Black Political Protest in São Paulo, 1888–1988*

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Beginning with Brazil’s origins as a nation, and continuing to the present, the relationship between race and politics in that country has been a close and integral one. Portuguese state policy made black slavery the very foundation of Brazil’s social and economic order during three centuries of colonial rule. That foundation remained in place even after independence, with the paradoxical result that Brazil became ‘the last Christian country to abolish slavery, and the first to declare itself a racial democracy’. Indeed, perhaps nowhere is the connection between race and politics in Brazil more evident than in the concept of ‘racial democracy’, which characterises race relations in that country in explicitly political terminology.  

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3 On the concept of racial democracy, see Thales de Azevedo, Democracia racial (Petrópolis, 1975); Emilia Viotti da Costa, ‘The Myth of Racial Democracy: A Legacy

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This article explores some of the connections between race and politics in Brazil by examining four moments in the history of black political mobilisation in that country. Geographically, it focuses on the south-eastern state of São Paulo, which by the time of emancipation, in 1888, housed the third-largest slave population in Brazil (after neighbouring Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro), and which has formed a centre of black political action from the 1880s through to the present. Chronologically, it focuses on: the struggle for the final abolition of slavery in the 1880s; the rise and fall of the Frente Negra Brasileira in the 1930s; the black organisations of the Second Republic; and the most recent wave of black protest, from the mid-1970s to 1988.

The purpose of such an exercise is twofold. First, placing these moments of black mobilisation in a century-long time-frame makes it possible for us to see them not as isolated episodes, but as chapters in a long-term, ongoing history of black protest and struggle in Brazil. Secondly, this article seeks to relate the history of black protest to the larger history of state–society relations in Brazil during the last hundred years. Recent work in this area has suggested how the character and institutional structure of the regime in power at any given moment have directly influenced the organisational forms through which popular forces, including Afro-Brazilians, have mobilised to assert themselves in politics. At the same time, movements originating in civil society have had significant reciprocal impacts on state policies and institutions, and have helped drive forward the repeated regime transitions which Brazil has experienced since 1889: from monarchy (1822–89) to oligarchic republic (1891–1930) to corporatist dictatorship (1937–45) to populist republic (1946–64) to military dictatorship (1964–85) to the Third Republic. The history of black protest is very much a part of this state–society dialectic,
although its centrality has varied substantially over time: high in the 1880s, low in the first half of the 1900s, and then increasing in the 1970s and 1980s.

**Moment 1: The Empire and Abolition**

Reflecting the tensions between colonial state and local elites which had produced independence, the Brazilian Empire divided political power between a centralising national monarchy and provincial landowning elites. Imperial policy was for the most part supportive of the landowners and their needs, but conflicts inevitably arose between the monarchy and those regional oligarchies who saw themselves neglected or actively harmed by its policies. During the last decades of the Empire the most serious such conflict revolved around the institution of slavery. As that conflict reached its climax, it increasingly took the form of a confrontation between slave-owning planters and a popular abolitionist movement tacitly supported by a monarchy whose policy initiatives had over time effectively undermined the institution of slavery.

During the first half of the century the Empire had resisted British efforts to terminate the Atlantic slave trade; by 1851, however, the monarchy had reversed course and began actively to prosecute slave traders, a policy which eliminated the trade in a matter of months. By the late 1860s Emperor Dom Pedro II was expressing public support for the idea of a gradual, indemnified emancipation of the nation’s slaves, and had instructed his Council of State to explore means of carrying this out. The result was the Rio Branco Law of 1871, which decreed the freedom of all slaves owned by the national state, the eventual freedom (at the age of majority) of all children born of slave mothers after 28 September 1871, and the purchase of the freedom of other slaves through a state-administered emancipation fund.

The Rio Branco Law was a compromise measure which provided for the eventual termination of slavery, but at the cost of maintaining forced

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8 The terms of the law, as well as the story of abolition more generally, are laid out in Robert Conrad, *The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery, 1830–1888* (Berkeley, 1972); Robert Brent Toplin, *The Abolition of Slavery in Brazil* (New York, 1971); Emília Viotti da Costa, *Da senzala à colônia* (2nd edn., São Paulo, 1982), and *A abolição* (São Paulo, 1982).
labour in Brazil well into the twentieth century.9 Immediate and definitive abolition was a political impossibility in a Parliament dominated by slave-owning interests. And the likelihood of such abolition was further reduced in 1881 by a sweeping electoral reform passed by planter interests fearful of the dangers posed by an expanding electorate which they were finding increasingly difficult to control. At a stroke the voting population was reduced from a million adult males to fewer than 150,000, effectively reinforcing the control of the propertied classes over Brazilian politics.10

If slavery were to be eliminated before the turn of the century, the effort would have to come from outside the formal political system, and this is precisely what happened. Immediately following the electoral reform of 1881 a new and more radical abolitionist movement began to appear in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo states, a movement which advocated civil disobedience and non-violent resistance, by both slaves and free people, to the institution of slavery. Abolitionist agitators, the caifazes, circulated through the countryside urging slaves to flee the plantations and make their way to urban centres, where abolitionist groups would provide them with shelter and protection and prevent slave-hunters from pursuing them.11

The radical abolitionism of the 1880s sparked a massive response among a slave population which over time had displayed considerable sensitivity to, and canniness in exploiting, changes in public and official attitudes toward slavery. Rising abolitionist sentiment after 1860, and the monarchy’s openly critical attitude toward slavery, had prompted a growing number of slaves to explore possible protections in the royal court system, where not infrequently they received a sympathetic reception. Mulatto lawyer Luis Gama won freedom for a number of slaves in São Paulo whose age indicated that either they or their parents had been imported after the first abolition of the slave trade, in 1831. The courts also proved receptive to slaves appealing for protection against abusive masters. State officials and landowners both commented on a series of cases in the 1860s and 1870s in which slaves had assaulted their masters or overseers and had then voluntarily turned themselves over to the police, claiming self-defence and demanding a court trial.12

9 Female slaves born prior to 28 Sept. 1871 would still have been of childbearing age in the early 1910s. Under the 1871 law, their children would not have acquired full freedom until reaching the age of majority, in the late 1920s – at which time their mothers would have been in their late 50s, and still slaves.
10 The reform and its effects are discussed in Graham, Patronage and Politics, pp. 182–206.
11 See works cited in note 8.
Such acts of resistance, and subsequent appeals to royal justice, tended to involve individuals or small groups. Not until the 1880s did the radical abolitionists provide a level of public support which emboldened the slave population to act *en masse*. When the opportunity for such action presented itself, thousands of slaves in São Paulo state seized it, fleeing the plantations in 1887 and 1888 in a massive, non-violent exodus which neither the plantation owners nor the state proved able to stop. Indeed, a key moment in the process of abolition took place in October 1887, when the president of the Club Militar formally petitioned the monarchy to relieve the armed forces of responsibility for capturing escaped slaves, a mission which the officers rejected both as immoral and impossible to carry out.

The withdrawal of the armed forces from the enforcement of slavery removed the last major impediment to slave flight, and it was at this point that São Paulo’s coffee planters abruptly changed course and embraced ‘planter emancipationism’. Forty thousand slaves, over a third of the province’s slave population, were freed by their masters during slavery’s last twelve months of existence, and on 13 March 1888 the province’s Legislative Assembly unanimously petitioned Parliament to abolish the institution. By 13 May 1888, when Princess Regent Isabel signed the Lei Aurea, the Golden Law which definitively abolished slavery throughout Brazil, São Paulo’s planters were congratulating themselves on having anticipated the inevitable and ended slavery ‘through the spontaneous will of the masters, without the intervention of the authorities’, as a contemporary report prepared by the provincial government put it.

As we have seen, however, abolition was precipitated not by the masters, but by the slaves. This was clearly perceived by most of the participants at the time. A French visitor to São Paulo at the turn of the century was informed by his hosts that slavery had been abolished because

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13 Abolitionist Ruy Barbosa’s description of the slaves’ flight from the plantations suggests the tactics and moral tone of the US civil rights movement of the 1960s: ‘the “I refuse” of the slaves, that glorious exodus of São Paulo’s slaves, solemn, Biblical, as divine as the most beautiful episodes of the Scriptures…’. Quoted in Azevedo, *Onda negra*, p. 213, n. 52.

the situation of such owners as had retained their slaves was becoming difficult; and discipline on the plantations was becoming impossible. The abolition law merely ratified the already profound disorganisation of slave labour – a disorganisation produced, of course, by the slaves themselves.\textsuperscript{15} An 1898 editorial commemorating the tenth anniversary of emancipation explained the event in almost identical terms:

Had the slaves not fled en masse from the plantations, rebelling against their masters... Had 20,000 of them not fled to the famous quilombo of Jabaquara [outside the port city of Santos], they might still be slaves today... Slavery ended because the slave didn't wish to be a slave any longer, because the slave rebelled against his master and the law that enslaved him... The May 13th law was no more than the legal sanctioning, so that public authority wouldn't be discredited, of an act that had already been consummated by the mass revolt of the slaves....\textsuperscript{16}

Though planters might try to claim credit for the achievement of emancipation, contemporary and subsequent observers acknowledged it as ‘a victory of the people and, we may add, a victory by the free blacks and slaves’.\textsuperscript{17} Describing the abolition of slavery as ‘the most genuine popular conquest’ in Brazilian history, the Diário de Campinas stated flatly that ‘the people made Abolition’. ‘Quite rare in our land, the executive branch being the mere executor of a decree by the people,’ mused São Paulo’s Diário Popular on 14 May. And writing four years after the event, an editorialist in O Estado de São Paulo observed that popular opinion tended to attribute abolition to Princess Isabel’s decision to free the slaves, but that in fact it had been the first expression of democracy in the country’s history. ‘A mass-based movement, deeply and profoundly of the people, and spread over the entire vastness of our country, we have but one example in our history, and that is the movement that on 13 May 1888 achieved its glorious ratification, and its recognition by the government.’\textsuperscript{18}

For the first time in Brazilian history, a grassroots political movement had triumphed against oligarchical interests. The implications of such an event were literally revolutionary, as more than one observer noted at the time.\textsuperscript{19} It also signalled to landowners the potential dangers posed by a political alliance between the monarchy and the masses – an alliance which

\textsuperscript{15} Pierre Denis, Brazil (London, 1911), p. 183. \textsuperscript{16} Rebate (3 June 1898), p. 1.
\textsuperscript{17} Costa, Abolição, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{19} See, for example, Toplin, Abolition, pp. 239 and 245.
had been tacit and informal during most of the decade, but which took concrete form in late 1888 with the creation of the Black Guard, a paramilitary organisation of former slaves headed by mulatto abolitionist José do Patrocínio, the members of which were sworn to defend the monarchy against Republicanism.20

The Republican Party had been created in 1870 by São Paulo coffee planters responding in part to the threat represented by Dom Pedro’s calls for gradual emancipation.21 Now the reality of emancipation, and additional demands by the abolitionists for agrarian reform, land grants for former slaves, and ‘democratisation of the soil’, further alienated the landowning elite and pushed growing numbers of them into the Republican ranks. As a Rio newspaper noted at the time, ‘the pact between the monarchical regime and the classes which formerly defended and upheld it was destroyed’ by abolition.22 São Paulo Republicans were now actively conspiring with discontented members of the officer corps to overthrow the monarchy; and when the armed forces struck, just a year and a half after abolition, landowners either stood aside or actively rejoiced in the fall of the Empire.

The only development that might have saved the monarchy was the formation of a new political pact in which rural and urban masses replaced the landowners as the monarchy’s base of political support. Certainly such support was not lacking. Several historians note that, largely because of emancipation, the monarchy’s popularity was at an all-time high in 1889, and monarchist sentiment continued to run strong among poor and working-class Brazilians well into the twentieth century.23 Given the

21 Conrad, Destruction, pp. 94–5.
institutional structure of the Empire, however, it proved impossible to bring the non-elite population into the political system at this late date as a source of support. The Empire had been based on the principle of either excluding non-elites from political participation, or admitting them only under conditions of tight control. In such a political environment, it was little short of a miracle that slavery had actually been brought down by a mass-based political movement; and once that movement’s goal had been achieved, it was hardly surprising that abolitionism ‘lacked the means of political reproduction’ and proved unable to sustain either itself or the political system under which it had triumphed.\(^{24}\) Nor was it surprising that Brazil’s next constitutional experiment, the First Republic, would be structured in such a way as to prevent popular movements from ever again posing such a direct threat to elite interests.

**Moment 2: The First Republic, Vargas, and the Frente Negra Brasileira**

‘It was only with the fall of the Empire’, notes historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, ‘that the empire of the planters began.’\(^{25}\) Reacting to the Empire’s concentration of authority in the hands of the monarch, the Republican Constitution of 1891 called for a decentralised federal structure in which the state governments retained substantial autonomy. Elite control of those governments, and of the federal Congress, was assured by levels of suffrage lower than those which had obtained during most of the Empire (i.e. until 1881). The result, as French observer Pierre Denis noted at the time, was a system in which the sovereign people, before delegating its sovereignty to its representatives, confides to the ruling class the duty of supervising its electoral functions. The large landed proprietors choose the candidates, and their instructions are usually obeyed. They form the structure, the framework, of all party politics; they are its strength, its very life; it is they who govern and administer Brazil.\(^{26}\)


\(^{25}\) Quoted in Carvalho, *Teatro de sombras*, p. 21.

Black Protest in São Paulo

Under the Republic, as under the monarchy, popular opposition again had to assert itself outside the tightly controlled institutional channels of the state. Such opposition took a variety of forms. One was a series of riots and uprisings, often with strongly monarchist overtones, which took place both in the backlands of rural Brazil and in the national capital of Rio de Janeiro between 1897 and 1916. A second form of resistance to the Republic was the labour movement, which between 1917 and 1920 subjected São Paulo and Rio to several general strikes, and an abortive anarchist uprising in the national capital. And a third form of protest was the tenente uprisings of the 1920s, revolts by young officers disgusted with the corruption and stagnation of the Republic. The first three of these revolts were successfully repressed by the government; the fourth, in 1930, was supported by agrarian elites in the south and northeast who felt that they had been locked out of national political power by their colleagues in São Paulo and Minas Gerais. With this civilian backing, the fourth tenente uprising brought the Republic to an end and introduced a new era in Brazilian politics, one dominated by the civilian leader of the so-called Revolution of 1930, Getúlio Vargas.

Black people had particular reason to join in the agitation against the Republic. In addition to its open favouring of the planter class, whose interests were in direct and frequent conflict with those of the newly freed libertos, the Republic had embraced the doctrines of scientific racism and Social Darwinism, and launched Brazil on a national campaign intended to transform it from a colonial backwater into a ‘tropical belle époque’, a European society transplanted to the tropics. A major part of this national


campaign was a conscious attempt to replace Brazil’s racially mixed population with a ‘whitened’ population ‘fortified’ by European immigrants. The national government made the promotion of European immigration one of its primary policy objectives, and the state government of São Paulo invested millions of dollars in a programme to bring Europeans to the state by subsidising their steamship passages to Santos.30

Afro-Brazilians thus found themselves politically excluded by the Republic’s limitations on suffrage and other forms of political participation; socially and psychologically excluded by the doctrines of scientific racism and the ‘whitening thesis’; and economically excluded by the employment and other preferences granted to European immigrants over their black competitors.31 Particularly in São Paulo, this racial exclusion extended to the various opposition movements as well. Though some elements of the labour movement made an effort to reach out to Afro-Brazilians, the domination of the movement by immigrant members and leaders tended to have a discouraging effect on black participation.32

And when disgruntled members of São Paulo’s middle and planter classes joined in 1926 to create the Democratic Party, they made no effort to bring Afro-Brazilians into their ranks, or to address any of the racial issues raised in the active black press of the 1920s.33

The failure of either the Republicans or the Democrats to consider the needs of the state’s black population led members of São Paulo’s black middle class to think about the possibility of entering paulista politics by means of a racially defined party or movement. As early as 1925 the capital’s leading black paper, O Clarim da Alvorada (The Clarion of Dawn), had called for ‘a political party comprised exclusively of men of colour’.


32 Andrews, ‘Black and White Workers’, pp. 497–502. The situation was different in Rio de Janeiro, where the smaller size of the immigrant population and the larger number of non-whites made it possible for Afro-Brazilians to assume leadership roles in the labour movement there. See Hahner, Poverty and Politics, pp. 98–102 and 282–3; Fausto, Trabalho urbano, p. 55; Francisco Foot Hardman, ‘Trabalhadores e negros no Brasil’, Folha de São Paulo (16 May 1982).

33 On the black press, see Miriam Nicolau Ferrara, A imprensa negra paulista, 1915–1963 (São Paulo, 1986); Imprensa negra (São Paulo, 1984).
In 1929 it returned to this theme, posing the question, ‘should the black man be a politician?’, and responding with a strong affirmative. ‘We have no knowledge of a single Governor who in his political platform has included a single line of interest to black people...If we could put together a voting bloc, then the black would see his position change, without having to bow down at every step to the will and commandments of others.’

By overturning the Republic and its system of one-party rule, 1930 seemed to open the door to the realisation of this dream, and black activists were not slow to respond. Within a year, and following a series of well-attended public meetings, they had organised the Frente Negra Brasileira, a black political party which quickly spread throughout São Paulo state and into Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo, Bahia, and Rio Grande do Sul.

In explaining the reasons for the initial rapid expansion of the Frente, contemporary observers stressed the widespread sense among black people of the new opportunities for political participation created by the change in regime. A report in the mainstream press on one of the Frente’s organising meetings noted the palpable atmosphere of hope and expectation among those present. ‘Last night’s meeting was truly noteworthy, both in terms of attendance, which was enormous, and of the speeches given...One visibly feels the awakening of a national consciousness among the black Brazilians, driving them toward more direct participation in the social and political life of the country....’ Recalling those meetings years later, one who took part in them stressed the same theme: ‘the blacks wanted to participate because they felt themselves to be the greatest beneficiaries of the revolution [of 1930]. The slavocracy had been deposed from power, the men who always scorned and despised the blacks. Now it was time for the blacks to take part.’ Even relatively conservative black papers, such as Progresso, which had spent the 1920s trying to downplay the extent of discrimination and racism in the city, and urging moderation and accommodation on its readers, could not resist the excitement:

In the hour in which Brazil prepares to convene its Constitutional Assembly [of 1933], setting the tone for the new Brazil, the men and women of the black race

must prepare to fight so that in that Assembly black people are represented by their legitimate racial brothers... Men and women of the black race, struggle bravely so that in the highest councils of the nation the voice of the blacks will lift like a clarion, imposing on Brazil the splendours of Justice for our race.37

The public reaction to the Frente exceeded any of its organisers’ expectations. In later years, former leaders recalled their amazement at the outpouring of enthusiasm in the community, and their uncertainty as to how to proceed in the face of such a response. Francisco Lucrécio, who joined the organisation in his early twenties, recalls how ‘we were exhausted, we used to come out of [Frente headquarters] sick because we were dedicated, we were fanatics. I didn’t do anything else: just study, go home, and go to the Frente. I never went to the movies, never went to the theatre.’ São Paulo papers covering the organisation’s first political campaign (in 1933 its founder and president, Arlindo Veiga dos Santos, ran for the city council) interviewed youths who had been working for 48 hours without rest, covering the city with posters for their candidate.38

Despite this prodigious expenditure of effort and energy, the Frente never succeeded in electing a single one of its candidates, or in becoming a significant factor within São Paulo politics. This was in part a function of the continuing restriction of suffrage to literates. Furthermore, the great majority of the state’s black population still lived in the countryside during the 1930s, its vote subject to close control by rural landowners and coronéis.39

Also contributing to the Frente’s political weakness, however, was a process of internal political conflict and eventual self-destruction which replicated in microcosm the larger trajectory of Brazilian politics during the 1930s. As in a number of other European and Latin American nations weathering the economic crisis of that decade, Brazilian politics became polarised between a Communist-dominated Popular Front movement, the Aliança Nacional Libertadora, and the Brazilian variant of European Fascism, the Integralist movement, founded in São Paulo in 1932.40 The Frente Negra had initially drawn support from a broad spectrum of political opinion within the black community, but within months of its

37 ‘Frente Unica’, Progresso (15 Nov. 1931), p. 3.
39 Despite the provisional government’s rhetoric of expanded political participation, voter turn-out as a percentage of the total population actually declined between the elections of 1930 (under the Republic) and 1934, from 5.7% of the adult population to 5.5%. Love, ‘Political Participation’, p. 16.
foundering it had moved into a close relationship with the Integralists. 41
Both organisations espoused an unrepentant xenophobia, and repeatedly denounced foreign domination of Brazilian life, as personified by foreign capitalists, foreign landlords, and ‘the pro-foreigner policies which marked the ominous dominion of the Paulista Republican Party’. In their speeches and publications, the Frente’s leaders called for ‘a hard nationalist campaign, against the foreign or semi-foreign slime that engineers divisions, Bolshevism, Socialism, and other vile and infamous things’, and urged the Vargas regime to ‘close the doors of Brazil [to foreigners] for twenty years or more’ so that black people could reconquer their rightful position in the country. 42
The Frente Negra shared with Integralism a contemptuous disdain for liberal democracy and, despite both organisations’ frequently voiced rejection of foreign political philosophies, an open admiration for European Fascism. In a 1933 editorial saluting Adolf Hitler’s rise to power, Arlindo Veiga dos Santos congratulated him for rescuing Germany from the hands of ‘Jewish cosmopolitanism’ and ‘the narcotic opiate of fourteen years of liberal-democratic republicanism’. Essays in the Frente’s newspaper, A Voz da Raça (The Voice of the Race) reported in highly positive terms on the achievements of Nazism and Fascism in instilling discipline and patriotism in their people. This admiration for authoritarianism extended to the Frente’s own system of internal governance: officers were chosen not by election but rather by incumbent officeholders, and the organisation as a whole was policed by a ‘militia’ modelled on the Integralists’ Green Shirts and commanded by Pedro Paulo Barbosa, a dedicated anti-Communist and supporter of Mussolini. 43
The Fascist orientation of both the Integralists and the Frente reflected the anxieties of São Paulo’s middle and lower-middle classes, and their fear of powerful pressures from above and below. They had deeply resented their exclusion from politics by the planter-dominated Republic; and they feared as well the fierce competition for jobs, education and upward mobility which they faced from the European immigrants and the

41 The Frente’s founder, Arlindo Veiga dos Santos, had been active in several of the proto-Fascist organisations in São Paulo which preceded the establishment of Integralism. Hélgio Trindade, Integralismo: O fascismo brasileiro na década de 30 (2nd edn., São Paulo, 1979), pp. 114 n. 72, 118 n. 85.
immigrants’ children. Many responded by embracing the strident nationalism and xenophobia of Integralism, and by rejecting the liberal democracy discredited by the corruption and fraud of the Republic.44

To judge by its rhetoric, the Frente Negra’s middle-class leadership shared these feelings and frustrations.45 However, the Frente’s Fascist orientation proved of limited appeal to the black population as a whole. As the organisation allied itself ever more closely with Integralism (it even adopted as its own the Integralists’ motto of ‘for family, for country, and for God’, modifying it slightly by adding ‘for race’), it progressively alienated both working-class and middle-class support within the black community, driving moderate and left-wing dissenters in São Paulo city to create the Clube Negro de Cultura Social and the small Frente Negra Socialista.46 The Frente chapter in the port city of Santos cut ties with the central organisation to enter into an electoral alliance with the Socialist Party (which, characteristically, the São Paulo headquarters dismissed as ‘a horde of undesirables from other countries’). The Frente responded to such dissidents with vicious attacks in A Voz da Raça on ‘Judeas to their race’ and by sending its militia to wreck the offices of a black newspaper critical of its orientation.47

Such conflicts prevented the Frente from achieving its goal of becoming a significant political force in São Paulo or anywhere else in Brazil. And similar Left–Right polarisation at the national level prevented Brazil as a whole from realising 1930’s promise of expanded participation and broad-based democracy. An abortive Communist uprising in 1935, and allegations of a planned Integralist putsch, led Getúlio Vargas in 1937 to suspend the new constitution and institute the New State, a corporatist dictatorship closely modelled on Portuguese and Italian Fascism. The Frente saluted the new regime as ‘the reaffirmation of brasilidade’ and pledged its full support.48 Shortly thereafter it was banned by the New


45 All members of the Frente leadership for whom professions could be ascertained were professionals or white-collar office workers. These include Arlindo Veiga dos Santos (clerk-secretary), Raul Joviano Amaral (accountant), Antônio Martins dos Santos (engineer), Francisco Lucrécio (dentist), and others.


State’s blanket proscription of all political parties. Reduced to a handful of members, it struggled on for several months as a non-political civic organisation but then formally dissolved in May 1938, shortly after the fiftieth anniversary of emancipation.

**Moment 3: The Second Republic**

The New State came to an end with the military coup of 1945, and the inauguration the following year of the Second Republic. The resulting restoration of civil liberties and party politics seemed at first glance to open the doors for a resurgence of the black movement. São Paulo’s black press, which had disappeared under the dictatorship, promptly resurfaced with the appearance of *Alvorada* in September 1945, *Senzala* in January 1946, and *O Novo Horizonte* in May 1946. The Convenção Nacional do Negro Brasileiro was hastily convened in the state capital a month after the fall of the dictatorship, work began on the creation of a new Associação do Negro Brasileiro, and community leaders began to prepare for the elections of 1946.49

All of these efforts (save the black papers, which continued into the 1950s and were joined by several additional publications) failed, and no racially defined political movement comparable to the Frente Negra appeared during the Second Republic. In part this was due to bitter memories of the Frente’s failings.50 Probably more important in explaining this development, however, were the changes which Brazil had undergone during the Vargas years, and the marked differences between the Second Republic and the First.

The New State had actively promoted Brazilian industrialisation, which led to the rapid growth of the industrial economy and a corresponding increase in the industrial labour force. Vargas’ policies had also imposed a new system of organisation on that labour force, mobilising it into state-sponsored unions subject to close government supervision and control. Under the New State, the unions were expected to maintain a high level of workplace discipline and quiescence among factory workers, and to provide a solid base of political support for the government.51

These new developments were particularly visible in São Paulo, the heartland of the Brazilian industrial economy, and had powerful implications for the state’s black population. Afro-Brazilians had been

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51 The Vargas system of labour relations is discussed in Kenneth Paul Erickson, *The Brazilian Corporative State and Working-Class Politics* (Berkeley, 1977). On how that system functioned in practice in São Paulo, see French, ‘Industrial Workers...’. 
systematically excluded from the opportunities created by the economic growth of the 1890–1930 period, when blue-collar employment had been dominated by European immigrants. After 1930, however, restrictions on immigration into Brazil (part of Vargas’ efforts to combat the Depression and to win support among Brazilian workers) combined with conditions in Europe greatly to reduce immigration into the country. As industrial growth accelerated, Afro-Brazilians no longer had to face job competition from the immigrants, and were now able to start entering the industrial economy and obtain the factory jobs that had previously been denied them.  

This entry of black workers into the industrial labour force had direct political consequences. First, by lowering previous barriers to black participation in the industrial economy, it considerably reduced the sense of grievance among the black population. Secondly, by enlisting black workers in the state-controlled labour movement, it integrated Afro-Brazilians into the Brazilian political system in a new and unprecedented way. Those black workers who could vote (suffrage was still restricted to literates, though this requirement was often circumvented for union members) were openly courted by the labour-based political parties which competed for power in the new Republic. The Communist Party, Getúlio Vargas’ Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (PTB), and, in São Paulo, Adhemar de Barros’s Partido Social Progressista (PSP) – each of these parties, and the labour movement from which they drew their support, was aggressively seeking black support and welcoming black voters into its ranks.  

The receptiveness of the populist parties to black voters substantially reduced sentiment in the black community for racially defined political activity along the lines of the Frente Negra. The result was that the black organisations of the 1946–64 period were almost exclusively cultural in their orientation, focusing on literacy and other educational projects, the fostering of black literary, theatrical and artistic activities, and so on. Indeed, the pre-eminent black organisation in São Paulo during these years, in terms of membership and visibility, embodied this orientation in its very name: the Associação Cultural do Negro, founded in 1954 by

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52 By 1910 Afro-Brazilians comprised 11.3% of São Paulo’s industrial labour force, a figure virtually identical to their 11.2% representation in the population as a whole. Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (hereafter IBGE), Censo demográfico: Estado de São Paulo, 1910 (Rio de Janeiro, 1914), p. 30.

53 The PSP, for example, maintained close ties with the black newspaper O Novo Horizonte; see ‘Mensagem aos negros’ (Sept. 1954), p. 5, and numerous other articles in the issues prior to the elections of 1954. The smaller Partido Socialista Brasileiro had a similar relationship with Mundo Novo. On black support for Getúlio Vargas and the PTB during this period, see Souza, ‘Raça e política’.
journalist Geraldo Campos de Oliveira, which functioned into the late 1970s.54

By admitting Afro-Brazilians to political participation, the populist institutions of the Second Republic greatly reduced the perceived need for a racially separate, black political movement. As those class-based institutions asserted themselves in Brazilian politics, however, they provoked stiffening opposition on the part of the elites and a substantial proportion of the middle class, both of which felt increasingly threatened by the demands and power of the populist parties. This opposition culminated in the military coup of March 1964, which closed down the Second Republic and inaugurated a twenty-one-year period of military dictatorship.

**Moment 4: redemocratisation and the modern black movement**

During its years in power, the military sought to restructure Brazil both politically and economically: to replace the ‘irresponsible, corrupt’ democracy of the Second Republic with reformed institutions less vulnerable to populist excesses; and economically, to move Brazil further down the road of industrialisation and modernisation on which it had embarked during the Vargas years and continued during the Second Republic.

The officers enjoyed considerable success in achieving their second goal. Economic growth averaged more than 10% per year during the ‘miracle’ years of 1968–74; by 1980, Brazil’s industrial output was the seventh-largest in the capitalist world.55 However, the benefits of economic expansion were grossly maldistributed, flowing disproportionately to the upper and middle classes (the top 20% of the population), and bypassing the working class, which saw the real value of the state-determined minimum wage shrink to between 50 and 60% of the purchasing power it had achieved at its height in the late 1950s.56

Within the middle class as well, the benefits of economic growth were by no means evenly distributed. Much like their grandparents during the early decades of the century, though now at a quite different level of the economy, black high-school and university graduates seeking white-collar

54 On the association’s activities, see its monthly newspaper, *O Mutirão*, which began publication on the seventieth anniversary of abolition, in May 1958. See also Moura, ‘Organizações negras’, pp. 157–9; and ‘Embora perto (e às vezes junto), o negro está muito longe do branco’, *Última Hora* (17 Oct. 1973).


and professional jobs in São Paulo's booming economy found themselves relegated to the least desirable positions, or rejected for employment altogether. The initial evidence of racial barriers in the white-collar job market was largely anecdotal; but government data gathered in the national household survey of 1976 made clear that racial exclusion was not a random phenomenon, confined to scattered individuals. Those data conclusively demonstrated the existence of racial inequities at all levels of the work force, and particularly severe inequality in white-collar and professional jobs. Furthermore, those data indicated that the higher the level of education attained by Afro-Brazilian jobseekers, the greater the disparity, both in absolute and percentage terms, between the salaries which they and their similarly prepared white competitors were receiving.57

Even before these findings became available to the public, a younger generation of Afro-Brazilians, many with one or more years of university study, were starting to organise a new black movement in response to the economic and political exclusion which they were experiencing under the dictatorship. This movement, most vividly symbolised by the Movimento Negro Unificado, created in São Paulo in 1978, was considerably more militant than any of its predecessors, reflecting in part the influence of its foreign models — the national liberation movements in Portugal's African colonies, and the civil rights and black power movements of the United States — and in part the strongly leftist orientation of much of the political opposition to the dictatorship, especially in southeastern Brazil.58


The pool of Afro-Brazilian high-school and college graduates in São Paulo increased substantially between 1950 and 1980, from 3,808 to 101,148. In 1950 only 0.5% of São Paulo's Afro-Brazilians had graduated from high school, and 0.03% from college; by 1980 1.5% of the state's black population had graduated from high school, and an additional 0.7% had completed one or more years of university study. Among the white population in 1980, 5.4% were high-school graduates, and an additional 5.1% had taken one or more years of university study. IBGE, Censo demográfico: São Paulo, 1950, table 20, p. 24; IBGE, Censo demográfico — dados gerais, migração, instrução, fecundidade, mortalidade — São Paulo, 1980 (Rio de Janeiro, 1982), table 1.5, pp. 12–13.

58 Joel Rufino dos Santos, 'O movimento negro e a crise brasileira', unpubl. ms., 1985; Mitchell, 'Blacks and the Abertura Democrática'. On the Movimento Negro Unificado in particular, see Lélia Gonzalez, 'The Unified Black Movement: A New Stage in Black
This new movement of the 1970s and 1980s was to a large degree the expression of frustration among upwardly mobile Afro-Brazilians denied admission to the middle-class status to which their education and qualifications entitled them. Its activists worked hard at recruiting support in the slums and favelas of the urban periferia, but their rhetoric and aspirations often seemed somewhat removed from the lives of poor and working-class blacks facing the immediate, grinding problems of poverty, crime and hunger.\(^5^9\) Still, despite its resulting difficulties in attracting a mass following, the black movement had major impacts on Brazilian life during the 1980s, exercising a degree of political influence out of all proportion to its actual membership, and provoking more state response in the area of race than at any time since 1888.

A major part of the explanation for this success may be found in the ‘party reform’ of 1979. Prior to that time, the dictatorship had permitted the existence of only a single opposition party, the Movimento Democrático Brasileiro. Eventually recognising that such a policy provided the perfect mechanism for its opponents to join forces, in 1979 the government freed the opposition to return to multi-party competition. The Movimento Negro Unificado had been founded just the year before and, inspired by its example, local-level black organisations were coming into existence throughout Brazil.\(^6^0\) As the newly created opposition

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For examples of literature and analysis produced by activists and intellectuals associated with the black movement, see Abdias do Nascimento, O genocıdio do negro brasileiro: Processo de um racismo mascarado (Rio de Janeiro, 1978), and Quilombismo (Petrópolis, 1982); Moura, O negro, and Sociologia do negro brasileiro; Joel Rufino dos Santos, O que é racismo (São Paulo, 1980); Sueli Carneiro and Thereza Santos, Mulher negra (São Paulo, 1985); Quilombhoje, Reflexões (São Paulo, 1985); Paulo Colina (ed.), Axe: Antologia contemporânea da poesia negra brasileira (São Paulo, 1982); and the literary annual Cadernos Negros (São Paulo, 1978–).

\(^5^9\) For a discussion of the problems middle-class activists experienced in working with poor and working-class blacks, see ‘Avaliando nosso movimento’, in Grupo Negro da PUC, Boletim 3, A luta continua (São Paulo, 1984), pp. 16–26. For survey data on the attitudes of black voters, by education and income level, toward the black movement, see Ana Lúcia E. F. Valente, Política e relações raciais: Os negros e as eleições paulistas de 1982 (São Paulo, 1986), pp. 125–43.

\(^6^0\) Two separate estimates suggest that 200–250 such organisations were in existence in Brazil by 1984. Santos, ‘Movimento negro’, p. 1; Cândido Mendes, ‘O quilombo urbano pede passagem’, Folha de São Paulo (6 Aug. 1984), p. 3. A study carried out during 1986 and 1987 found 343 such organisations in Brazil as a whole: 138 in São Paulo, 76 in Rio de Janeiro, 33 in Minas Gerais, 27 in Bahia, and the rest scattered throughout the country. Caetana Damasceno et al., Catálogo de entidades de movimento negro no Brasil, Comunicações do ISER [Instituto de Estudos da Religião], no. 29 (1988).
parties competed among themselves for electoral support, they directed particular attention to this burgeoning black movement, inserting anti-racism planks into their platforms, and creating special working groups and commissions to investigate racial problems in Brazil.

This inter-party competition for black electoral support was particularly visible in São Paulo, where fifty-four Afro-Brazilian candidates were nominated for municipal, state and national-level offices in the elections of 1982. Reflecting the movement’s inability to mobilise mass support, only two of those candidates were elected (one to the state Legislative Assembly, and the other to the São Paulo city council); nevertheless, when the leading opposition party, the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), swept the government party from power that year, it proceeded to establish a new state agency, the Conselho de Participação e Desenvolvimento da Comunidade Negra, charged, in the words of the executive decree which created it, with ‘carrying out studies on the condition of the black community and proposing measures aimed at defending its rights, and eliminating the discrimination which affects it’. Following the elections of 1986, in which the PMDB was again victorious, anti-discrimination offices were created in the Secretariats of Education and Labour, and black union activist Oswaldo Ribeiro was appointed to head the newly created Special Secretariat of Social Relations.

These new agencies are small, fledgling organisations occupying minute niches within the colossal structure of the Brazilian state, and critics of the PMDB, and of the black activists associated with the party, have been quick to denounce them as purely cosmetic entities with no real political influence or significance. Viewing these developments from a

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63 Similar developments took place in Rio de Janeiro, where Governor Leonel Brizola, who had campaigned on a platform of ‘socialismo Moreno’ (literally, ‘brown socialism’), appointed three Afro-Brazilians to his cabinet (the Secretaries of Labour and Housing, Military Police, and Social Affairs – all areas of particular interest to his Afro-Brazilian constituency) and undertook a number of policy initiatives aimed at benefiting the city’s poor population, which is heavily black. On Afro-Brazilian support for Brizola and his party, the Partido Democrático Trabalhista, see Soares and Silva, ‘Urbanization, Race, and Class’.

64 See, for example, the criticisms reported in ‘Conselho busca adesões e apoio’, Caderno C, Diário do Grande ABC (24 Nov. 1985).
historical perspective, one must disagree. Never before, to my knowledge, had a state or national government in Brazil ever officially contradicted the country’s image of itself as a racial democracy. Nor had a Brazilian government ever taken the step of creating a set of state agencies with a vested interest in publicising, and stimulating public debate on, the issues of discrimination and inequality. In 1984 the Secretariat of Culture initiated Projeto Zumbi, a month-long programme of lectures, concerts, art exhibits, public debates, and TV and radio programmes which takes place each November. The following year the Conselho de Desenvolvimento e Participação da Comunidade Negra began to publish a bimonthly newspaper distributed free of charge in black neighbourhoods and the central business district, as well as inexpensive booklets on black history, black literature, and racial problems in Brazil. The anti-discrimination office at the Secretariat of Labour focused its efforts on union leaders and on personnel administrators in São Paulo firms, trying to enlist both groups in a campaign to eliminate discrimination in hiring and promotion. And in 1988 the Secretariat of Education’s Grupo de Trabalho para Assuntos Afro-Brasileiros produced 200,000 copies of a special magazine on the centennial of emancipation, which was distributed to students and teachers in the São Paulo public schools and used as a basis for class discussions of the event.

These state initiatives combined with the consciousness-raising work and lobbying of the black movement more generally to stimulate a broad debate and discussion in Brazilian society on the nature of race relations in that country, and the degree to which the image of racial democracy accurately reflects racial realities. Carried out in the print and electronic media, and in venues ranging from elementary schools to samba schools, from prestigious universities to humble Christian base communities, this debate reached a climax of sorts in the festivities marking the centennial of Brazilian emancipation in 1988, during which the concept of Brazil as a racial democracy was roundly criticised. The Catholic church devoted its annual Lenten Brotherhood Campaign to the theme of race relations, distributing a texto base which condemned past Church complicity in slavery, and present-day racial discrimination. Federal Minister of Culture Celso Furtado, whose ministry was responsible for coordinating the centennial activities, stated flatly that ‘the idea that there is racial

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democracy in Brazil is false’.68 The nation’s two leading news weeklies both concurred, Istoé noting that ‘the myth of racial democracy appears to be definitively in its grave’, while Véja implicitly dismissed the concept by opening its cover story on the centennial with the observation that ‘one hundred years after Abolition, in Brazil there are two distinct citizeships – white and black’.69 Similar observations appeared in other prominent newspapers and magazines, and even in a somewhat unexpected quarter: the nationalist and politically centrist The Brasilians, a monthly newspaper published in New York by Brazilian émigrés. In its editorial commemorating the centennial, the paper reviewed recent statistical data documenting racial inequality in Brazil, strongly condemned the history of racial discrimination in that country, and saluted the ‘new and long overdue openness in dealing with racial issues there’. As far as racial democracy was concerned, the editors’ attitude was succinctly expressed by the editorial’s title: ‘Another Myth Bites the Dust.’70

The future in light of the past
At the very moment, however, that it was redefining the national discourse on race, the black movement of the 1980s was visibly receding, losing political influence and weight. Just as the Frente Negra’s Fascist orientation had antagonised initial supporters in the 1930s, the Marxist militancy of the Movimento Negro Unificado had a similarly alienating effect in the 1980s. One of the MNU’s founders described in 1984 how the movement ‘kept getting narrower and narrower ideologically, characterising itself increasingly as a movement of the left... After a year, it started to lose militants and strength.’71 As the MNU faded in importance, no comparable organisation emerged to replace it, and by 1988 Istoé observed that the black movement as a whole was in a state of ‘dramatic pulverisation... Ten years after the boom of the black movements, much of the initial euphoria has dissipated.’72

This decline can be traced in part to the pressures, both political and economic, which were undermining all popular movements in Brazil by the mid-1980s. However, a comparative examination of the instances of black mobilisation summarised in this essay suggests some additional factors specific to the history of black movements in Brazil. In all four cases, middle-class militants experienced enormous difficulties in bridging the gap between themselves and the poor and working-class blacks whom they sought to organise. This divergence between middle- and lower-class interests and aspirations contributed directly to the demise of the Frente Negra, and was one of the major obstacles facing the black movement of the 1980s. The alliance between slaves and middle-class abolitionists, both black and white, in the 1880s appears at first glance to constitute an exception to this generalisation. But the middle-class abolitionists were most important, not in providing leadership to the slave population, but rather in creating a climate of public opinion opposed to slavery, and in providing protection for fleeing slaves in the state capital, Santos and other urban areas. The actual leadership of that mass flight fell to the slaves themselves, or to black and white caifazes who were predominantly of working-class background. Once emancipation had taken place, the abolitionist movement soon dissolved, and the black middle class devoted itself either to the pursuit of upward mobility through cultural and biological whitening or, failing that, to a tightly circumscribed world of clubs and dances which excluded libertos and members of the black proletariat. Not until the 1930s, nearly fifty years after emancipation, did its members venture forth again to play the role of leaders of the black masses.

Thus in Brazil, as in the United States and other multiracial societies, class divisions within the black population have posed a significant obstacle to political mobilisation along racial lines. Those divisions can occasionally be overcome, however, by conditions of racial and/or political oppression sufficiently powerful to force black elites and masses into alliance, even if only temporarily. Our four cases suggest that those experiences of black mobilisation which have had the greatest societal and political impact have been those which developed under exclusionary, anti-democratic regimes, and in response to highly visible forms of racial injustice.

75 On São Paulo’s ‘black bourgeoisie’ during the early 1900s, see Andrews, Blacks and Whites, pp. 129–43.
The first such instance, both chronologically and in terms of its social and political ramifications, was the struggle against slavery, the most extreme form of racial oppression in Brazilian history. Despite the sympathetic attitude of the monarchy, abolitionism was radicalised and forced outside the formal political system by Parliament's drastic reduction of suffrage in 1881. The result was a mass-based popular movement which succeeded in destroying the institution on which Brazilian society and economy had been based for more than three hundred years. Such a movement was profoundly threatening to the planters, who responded by withdrawing their support from the monarchy and replacing it with the oligarchical, decentralised First Republic.

The next two instances of black mobilisation, the Frente Negra and the cultural organisations of the Second Republic, both had negligible political impacts. They also both took place during periods of political 'opening' and of efforts by Varguista populism to integrate black people, as part of the urban working class, into the state-dominated labour unions and, during the Second Republic, into labour-based political parties. Racial mobilisation might not have taken place during the 1930s at all had it not been for the recent memory and concrete legacies of the racial exclusion of the First Republic, and the continuing hostility of the mainstream parties to black participation. By the 1940s and 1950s the integration of the black population into the industrial work-force and the creation of new populist parties actively seeking black support had removed the need for a racially defined political movement. As a result, the Second Republic produced no black political movement comparable to those of the 1880s, 1930s or 1980s.

This brings us to the movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which has had an impact on state politics and national racial ideology second only to the abolitionism of the 1880s. This recent movement arose under conditions of marked political exclusion and authoritarianism, and formed part of the larger, society-wide protest against the military dictatorship. It was responding specifically, however, to the visible exclusion of black people from white-collar and middle-class employment. Succeeding where the black movements of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s had failed, the Movimento Negro Unificado and its sister organisations forced the issues of racial discrimination and inequality on to the national political agenda and provoked a society-wide debate on how to deal with them. Several state governments, and to a lesser degree the national government, formally committed themselves to combating racial inequality, and the state of São Paulo followed this up with concrete measures toward that end.

We conclude, therefore, that it is exclusionary regimes which have tended to provoke the most effective instances of black political
mobilisation. Inclusionary regimes, by contrast, which have actively sought to integrate Afro-Brazilians into their institutions, have greatly reduced the impulse toward mobilisation along racial lines. As Brazil made the transition from military dictatorship to electoral democracy in the 1980s, this tendency asserted itself in the Third Republic as well, perceptibly weakening, and perhaps bringing to an end, the most recent cycle of Afro-Brazilian protest.

As the historical moments covered in this article suggest, however, the end of each wave of black protest has always been followed, even if at some remove in time, by the beginnings of another. And while our analysis suggests that inclusionary regimes are less conducive to racial mobilisation, it is important to recognise that the events of the 1980s profoundly altered the national discourse on race, making it an overt political issue in a way never before seen in Brazilian history. Whether race will emerge as a focus for renewed struggles in the 1990s remains to be seen; but one doubts that we have reached the 'end of history' for black political protest in Brazil.

76 This generalisation applies to the southern United States and South Africa as well, where a combination of highly visible racial injustice, in the form of segregation, and exclusionary political regimes, eventually produced massive racial mobilisations in opposition to the status quo.

77 Though it is to borrow a characterisation from the (in some ways) analogous case of Brazilian feminism, 'dispersion rather than disappearance would be a more accurate way to describe the state of the movement in the late 1980s'. Sonia E. Alvarez, Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics (Princeton, 1990), p. 228. Numerous organisations continued to exist (see note 60), and some new ones were being created, such as SOS Racismo in Rio de Janeiro.