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CONSPICUITY AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS: VEBLENIAN CATEGORIES IN GILBERTO FREYRE'S INTERPRETATION OF BRAZILIAN ELITES

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Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987) remains, nearly four decades after his death, one of the paradigmatic references of the social sciences in Brazil. The author of foundational works in Brazilian anthropology and sociology, his vast legacy is inseparable from the very history of the humanities in the country. A graduate of Columbia University, Freyre played a central role in translating, adapting, and popularizing contemporary frameworks of social thought for the Brazilian context, most notably the influence of Franz Boas's cultural anthropology and his intellectual dialogue with Rüdiger Bilden, both of which were fundamental to Freyre's advances in understanding the particularities of Brazilian culture and its ethnic and historical formation.

Among his works, special importance is attributed to the triptych composed of Casa-Grande e Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves, 1933), Sobrados e Mucambos (The Mansions and the Shanties, 1936), and Ordem e Progresso (Order and Progress, 1959), in which the social theorist constructs a far-reaching analysis of the cultural matrices that underpinned Brazilian society. In

the first of these works, Freyre dissects the formation of Brazilian culture during the colonial period through the interactions between plantation owners and enslaved populations, as well as through the peculiar syncretism among Portuguese, Indigenous, and African elements in the constitution of a sui generis tropical civilization. Historically mobilized in apologetic interpretations of Brazilian racial democracy, Freyre's account of cultural exchanges among the three ethnic matrices of the Brazilian people remains the most controversial aspect of his work, having been continuously reinterpreted and debated by a vast critical literature. In the subsequent volumes, Freyre turns to the evolution of this civilization throughout the nineteenth century, examining the emergence of an increasingly urban Brazil marked by the intertwining of the colonial modus vivendi with new social relations, culminating in the spasms of modernization of the Republican period and the erosion of inherited family and cultural patterns.

Within the history of ideas, Freyre stands as an exemplary representative of Brazilian modernist intellectual life. Although deeply engaged in the study of the traditions that shaped social experience in Brazil, he broke with dominant interpretive canons of his time, incorporated contemporary references from social theory, and proposed analytical approaches that would enable subsequent generations to think about Brazil "in our own terms." Alongside Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Caio Prado Jr., Florestan Fernandes, and Darcy Ribeiro, Freyre constitutes one of the inescapable classics of Brazilian social thought. Despite well-known reservations regarding his tendency to symbolically pacify relations between colonizers, Indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans, his work remains a central reference in historical, anthropological, and sociological studies of Brazil.

A less explored aspect of Freyre's intellectual trajectory lies in the fact that his references are not confined to Boasian anthropology or to his proximity to Bilden. An attentive reader of the social thought of his time, Freyre selectively mobilized categories drawn from the work of Thorstein Bunde Veblen (1857–1929), one of the founders of institutional economics. While references to The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) are relatively brief in Casa-Grande e Senzala and Ordem e Progresso—where the work appears primarily as part of a repertoire of contemporary readings recommended to Brazilian elites—it is in

Sobrados e Mucambos that Veblen's influence becomes more substantively apparent.

In this work, Freyre not only acknowledges the relevance of Veblen's account of instincts as a foundation of social institutions, but also mobilizes core concepts from The Theory of the Leisure Class to categorize empirically observed practices within Brazilian patriarchy. His analysis of the conspicuous character of the modus vivendi of senhorial elites—centered on ostentation, waste, and the symbolic assertion of authority—directly engages with the notions of conspicuous waste and emulation. In a particularly suggestive passage, Freyre extends this logic, drawing on Capistrano de Abreu, to segments of the cattle-raising economy in the hinterlands, socially and economically distinct from the sugar-based elite, yet similarly embedded in dynamics of invidious comparison and status affirmation. This analysis highlights the diffusion of such patterns beyond the classical core of colonial patriarchy.

Beyond the analytical use of these categories, Freyre expressed explicit admiration for Thorstein Veblen in a short piece of popular scientific writing published in the Jornal de Commercio, in which he introduced the Brazilian public to the contributions of the American intellectual. Part of a series aimed at disseminating major figures of the social sciences, the article situates Veblen, in Freyre's reading, as a social theorist of the first order, whose work transcended disciplinary boundaries and proved indispensable for understanding the modern world. Such a reading suggests the incorporation of Thorstein Veblen into a broader canon of social thought, in which his contributions exceed the methodological confines of economics and assert themselves as central analytical tools for understanding the institutions and social forms of modern capitalism.

The aim of this paper is to explore the points of contact between Gilberto Freyre and Thorstein Veblen, with particular emphasis on references to The Theory of the Leisure Class in Freyre's triptych—Casa-Grande e Senzala, Sobrados e Mucambos, and Ordem e Progresso—as well as in the article published in the Jornal de Commercio. It is argued that, although Freyre's theoretical affiliation remains fundamentally anchored in Boasian cultural anthropology, there is

consistent evidence of a substantive influence of the Veblenian framework in his work, particularly in the use of categories such as instinct, conspicuousness, and emulation for the analysis of representations of power, affluence, and social distinction among Brazilian colonial and imperial elites.

Palavras-chave: thorstein veblen (1857–1929); gilberto freyre (1900–1987); original institutional economics; brazilian social thought.