

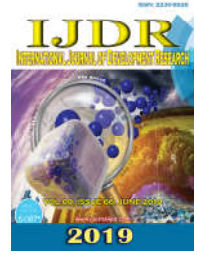


ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

IJDR

International Journal of Development Research
Vol. 09, Issue, 06, pp. 28416-28420, June, 2019



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

CONSTRUCTION AND CHALLENGE OF A POSITIVE BLACK IDENTITY FROM ALBERTO MELUCCI

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 21st March, 2019
Received in revised form
17th April, 2019
Accepted 03rd May, 2019
Published online 30th June, 2019

Key Words:

Black Identity. Blackness.
Black Movement. Alberto Melucci.

ABSTRACT

The present work aims to make an approach on the challenges of building a positive black identity in Brazilian lands, based on the thinking of Italian sociologist and clinical psychologist Alberto Melucci. In this article, presenting the organization, action, claims and achievements of the Brazilian black movement, as a social movement, specifically, this text addresses: the historical, ideological and theoretical context that has fragmented and stereotyped the identity of Brazilian black women and men; the concept and context of blackness; and, finally, the context in which the construction and challenge of a positive black identity takes place; emphasizing the concept and understanding of Melucci identity in our current societies.

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Citation: Jorge Manoel Adão, Ronaldo Rodrigues da Silva and Zenaide Dias Teixeira. 2019. "Construction and challenge of a positive black identity from alberto melucci", *International Journal of Development Research*, 09, (06), 28416-28420.

INTRODUCTION

The present article aims to make an approach to the construction and challenge of a positive identity of Brazilian black women and men from Alberto Melucci - Italian sociologist and clinical psychologist. From the works of Melucci this work is based, specifically, in "The game of self. The change of self in a global society" of 1992, where the author himself presents the work affirming that he expresses social reality and individual experience are poles of a circular relationship - for the observer is not external to the field he describes. And, in "The Invention of the Present. Social Movements in Complex Societies", of 2001. In advance, we explain that at no point in this approach does "identity" be used as a philosophical concept¹. And yes, reference is made to individual and group identity in the Meluccian understanding, which has the following characteristics: "[...] continuity of an individual, beyond the variations of time and adaptations to the environment; delimitation of this individual in relation to others; and the ability to recognize oneself and to be recognized" (Melucci, 1992, p. 31).

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¹ "Identity" as a philosophical concept has three fundamental definitions: identity as a unit of substance, Aristotle's understanding; identity as possibility of substitution, definition of Leibniz; and, identity as convention, conceptualized by Weismann (Abbagnano, 1999, p. 528-529).

With regard to the black people, we remember that the history of Brazil was marked not only by a conflict between rich and poor, but also by a socio-racial conflict between black and non-black people (FRISOTTI, 1988). Conflict that, nowadays, continues and acquires new clothes such as xenophobia and mixofobia. Although it is not a theme developed here, we remember that in approaching the identity of the Negro it is necessary to bear in mind the trajectory, performance, clashes and achievements made by the Brazilian black movement². For it was within the entities and constituent groups of this movement that their respective militants felt the need to experience and claim values that came to encounter an experience of blackness and the construction of a positive black identity. It is also understood that the Brazilian Negro constitutes itself as an ethnic and racial group at the same time. An ethnic group is defined by a set of biological-hereditary elements and by a historical-cultural tradition: by certain somatic and racial traits, as by a culture and by specific forms of organization of social relations and by self-affirmation of these differences (MELUCCI, 2001, p.109). And, as a racial group, we use the concept of "race" as a social construction: in social life, this notion is constructed, even though in our

² It is practical to define the trajectory of the Brazilian black movement in three phases (Pinto, 1993; Ferreira, 2000; H. Santos, 2000; and Nabarro, 2000), which are as follows: Pre-Abolitionist Black Movement, until 1888; Post-Abolitionist Black Movement, from 1888 until the 1970s; and, Current Black Movement, from the 1970s to the present day.

Brazilian context we call it "color." In other words, I define "race" as a group of people that in a given society is defined as different from other groups because of certain physical differences, where the phenotypes function as a kind of physical raw material, which are bounded socially through beliefs, values and attitudes (ADÃO, 2002, p. 50). Finally, I am of the opinion that the importance of using the concept of race alongside ethnicity lies in the analysis of racism³. That is, there is only use in the concept of race in the face of the idea and reality of racism. Just as I understand that racism can only be understood through an analysis and approach of its particular formation in its differentiated historical and geographical context.

Fragmented and stereotyped identity: From Melucci's understanding of identity as a system of relations and representations rather than as a monolithic unit of an individual (MELUCCI, 1992, p. 360), I approach the process of fragmentation and stereotyping that has historically been thought, projected, and concretized for the black in the Brazilian diaspora. A situation in which occurs, concomitantly, to a historical *praxis* of black struggle and resistance, concretized in the organization of quilombos and in the presence of cults of African matrices in our society, for example. In this process of inferiority of the Negro identity, we especially highlight the ideology of whitening, miscegenation, the myth of racial democracy and the creation of racial stereotypes. Elements that were structured and marked out in the symbolic, social, political, economic and ideological meaning of the three hundred and fifty years of slavery of African and their descendents in Brazilian lands. We believe that these are the main elements imbricated in this problematic, even knowing that they do not exhaust them; even because identity has varying degrees of complexity, so "[...] we can speak of many identities that belong to us, those personal, familiar, social, and so on: what changes is the system of relations of which we are referring and in respect to which our recognition comes" (MELUCCI, 1992, p. 36). The bleaching ideology had its origin in the theory of the superiority of the white ethnicity over the others, placing the blondes of the European north as the maximum ideal: it was articulated by Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) and Gobineau (1816-1922), among others. This theory was widely accepted in Brazil in the late nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century, finding in Oliveira Vianna (1883-1951) an expressive disseminator. Since then, a trajectory of studies on the Brazilian Negro (late nineteenth century) is unleashed. This trajectory can be divided into three currents, at the level of domain and influence, which are as follows: the first current, influenced by the racialist physical anthropology, presented by the black people as an inferior racial category, and may even weigh negatively on the future of Brazil, because of the miscegenation with the whites. That is, the Brazilian intellectual elite of the time, imbued with racist ideas, believed that the process of mestization among black people, Indians and whites would result in degenerate descendants and, consequently, no capacity to secure Brazil's future. Here, we bring as an example Nina Rodrigues, a physician and scientist

from Maranhão, who broadcasts Lombroso's ideas⁴ in South America in the 1980s. According to Silva Jr. (2000, p. 365),

[...] among the manifestations of the geniality of scientist Nina, a comic series, had it not been answered by the tragedy that struck so many black children and youngsters of the beginning of the century: freniatria, phrenology and quetais were notable in Europe, by the association between certain characteristics or corporal measures and delinquency; hence the importance attributed to measurements of height, compliance with the head, middle finger, arms, etc., to which the width of the nose was added in Brazil, certainly resulting from the adaptive effort of the scientist.

The second chain began to emerge in the 1930s, when the debate of the first movement (which alternated between writers, doctors, jurists and anthropologists) began to decline. This second movement, strongly influenced by culturalism, has in Gilberto Freyre one of its great representatives. The authors of this current

[...] saw black people not only as coming from an inferior race, but also as representatives of a culture considered at the same time inferior due to the pre-logical qualification taken from Levy-Bruhl's thought, and relatively positive in function of the culturalist theories (MUNANGA, 2000, p. 13).

It is consensus that the idea of the existence of a racial democracy in Brazil had a great contribution by Gilberto Freyre, in his work "*Casa Grande and Senzala*". That is, by transforming miscegenation into a positive and non-negative value under the aspect of degeneration, this author allowed to definitely complete the contours of an identity which had long been drawn: Freyre consolidates the original myth of Brazilian society set in a triangle, whose vertices are the black, white and indigenous races (MUNANGA, 1999c, p. 79). These first two chains cohabited until the 1950s, not caring about the root and nature of the relations between black and white people, or between whites and natives, has in the work of its thinkers a great contribution to the myth of racial democracy; and, to project Brazil into the eyes of the world as the only multiracial country, where people would live in harmony. A third chain of thought emerged from 1950, after World War II, with a team of researchers (among them sociologists Roger Bastide, Florestan Fernandes, Oracy Nogueira, Thales de Azevedo, Octavio Ianni and Fernando Henrique Cardoso); sponsored by Unesco on a study project on the system of harmonious relations. "[...] with the development of this project, it was discovered, however, that the upward social mobility of the negroes in this society was blocked by the existence of racial prejudices and by the discrimination that ensued" (MUNANGA, 2000, p. 14). In the 1980s, the deepening of these studies (third current) will demonstrate that, regardless of the vestiges of the slave-owning past, racism was a product of contemporary Brazilian society and rested on other

³I define racism from Munanga (2000, p.21), which brings back its two aspects: racism, on the one hand, is the doctrinal discourse in the form of ideas, frozen in the books, whose beginning of its elaboration happened at the end of the nineteenth century, called scientific racism or racialism; and, on the other hand, racism is understood as a political practice translated into concrete discrimination.

⁴Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), doctor, psychiatrist and militant of the Italian Socialist Party of Workers, is considered the founder of criminal anthropology and one of the forerunners of Criminology, a science whose object is still subject to controversy. Thanks to Lombroso one has the definitions to natural delinquent and atavism (remote inheritance) criminals and the association between phenotype and predisposition. Lombroso, together with Enrico Ferri and Rafael Garofalo, is part of the Italian School of criminological positivism (SILVA JR., 2000, p. 384).

antagonisms other than those of slavery society “[...] And, observed under this Aspect, contemporary Brazilian society was structured by two dialectical systems: relations of class and race” (MUNANGA, 2000, p. 14). Finally, on one hand, consciously or unconsciously, Brazilian society in its racist *praxis* had and has in mind the various constitutive and demarcating dimensions of identity, both on a personal level and at a group level. These dimensions in which Melucci (1992, p. 37) sets it up in poles. Our identity then becomes a four-pole field, as a system of vectors in tension with one another, which continually strives for a balance between the identification that we operate with the identification with others, the difference as we affirm it, and how we are recognized by others (MELUCCI, 1992, p.37). And, on the other hand, as I have already mentioned, despite this *praxis* that has fragmented and negativized the Brazilian black identity, the experience of blackness and the construction of a positive black identity has been always becoming more real to this part of the population in our country.

Concept and context of blackness: The term black, in our reality, has become a political concept that involves all people (black, mixed, dark skinned and mulatto) with partial or totally African ancestry⁵. Due to the black concept and expression, we have the concept of blackness as the construction of a black-Brazilian racial and ethnic identity. Reality, challenge and also problematic face, since its emergence, by the black movement and, lately, also by the researchers that focus on this theme⁶.

The expression *negritude*, on the one hand, came to be used in the 1930s, by Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinica⁷ in his texts. Senghor used it with indicative of cultural heritage, values and spirit of black-African civilization. For Césaire, this term expresses the recognition of a fact, its acceptance and active assumption of the destiny and culture of the black people (Ferreira, 2000, p. 135). On the other hand, as a concept, blackness is born the moment black students from colonized countries of Africa, the Antilles and Guyana began to study in the universities of the old metropolis. These students, in order to assimilate the Western cultural model, regarded as the only and the best that humanity had ever produced, began to perceive the contradictions and rivalries existing among the colonial powers themselves. And so, gradually, they begin to undo the myth of the superiority of Western civilization (MUNANGA, 1999a, p. 50). This realization challenged these students to face two major interrelated issues: the recovery of the identity of their people and the search for emancipation, translated into political independence. The achievement of these goals was followed by racial awareness and by the fact that the oppression suffered was not only of a minority class over a lowered majority, but simultaneously a race, regardless of the

social class. “The identity consists in fully assuming the status of a black man with pride, in saying with his head held high: I am black. The word was stripped of all that she carried in the past, like contempt, transforming the latter into a source of pride for the Negro” (MUNANGA, 1999c, p. 51). Thus, *negritude* appears as an operation of semantic detoxification and of constitution of a new place of intelligibility of the relation with itself, with the others and with the world. From the literature, we can notice and classify different conceptions of blackness: (a) *painful negritude* is a lived phase, for example, when the black poet suffers the passion of historical sufferings, in the effort to tune in and communicate with his people, through their art; With anguish and pain, he is afraid of losing his culture and his identity in the Western context; (b) *aggressive negritude*, characterizes a phase of outrage, denial of reason, white God, Western beauty, European languages. Race is claimed even in its needs; (c) *serene negritude*, is a constructive attitude of dialectical reconciliation, a desire to ascend to a universal culture. He feels how good it is to constantly proclaim his blackness evident in the conduct and habits of every African; (d) *victorious negritude*, it is the claim of the paternity of civilization, in an idealizing supercompensation, a true messianism. This classification, “beyond its permanence, also shows how a writer can move from one position to another, without betraying himself, simultaneously expressing himself under several records” (MUNANGA, 1986, p. 54-55).

Building a positive black identity: From the historical and contemporary presence of an anti-Black to Brazilian racism, noticing the locus, status, social class ... where the majority of black people are, own and belong, respectively, it is not surprising to verify that the experience of blackness and the construction of a positive black identity remains an emerging challenge. This challenge that goes through, in particular, participation in entities and groups of the black movement. In other words, the entities and groups of the black movement make up spaces where it is possible for black people to live the existing polarity between self-recognition and eternal recognition, which articulates around them as identification and difference - dimensions immersed and constitutive of their own identity. Identification happens when we affirm ourselves for what we are, thus declaring the continuity and permanence of our existence and requesting that we be recognized by others. In its turn, the affirmation of difference occurs when we distinguish ourselves from others and try to make this diversity known. Currently, we have already found reflections, researches and analyses developed regarding the black identity trajectory. For example, Ferreira (2000, p. 74-84) calls this trajectory of stages of construction of black-Brazilian identity. That is to say, according to this author, the construction of black identity follows a four-stage process: (1) in the stage of submission there is an idealization of the white world as shield, corresponding to the internalization of negative stereotypes done in an unconscious way, synthesized in the notion that “white is right” and “black is wrong”; (2) the impact stage is marked by the discovery of the ethnic-racial reference group developed by the person from the moment of awareness of discrimination, when emotions sprout, such as guilt, anger and a generalized anguish, which may become favorable for generating energies for action; (3) in the militancy stage, the construction of an afro centered identity happens, characterized by a great valuation of the symbols of the new identity in process (verbal jargon, music, rhythms, hairstyles and African clothing), with the substitution of the

⁵Historian Clóvis Moura, after the 1980 census, did a survey asking non-whites about their color. In the result of this research, 136 colors were collected (MUNANGA, 1999, p. 120).

⁶ There is also the term “Banking” while category. This had its origin in the second half of the seventeenth century product of the social transformation of the colonization of America with the English, Irish, Scottish and other Europeans. However, “[...] the first white settlers did not have a concept of themselves as white males [...]. The expression ‘white’, with all its burden of guilt and arrogance, only became of common use at the end of the century” (CASHMORE, 2000, p. 97). Today, more than superiority or purity, whiteness means privilege and power, conferring advantages and prestige.

⁷ Two great thinkers and strugglers in the fight against anti-black racism, referentials of the black movement. Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, born in 1906 and 1913 respectively, were both poets, writers, politicians and fellow exiles in Europe.

denomination “black” or “Of color” by that of “black”, occurring the dissipation of hostilities from the previous stage; (4) and, at the articulation stage, there is an opening for otherness, with the new identity based on three dynamic functions: the defense and protection of psychological aggressions, the provision of a sense of belonging and social anchorage, and the starting point and principles for relationships with people from cultures different from those referenced in African matrices.

These stages synthesize the process in which we live when we have the opportunity and the courage to assume blackness. To this challenge of experiencing blackness and constructing a positive black identity, it sums up the complex, polemical and ideological reality of the category of the mixed race in Brazil, where, generally speaking, only those black people that integrate into an entity or group of the black movement is that they reject this category. I realize that, just as the myth of racial democracy, which uses the ideology of bleaching and the issue relating biological and cultural miscegenation stops the entry of many Brazilian black people into the entities and groups of the black movement; and, consequently, of the awareness of the importance of this, as a social movement, also in the process of black identity construction that there are many impediments and temptations. Impediments like: the daily journey of a black worker, from his leaving home until his return at the end of the journey; the context of black students, who usually work during the day and study at night; and the very problems and challenges within the entities and groups of the black movement. The temptations are present in situations where some militants put the objective of the cause in the background, being more concerned with personal promotion; others who, upon entering the academy, practically disconnect themselves from their black group or entity; and still others that have prioritized or remained in only one of the stages of the process of construction of the black identity and the experience of negritude.

In our reality, we notice that the contemporary black movement bets on the construction of identity, on the recovery of blackness understood in its biological, cultural and ontological complexity; using as a way the rescue of its culture, its denied and falsified past, of realizing its positive participation in the construction of Brazil, the beauty of its inferiorized phenotype. Specifically, he is aware that, if from the biological and sociological point of view the miscegenation and the transculturation among people is an accomplished fact; identity is a process that can always be renegotiated according to political-ideological criteria and power relations. At the same time, it faces a knot in the process of forming the Brazilian identity that is, on the one hand, a self-definition advocated by politically mobilized black people in their entities; and, on the other hand, in the neglect of the black bases, which are the majority not mobilized and not conscious. However, the black movement is aware that, despite the obstacles and difficulties, without the construction of a positive black identity, with the solidarity of the black and mixed race, there is no glimpse, much less a way that can trigger a process of implementation of public policies in favor of the community and against racism. That is, as Melucci (1992, p. 37) asserts, it is not possible to separate rigidly the individual, relational and social aspects of identity. In individual history, identity presents itself as a learning process, which carries the autonomy of a person.

Conclusion

As we focus on the elaboration of the present reflection, taking into account my personal and academic trajectory, it gets stronger the fact that Melucci contributes and can continue to contribute in this challenging reality of the negritude experience and construction of a positive black identity in Brazilian lands. Among the many contributions that Melucci (1992, p. 32-34) brings with his works, we highlight here three ideas, by way of conclusion, about identity. The first is the fact that our personal unity, produced and maintained through self-identification, is based on the belonging of a group and on the possibility of situating ourselves within a system of relations. The second consists in the fact that difference supposes a certain similarity and a certain reciprocity, for being seen and affirmed as such, which constitutes the paradox of identity. And third, is that our identity tends to coincide with the conscious processes of individuation and not so much as a situation as an action.

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