity that Brazil that cannot emulate.

From its early days, Brazilian economy relied on the extraction of natural resources and cash crops of high demand in the global markets. Initially, it depended on the exploitation of brazilwood, gold, gems, and later on the production of sugar and coffee as cash crops. Slave labor directly imported from Africa by Brazilian merchants fueled the economy. The immense size of the country earmarked profound regional disparities that went from the coastal areas to the interior and from north to south. Large estates (*fazendas*) produced sugar as the primary export. Sugar was Brazil king until the late seventeenth

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century. It was then that French and the Dutch created the sugar emporium of the Antilles and hence, great world market providers. By the 1840s, coffee had replaced sugar and became Brazil and São Paulo primary source of revenue.

With the decline of king, sugar came the regional shift of economic supremacy from the north-central to the southeastern rich and fertile soils of São Paulo and coffee production. Furthermore, the economy still depended on slavery until the *ley aura* ended the institution in 1888. The *Paulistanos* were leaders in the movement against slavery and pro-European immigration. The coffee era provided enormous wealth, which allowed coffee barons to invest in banking, infrastructure, railways, credit institutions, and industrialization. The money earned from coffee exports created vital capital that brought more immigrants from Europe and impoverished regions of the country. The port of Santos, in southeastern State of São Paulo, became the main gateway to send coffee all over the world. After emancipation, immigrant Italians, French, Spaniards, Japanese, Koreans, Germans, Greeks, and Syrians replaced slaves in coffee plantations. Coffee became the engine of the economy and provided needed capital for diversification. Immigrants created manufactures and occupied jobs in the burgeoning economy of the state. Over two millions immigrants went by Santos and found employment in the State. In 1922, Santos opened the Coffee Exchange Palace (*Bolsa de Café*). The Exchange determined the price of coffee worldwide.

*Paulistanos* perceived themselves modern, urban, and progressive. Under this consideration, they promoted their economic success as the achievement measure of the nation. *Paulistanos* likened themselves as the locomotive of the Brazilian economic growth at the same time they crafted identity discourses of hard workers, overachievers, and intellectually superior to Brazilians in poor areas of the country. Greatness had no limits for *paulista* business and intellectual elites when they compared to the northeastern. In that part of the country, overexploitation of the land and erroneous agricultural practices depleted the soil and impoverished the people.

According to Weinstein, the making of a *paulista* identity of superior ability and exceptionality was constructed on the self-perception of whiteness as advantageous characteristic and beneficial to their hard-work ethic. The image was created in contrast to blackness, poverty, and backwardness of the northeast. Whiteness, modernity, and entrepreneurship were coterminous personal features of the *paulista* elite. All the while,

the opposing Nordeste description was of an impoverished and devastated landscape, barren and ill-equipped for modernity.

Two significant events in the history of São Paulo and Brazil are at the center of Weinstein analysis. The first is the failed Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932, otherwise known as the *Guerra Paulista*. It was the revolt of São Paulo against the coup d'état staged in 1930 by Getulio Vargas from the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. Vargas overthrew the central government led by *paulista* Washington Luis, governor of São Paulo from 1920 to 1924. Furthermore, Vargas coup prevented the inauguration of another *paulista* to the nation's presidency, Julio Prestes. Vargas seizure of the federal government was the beginning of his 15-year firm rule over Brazil and the inauguration of the *Estado Novo* (New State).

*Paulistas* felt aggrieved, and resentment developed into a full-blown uprising. It is at this juncture that *paulistano* identity emerges strongly and acquires a distinct persona based on perceptions of whiteness and exceptionalism. It build as well on disparaging the physiognomy and cultural disposition of Brazilians. Weinstein reviews the discourses and imagery in newspapers, speeches, flyers, magazines, photographs, and cartoons emphasizing the superior qualities of *paulistas*. The *paulista* stress on pride exposed denigration, and disparaging images of the "other" Brazilians. Surfacing from the study of the documentation is the broad ideological range of the groups behind the rebellion. The spectrum of disaffection went from separatists to those who supported Vargas but felt betrayed by his authoritarianism. What is clear is that for *paulistas*, the Vargas coup was evidence of national envy and aspiration to misuse *paulista* affluence and achievements. At the end, what galvanized the *paulista* rebellion was the plea for the rule of law and the constitution. Vargas federal military crushed the rebellion in less than three months. Still, São Paulo commemorates the uprising every July 9 as a State holiday.

Not less significant is the author's analysis is her revision of women's role in the whole movement. Female involvement was instrumental to change perceptions of gender roles but contradictory. Women participation in the rebellion evidences class and racial divides. The "white ladies" of the upper class contributing jewelry and collecting funds for the war effort while the "black women" were the army clad fighters. The *paulista* elite woman was glorified, and at the same time, her supportive role reinforced. Black women were equated to male soldiers and thus, unfeminine.

The second focus of Weinstein's attention was the commemoration of the 400<sup>th</sup> year of the founding of the city of São Paulo in 1554. Initially built by the Jesuits in 1554, the city and the state did not rise to prominence until late nineteenth century with the victory of immigration and coffee production. The celebration brought about a memorialization of the 1932 rebellion as a pivotal moment of crystallization of the *paulista* identity of modernity and drive. Exceptionalism exalted the uprising as evident triumph of modernism, European immigration ancestry, capitalism, and drive. However, it did not contribute to the modernization of the rest of Brazil. Instead, it kept São Paulo as the driving force behind the nation and illustration of regional disparities.

Weinstein's book conflates analysis of regionalism, identity, nationalism, gender relations, and race. It stands on her meticulous research of a broad variety of sources. These range from art to police archives, newspapers and private and governmental records, foreign travel accounts, and diplomat dispatches. It includes museum depositories, cartoons, flyers, and posters. The reader will find thoughtful examination of orientalism and critiques of the long-standing paradigm of internal colonialism. In all, the book provides an insightful view of identity construction and a serious analysis of the racial underpinnings of the whiteness rhetoric of elitist twentieth-century Brazil.