

## An Intellectual Portrait of Rüdiger Bilden, Forgotten Forerunner of Gilberto Freyre

Maria Lúcia G. Pallares Burke

University of Cambridge

2020

### POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Pallares–Burke, Maria Lúcia G., 2020. "An Intellectual Portrait of Rüdiger Bilden, Forgotten Forerunner of Gilberto Freyre", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : [article2044.html](http://article2044.html)

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

© UMR9022 Héritages (CY Cergy Paris Université, CNRS, Ministère de la culture)/DIRI, Direction générale des patrimoines et de l'architecture du Ministère de la culture. (All rights reserved).

Your use of this article indicates your acceptance of the Bérose site ([www.berose.fr](http://www.berose.fr)) terms and conditions of use, available [here](#).

Visited on 6 November 2024 at 11:58

Publié dans le cadre du thème de recherche «Histoire des anthropologies au Brésil», dirigé par Stefania Capone (CNRS) et Fernanda Arêas Peixoto (Universidade de São Paulo)

In January 1929, an article appeared in *The Nation*, a well-known weekly magazine of the time which had individuals such as Franz Boas and Bertrand Russell as collaborators, under the title, 'Brazil, Laboratory of Civilization'. Who was the author of this article? What did he mean by the phrase, 'laboratory of civilization'? What was the fate of the author and of this idea? This paper will explore the paradoxical combination of the success of the idea and the failure of the author.

### Rüdiger Bilden (1893-1980)

I shall begin with the author, Rüdiger Bilden, a German who was 35 years old and had been living in the USA since 1914. Bilden, studied at Columbia University, New York, where he was a promising student, indeed an outstanding one. [1] In 1920, he met the young Brazilian Gilberto Freyre, who he had a life-long friendship with. Freyre later became well-known as a multifaceted scholar and public intellectual, thanks to his wide-ranging work in history, sociology, anthropology and much more. Bilden impressed his teachers and friends with his talent, culture, wide interests and knowledge of languages. A little older than his fellow students, he soon became their mentor: advising them on books to read, on writers to study, on languages to learn, on habits of work to develop, and on topics to think about.

He was soon engaged in an ambitious and innovative study of the effects of slavery on

Brazilian society and culture, a study that created, from the early 1920s, great expectations among scholars from Brazil and the United States. But he did not live up to his early promise. He did not finish his PhD and published very little. He was unable to secure a permanent job and build a career, which would have given him professional and financial stability, and he virtually dropped out of the academic world. When he died in 1980, at the age of 87, away from his family and absent from historical memory, his name was only a rare and obscure footnote, which did not attract the attention even of specialists.

By worldly criteria, this man, who had been so promising, ended up becoming what the Americans call a 'loser' and what the English describe, in a rather sarcastic phrase, as 'someone who had a brilliant future behind him'.

Yet, a detailed summary of his research project (originally meant to be a PhD thesis), in one of Bilden's applications for funding in the early 1920s, showed that in some important respects it anticipated the conclusions of Gilberto Freyre's most famous book, *Casa-Grande & Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves)* by more than ten years. As is well-known, this book, published in 1933, was compared to an 'earthquake' which shook the whole country and reinvented Brazil, by inverting the negative view about a central aspect of Brazilian reality: racial mixing. Until then, the innate superiority of certain races and the inferiority of others, like the undesirability of a racial mixture, were considered to be facts, established by science. As a character in Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) put it, 'it's all scientific stuff; it's been proved'. As the result of miscegenation, which was believed to imply degeneration, Brazil was therefore thought to lack an identity of its own. In short, many foreigners and Brazilians alike, basing themselves on racist ideas legitimized by what was presented as 'science', agreed that nothing positive could be expected from a country populated by a 'mongrel race' and ruled by a 'mulatto government', as the stereotype of Brazil asserted. Only very occasionally could there be found some positive references to Brazilian hybridity, as in the case of Sílvio Romero in the 19th century and of Manoel Bonfim and Roquette-Pinto at the beginning of the 20th. The case was the same in Mexico, where José Vasconcelos praised the *mestiço* as the 5th great race of humankind, the universal synthesis of all the peoples in Europe, Africa, Asia and America (Pallares-Burke, 2018, p. 333; Vasconcelos, 1925).

Important intellectuals who read Bilden's project and part of the unfinished work at the time, considered his ideas to be revolutionary and were certain that the whole history of Brazil would have to be rewritten after he published his book. Manoel de Oliveira Lima, the important Brazilian diplomat and historian, for instance, said that finally, 'the question of slavery in my country will be examined deeply, competently and completely', and as a result, 'the many vital problems of Brazil today [1924] will be duly dealt with'. In short, Bilden was making a pioneering study of the weight of the past in Brazil, showing that the legacy of slavery was still actively present as an obstacle to the development of the new republic (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 179-180).

After reading Bilden's manuscript in 1926, Vicente Licínio Cardoso – the author who had organized the book *À Margem da História da República* (On the Fringes of the History of the

Republic), which reunited intellectuals who had been born with the Republic (1889) and were disappointed with the path that it had taken – also manifested his enthusiasm about the work in a national newspaper. As he wrote, it would “shake up the easy-going ways” of Brazilian historians, who did not carry out “a critical examination of historical facts” and did not recognize “the effects of black blood on our historical evolution”. There was no doubt, he said, that Bilden’s work would inaugurate a new phase of historical studies on Brazil (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 180).

It is important to remember that the history of Brazil attracted very little interest beyond its frontiers at that time. As the historian William R. Shepherd, who gave the first course on Latin American history at Columbia University at the very beginning of the 20th century, put it: “from all the nations of the New World, the United States of Brazil is the only country of great international importance which lacks a comprehensive and altogether adequate treatise on its past” (Shepherd, 1933, p. 427).

In a report to the Carnegie Foundation in 1924 on the progress of his work on the legacy of slavery to Brazilian history (which he had started to develop in 1922), Bilden drew attention, for the first time, to the contrast that Freyre would later also stress, between the British and the Portuguese colonial systems, and also to the deep influence of domestic slavery on Brazilian private life, an idea that Freyre would also put forward in his *Casa-Grande & Senzala* of 1933. But perhaps most important of all, it was this forgotten interlocutor of Freyre’s who first emphasized very clearly in his “Brazil, Laboratory of Civilization” that ‘the evils attributed by some critics to the racial composition of the country should be blamed on slavery’ (Roquette-Pinto, 1978, p. 30).

The ambitious and innovative work that Bilden was engaged on demanded more than broad knowledge, effort and penetrating analysis – qualities in which he abounded. Besides visiting a number of libraries in the United States, Bilden needed to complement his investigation with a visit to Brazil. It was not easy for him to raise funds for this, but eventually – with the support of his Columbia teachers and others, like Manoel de Oliveira Lima and another Brazilian diplomat and historian, Hélio Lobo– he received a grant from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund which allowed him to visit Brazil for a year and a half in 1925-1927.

During this period, Bilden made contact with people from different walks of life. Helped, in part, by his letters of introduction from Hélio Lobo and Oliveira Lima, he met American and German diplomats, the scientists Bertha Lutz and Emilie Snethlage, the media tycoon Assis Chateaubriand, historians such as Max Fleiuss, Rodolfo Garcia, Capistrano de Abreu and Afonso Taunay, the educationalist Carneiro Leão, and even Júlio de Mesquita Filho, who had just been appointed director of the national newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*. It was he who invited Bilden to visit the city of São Paulo, to make a tour of coffee plantations in the state, and to meet members of the economic elite, such as Moraes Barros and Souza Queiroz. It was at this time in Brazil that he first met Edgar Roquette-Pinto, with whom he started a correspondence that reveals their mutual admiration (Pallares-Burke, 2012, pp. 155-157,

169-170). Only later would he meet the other Brazilian anthropologist, Arthur Ramos, with whom he became close and even helped to publish his book *The Negro in Brazil*, a study originally published in English (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 239, 360).

On his return to New York, his determination to finish writing his voluminous work on Brazil continued, in spite of the difficulties of finding a job – difficulties which were soon to be dramatically increased with the Great Crash of October 1929.

But in January 1929, the publication of the article 'Brazil, Laboratory of Civilization' raised even more expectations concerning the work in progress. We must remember that ideas about Brazil, which today seem to be part of common sense, were at that time far from conventional – four years before Freyre's *Casa-Grande & Senzala* was published and two years before it was even planned. In short, they were ideas for which one had to fight with determination and audacity, qualities that Bilden had aplenty.

The anthropologist Melville Herskovits, who had been his colleague at Columbia, for instance, expressed his enthusiasm, saying that he was impatiently waiting for the "full results" of Bilden's work, which would be a comprehensive attack on so-called 'scientific racism', so widespread at that time. Giving scientific airs to prejudices, the 'science of race' not only presented the natural hierarchy of races as a proven fact, but placed the Nordic race at the top, because it was considered the race of the 'white man par excellence'. (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 194)

The same impatience was expressed by Franz Boas, one of the most eloquent critics of racial science during the first half of the 20th century. As a close friend and mentor of Bilden, and like him, a German immigrant to the United States, Boas had even commissioned him to carry out research on Brazilian 'consciousness of race' for the book which Boas published in 1929, *Anthropology and Modern Life*. (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 166; Boas, 1929, p. 62)

Again, the Brazilian anthropologist Edgar Roquette-Pinto, whom I'm tempted to describe as the 'Brazilian Franz Boas', did not hide his admiration for ideas aimed at a public in need of common sense. As he put it, the ideas of this 'good friend of Brazil', after all, added a historical foundation to his own idea that the mixed Brazilian was not a biological problem, but an economic and social one. In other words, the mixed population should be educated, not replaced. (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 188; Roquette-Pinto, 1978, p. 79)

## Brazil as a Laboratory

The article, originally titled "Brazil, Laboratory of Race and Civilization", was commissioned by *The Nation* to be published around the time that Herbert Hoover, president-elect, was visiting Latin America – from November to December 1928 (Pallares-Burke, 2018, p. 340). It developed some points already announced in Bilden's 1922 book project and had a very clear aim: to introduce an alternative vision of human relations to a violent and segregationist society, one which was more humane and more healthy. At the same time, it was aimed at

informing the American public in general – for whom the main products of Latin America were 'revolutions and earthquakes' (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 96) – that they had been committing 'intellectual atrocities' against this part of the American continent (Bilden, 1929, p. 71).

Among these atrocities committed by both uneducated and educated people was the idea that Latin America in general, and Brazil in particular, were doomed to be inferior if their population was not whitened. Dismissing current American prejudices against Latin America and Brazil, Bilden argued that the alleged inferiority of these countries had a cultural and not a racial explanation and so, as he puts it, 'the cause of the evils in Brazil is not race. It was slavery' (Roquette-Pinto, 1978, p. 30; Pallares-Burke, 2012, p.193)

Referring to the 'good will trip' organized by Hoover as part of new U.S. policy towards Latin America – the Good Neighbor Policy – Bilden warned the Americans that although it was a very praiseworthy initiative, such a new policy would be completely sterile if it was not accompanied by an 'elementary knowledge' of the countries involved (Bilden, 1929, p. 71-72).

In the case of Brazil, he said, the first thing to remedy was the ignorance of a basic aspect of its history, that is, the fact that the country was colonized by the Portuguese and not by the Spaniards, who were in search of 'gold, adventure and converts'.

Instead, developing agriculture had been the main Portuguese aim in the New World. The colonization of Brazil was therefore done 'by means of the latifundium, imported slave labour and the creation of a half-breed class suited to the milieu and wedded to the Lusitanian [Portuguese] causes'. Being ignorant about the character of Portuguese colonization and settlement makes it impossible, says Bilden, to understand Brazilian culture and the race question. As he argued, the type of society that developed in Brazil had been wrongly explained as being the result of the "polygenetic origin" of the Portuguese colonizers. But, why look for such a distant and clouded cause in racial factors that are "inviting", when "historical factors give such a satisfactory explanation?" (Bilden, 1929, p. 72).

Reflecting on the question of miscegenation in Brazil, Bilden, anticipating what Freyre would do years later, saw it as the result of a 'propensity acquired by the Portuguese during the long centuries of the Moorish conquest of Portugal and later during the colonial ventures on the African coast'. Accentuating this trend, Brazil, he explained, 'grew up as a slave society in which the pure white element was numerically inferior and race lines were drawn more loosely than in any other country of European origin'. Both for 'reasons of state' and 'from necessity and habit' – since in Brazil there was a lack of white women – the Portuguese colonizers 'readily' mixed with the Indian and Negro slaves, giving rise to a society in which there was no 'rigid identity of race and class' as was the rule in the English, Dutch, French and Spanish colonies. (Bilden, 1929, p. 72)

Bilden was far from denying the existence of antagonisms between the three main ethnic groups or of a certain degree of discrimination. Nevertheless, he emphasized that the antagonisms could be found among different social categories instead of races: 'between

master and slave, rather than among white, half-caste and Indian or Negro' – adding that such antagonisms tended to disappear along with these social distinctions (Bilden, 1929, p. 72).

The independence of Brazil from Portugal in 1822, followed by the gradual abolition of slavery and the establishment of the Republic, had all been contributing to the 'social equalization and hence fusion of the diverse ethnic elements'. Equalization and fusion were still, Bilden emphasized, in progress while 'race lines still follow class lines', which means that 'the lower the class, the darker the blood'; as he puts it, the 'negroid element' in Brazil was still 'handicapped', and the cultural and economic domination of the white element still silently perpetuated elements of an inhuman history. So, the truth is that "the abolition of slavery, while constructive, was not constructive to the point of freeing it from its dismal and insidious heritage. Only a number of generations can accomplish that end", he comments (Bilden, 1929, p. 73). As he wrote to Roquette Pinto, "the worst danger" is for racial discrimination in the American style to continue to develop in Brazil, led by the popularity of the "semi-scientific sociological literature" and by the attraction that the Brazilians feel for many American things (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 201).

In short, in spite of all that remains to happen, Bilden continued, and the fact of the supremacy of the white race in the management of the country, 'the average Brazilian will never be wholly white' and the 'Brazilian of the future will represent a new race, neither white, Indian, nor Negro ...'. And this mixed type 'will be well suited ... to realize the amazing promise which this country holds forth' (Bilden, 1929, p. 73).

It is already evident that in this process 'the more primitive groups are not, as in the Anglo-Saxon countries, rigidly subjected to the cultural standards of the dominant group, but are surprisingly free to make characteristic and valuable contributions'. This is the 'vital importance of Brazil to the world at large', concludes Bilden with enthusiasm. It is up to the reader, he says, to decide if Brazil 'should be dubbed ... a land of mongrels, or rather be looked upon as a world laboratory of tropical civilization' (Bilden, 1929, p. 74).

What did Bilden then mean by this phrase, "laboratory of civilization"? The title of the article, 'Brazil, Laboratory of Civilization', certainly catches one's attention, though this metaphor cannot bear too much weight. As the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz wittily puts it, 'when you take an intellectual ride on a metaphor, it is important that you know where to get off' (Hannerz, 2002, p. 6). Bilden was probably thinking of a chemical experiment where you mix different substances to see what will be produced. The result of the mix, of this new social experiment in the Brazilian case, was not yet clear, but looked promising, something from which other places could learn. As Bilden wrote to Franz Boas in 1926, Brazil was the 'most interesting country' from the point of view of a study of races, owing to the complexity of the racial mixture. It was, as he put it, 'an immense field work, and a very interesting one, for anthropologists and ethnologists, a field still practically untouched by serious scientific research' (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 166). What could be said, continues Bilden in the 1929 article, is that, up to that moment, the country had been transforming itself, modernizing

itself 'without war, revolution or other form of violence' and was still progressing 'far on the road toward a harmonious blending of diverse and supposedly incompatible ethnic elements into a new tropical race' (Bilden, 1929, p. 74).

In spite of this promising essay and the great expectations of many people, including himself, "Brazil, Laboratory of Civilization" ended up being the only sample – without doubt a brilliant one – of the book which Bilden never finished. The few remaining articles he published during his life did not expand much on these ideas or they were not relevant to the topic of this great book that never was. Six years later, with the project still not abandoned, but with the work unfinished, with debts, no money and not much enthusiasm, Bilden wrote to his friend Gilberto Freyre, that in case something happened to him, he would like 'all his notes, manuscript papers, etc.' to be sent to Freyre so that he could use them as he thought fit, since, as Bilden put it, 'I don't know anyone who could make better use of them than you' (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 194). In fact, Freyre had had access to this material before writing *Casa-Grande & Senzala* and admits in its pages that he had read the 'first manuscript' of Bilden's book from which he got 'valuable suggestions', as he declares in a footnote (Freyre, 1992, p. xlvii, p. 66).

## Bilden's Defeat

It seems fair to say that the report to the Carnegie Foundation, together with this pioneering article suggest very strongly that Bilden has been unjustly forgotten by history. This was what moved me to find out more about him. The task was not an easy one. There was no archive with his papers – a dream of all historians – no diaries, no notebooks, no descendants to approach, and no information about his origins, except that he was born in 1893, in Eschweiler in the Rhineland, which he left in 1914.

I was encouraged in my reconstruction of Bilden's life by the fact that first-class scholars, deeply involved in the debates of their time, respected him and continued to think him brilliant despite his failure to produce. They included the anthropologists Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, George Herzog, Roquette-Pinto and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who was also an explorer. What went wrong with this young and promising scholar after this early achievement? What might explain the fact that a person who once seemed destined for success ended up dying in obscurity and poverty?

My research took me in two directions. In the first place, to the study of failure, which, although neglected for so long, has been attracting increasing interest on the part of scholars, who have been defending the need of legitimizing failure in the lives of even apparent successful individuals, drawing attention to the fact that defining failure is, actually, not as simple as it may seem (Cortázar, 2006; Morris, 1975; Brady, 1989; Sandage, 2005; Zahlmann e Scholz, 2005). They emphasize the need to distinguish between contemporary and posthumous winners and losers; former winners can become losers and be quite literally knocked down (as in the case of the statues of Stalin and Columbus) and,

conversely, former losers can be rehabilitated, as in the case of Thomas Münzer, the radical German preacher during the DDR period, and of Tiradentes, the leader of a movement for independence in colonial Brazil. In general, these scholars noted the fleeting nature of failure and success, which can be ephemeral in the lives of each and every one of us. Underlying this new interest in failure and obscurity is the idea that history has often been written as the story of the winners alone, based on archives generally compiled by winners and expressing their points of view. In other words, the idea is that history has been generally (and wrongly) concerned mainly with triumphs and with the story of progress, leaving the losers where they belong – the “dustbin of history”, in Trotsky’s memorable phrase (which he coined when he was still on the winning side).

But in order to understand what happened – so goes the argument – this heroic or triumphalist vision should be replaced by a more inclusive approach to history. We need to look at the so-called losers as well – either collective losers, unsuccessful groups like the Girondins or the Mensheviks; or individuals, whether big losers, such as Danton, Kerensky and Trotsky, or small losers, anonymous or obscure. Because losers, great and small, are also part of history, since the unsuccessful also helped to shape a future that became our present day, sometimes producing fruitful ideas for which others later received the credit.

A poetic rejection of the simple ‘dustbin theory’, and a defence of the present as the product of losers as well as winners, can be found in Walt Whitman’s beautiful poem, *Song of Myself*, first published in 1855, in which he reminds us that there might be greatness in failure, and gives ‘vivas to those who have failed’ – to the conquered, to the generals who lost battles, to the ‘numberless heroes, equal to the greatest heroes known’ – because, as he says, ‘battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won’.

The second direction in which my attempt to reconstruct the trajectory of Rüdiger Bilden took me was to see him less and less as a loser. For this reconstruction, which had itself seemed at the start to be doomed to failure, I had a stroke of luck when I managed to find data about the family that Bilden had left behind in Germany almost 100 years earlier, as I located Bilden’s niece, Dr. Helga Bilden, the last surviving member of the Bildens of Eschweiler. She became my main informant about the family of an uncle she never met, but about whom she had heard much since her childhood. With this help and also by examining a wide range of scattered material – such as letters, conference papers, applications for grants, newspaper articles, manuscripts, courses he taught here and there, official documents, etc. – I came to realise that although Bilden had been reduced to a very rare and obscure footnote in the history of Brazil and of Latin America, he had made significant and pioneering contributions not only to history, but also to the study of race relations; contributions which circulated among scholars and were recognized as important at the time.

One of these contributions was a paper which he presented in 1931 at the Institute of Public Affairs of the University of Virginia, in the roundtable “Our Latin American Relations”, an occasion on which his friends from Columbia, Gilberto Freyre and Francis B. Simkins, accompanied him. Centring once again on the question of miscegenation, but this time

placing it in the wider context of race relations in Latin America, Bilden wanted to question the common interpretation that part of the American continent was basically a “collective unity”, in which different republics shared a cultural development that was more or less uniform. This, as Bilden put it, was another “intellectual atrocity” committed by the North Americans against this part of the continent. Once again emphasizing diversity, thanks in particular to the different proportions of migrants from Europe in the populations of different states, Bilden concludes that ‘the ready attribution of a common Latin individuality to the Latin American countries ... must be dismissed as smacking rather strongly of white men’s presumption’. Ignoring the non-European racial elements, who possess ‘widely varied cultural attainments’, and stressing only ‘one set of factors – those of European origins’ meant total neglect of the diversity in the making of Latin America. To avoid this danger, Bilden suggested interpreting Latin American history in the light ‘of the varying kind and degree of intermixture, juxtaposition, or antagonism of ethnic strains and corresponding cultural values ... without any preconceived notions of the superiority of one race or culture over others’. This approach would mean distinguishing between four groups of countries, ranging from the predominantly European, such as Chile, to countries such as Paraguay where ‘the European element is at best a veneer’ (Pallares-Burke, 2012, pp. 201-203).

In this context, Bilden presents Brazil as a country which had a unique position in the region, because the “European element” had never occupied a position of indisputable power. One of the reasons for this, he clarifies, is that the colonizer was forced – both by the geographic milieu and the Portuguese politics of colonization – to compete with the other ethnic elements in “an almost total equality of conditions” (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 204).

Bilden’s failure to produce his book had something to do with his perfectionism, and his inability to adapt to a difficult reality which would not allow him to produce the master work that his intellectual ambitions demanded. But, at the same time, we can surely say that the main factor in this failure to produce was that Bilden was in the wrong place at the wrong time and that all his talents, knowledge and determination proved to be insufficient for him to overcome the obstacles that life reserved for him.

Having arrived in the United States in 1914, just before the beginning of the war, and remaining there for the rest of his life, we may say that his aspirations and frustrations, his ambitions and his fate were marked, if not shaped, by the dramatic events through which he lived in the most turbulent period of the 20th century: at a world level, the two Great Wars and the Great Depression; and at the American level, racial segregation, the New Deal, the turbulent beginnings of the civil rights movement and McCarthyism.

Bilden was twice listed as an ‘enemy alien’ and, like other Germans and Americans of German ancestry, suffered from the climate of hostility and suspicion that took hold of the country during the two wars and even between the wars – a time when ‘anti-German hysteria’ was always ready to take hold of the country, manifesting itself in various ways, including the boycott of German music, which virtually disappeared from the concert halls, and the change in the names of German products, like hamburgers, which became ‘liberty

steak', sauerkraut, which became 'liberty cabbage', and so on (Pallares-Burke, 2012, pp. 61-65, 253). Bilden's failure to secure a permanent job in a university may well have been the result of discrimination against an "enemy alien", as the Germans, Italians and Japanese were called during that period.

His exclusion from participation in meetings for the improvement of the relations between the United States and the Latin American countries was definitely linked to his origins, even before the United States entered World War II in December 1941. And so, Bilden, who had such interest in the topic as well as the knowledge needed to help 'strengthen the bonds between North and South America', was excluded from events in this field. As he wrote at the time, in June 1940, 'Yesterday I was told on very good authority that the State Department will not tolerate anyone of German or Austrian origin, whether he is a citizen [of the USA] or not, in Latin American activities. This will exclude me ... even from opposing Nazi activities in Latin America'. That was certainly absurd and unfair, he laments, considering that he was directly opposed to fascism and Nazi Germany, had been living in the United States for nearly 26 years, deeply despised Hitler and although he was 'a native German' as he put it, 'would be one of the first to be shot if Hitler ever came to this country, as many Americans fear he will' (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 277).

## Bilden's Victory

In spite of all that, Bilden's trajectory illustrates a moral victory against adversity. Trying to survive with temporary and irregular jobs, always short of money and often in debt, it was only to be expected that he would abandon his intellectual projects and that his memory would only survive in the dusty archive of Columbia University. But that was not what happened. Optimist or dreamer, he never gave up his ambitions despite all the difficulties. And if it is absolutely true that he was a loser in material terms, his activities, like those of some other so-called losers, made a real difference to the world.

Not an indifferent bystander to what happens around him or someone who passes by people with problems, Rüdiger Bilden was what one might call an *engagé* individual, deeply involved and dedicated to the ideas he believed in and to the political and social causes he thought to be important to the world. With his determination, Bilden illustrates what the American sociologist David Riesman has called the 'nerve of failure', which he defines as 'the courage to accept the possibility of defeat, of failure, without being morally crushed', and without losing the will to take risks. Nerve, Riesman reminds us, is only necessary in defeat. 'Little nerve is required on the winning side' (Riesman, 1954, p. 33, 55, 144).

One example, among many, of Bilden's dedication at the individual level is the concern he showed with the failure of his American friend, Franklyn Simkins, who had his PhD rejected at Columbia. Insisting that he should not succumb to this shock and accept the failure, he gave Simkins firm advice on how to proceed and rewrite his work – with a sense of order, with discipline, with meticulous analysis of the data, in the German manner, aiming at

perfection. The important thing, he told him, is to 'make a first-class piece of work ... that will make your reputation. You can do it and you must do it, no matter how long it takes. What matters is the exactitude and the scholarship of your work. ... Forget about the publication of it. That can be handled afterwards'. At the end he adds a final thought: 'Do not feel discouraged, life is hard, the only way to deal with it is to be even harder' – advice that Bilden himself seems to have followed quite literally (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 185-187). His suggestions were accepted by his friend Simkins, who rewrote the thesis, had it approved at Columbia, and became a renowned historian of the American South.

At the collective level, Bilden's most important contribution concerned the question of race relations in the United States, a cause to which he gave more and more attention as the prospect of finishing his ambitious volumes on Brazilian slavery was diminishing. And this, at a time when "the bravest of us are afraid to talk about race", as the famous scholar and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois put it. Bilden was in close contact with the black artists and intellectuals of the so-called Harlem Renaissance in New York and with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), sharing its aims of improving the social situation and opportunities of African Americans. He knew and worked in close contact with important leaders of the black *intelligentsia*, such as Charles Johnson, Aaron Douglas, Walter White – the leader of the NAACP from 1929 to 1955 – and Arthur Schomburg (Pallares-Burke, 2018, p. 328-329).

One of the remarkable features of Bilden's character was his ability to build bridges between individuals who had the same concern for the improvement of race relations. In this way, he could be considered an important member of the small group of Boas's disciples whose activities support the argument that interracial cooperation existed among the intellectuals and artists connected to the Harlem movement for the improvement of race relations. By trying to widen the network of communication and good will of those devoted to this cause, Bilden worked as a mediator between the Harlem *intelligentsia* and anyone whom he thought might gain from this contact. Arthur Ramos and Gilberto Freyre, for instance, were the Brazilians whom Bilden thought would greatly profit from meeting the "elite of the black population" (Pallares-Burke, 2018, p. 329; 2012, pp. 249-252).

For the cause of race relations, Bilden devoted his time and effort to improve the self-esteem and pride of Blacks, teaching them as well as Whites – through many courses and lectures, odd newspaper articles and at least once a radio programme – about the history of the culture of Africans and its legacy to the New World. He thus helped to demolish the myth that the Blacks had no past – believing, like his mentor Franz Boas and a few others at the time, that such a myth deprived Blacks of the pride that they needed to fight for their rights, while giving Whites reasons to justify segregation and to treat the descendants of slaves as inferior (Pallares-Burke, 2012, pp. 244-255, 291-339).

At the same time, he continued to present Brazil as a 'laboratory of civilization' – that is, a model against which the improvement of the situation of North American Blacks might be measured. On one side, he presented a nation divided sharply into Blacks and Whites (the

United States), and, on the other side, a nation, Brazil, where a social experiment was taking place. The inhabitants distinguished innumerable shades of brown and persons of African origin had 'risen to prominence' (for instance, Nilo Peçanha, President of the Brazilian Republic in 1909-1910), while institutional segregation did not exist, although, as he emphasizes, the negative legacy of slavery was still present.

From 1937 till 1943, Bilden held temporary teaching posts at universities for Blacks, such as Fisk University in Tennessee (where he also ran a seminar with Donald Pierson, Robert E. Park and Ruth Landes on "Race and Culture"), Hampton Institute in Virginia and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, as well as the Rand School of Social Science in New York (where he invited Arthur Ramos to give a lecture in his course on the "History of the Negro in the Western hemisphere"), founded by the Socialist Party. He also gave lectures, often without payment, in Harlem, the black neighbourhood in New York: in churches and other places which Bilden describes as "a Negro Society", "a Labour Centre", and so on.

The novelty and relevance of Bilden's approach to the study of race relations seems to have been well recognized in certain circles. The African-American sociologist Charles Johnson, for instance, who hired Bilden to teach the history of race relations in Brazil at Fisk University in 1937, considered his approach to be of great value. As he put it, "certainly, a series of lectures in this field would serve to lift the horizon of both White and Negro students who are inclined to be provincial in their considerations of race problems". And Bilden himself was relatively happy with the result of his teachings. As he wrote to Arthur Ramos in 1938 from Fisk, his "long years of recommending Brazil as a field for anthropological and social investigation" was partially responsible for the "sudden explosion of interest in Brazil" that was happening there (Pallares-Burke, 2012, p. 238). The fact that he had met talented scholars at Fisk with similar interests in race relations, such as the African-American anthropologist and linguist Mark Hanna Watkins and Lorenzo Dow Turner, who studied the influence of the African languages on English, must have made Bilden feel especially enthusiastic (Pallares-Burke, 2012, pp. 233-234).

His appeal to a black audience seems to have been so strong that it was suggested by black leaders and by Franz Boas as well, that he make a tour of the leading academic institutions in the South to give a 'series of lectures at each on the race situation in Brazil'. Clear evidence of Bilden's authority in the field is also the invitation he received in the early 1940s from Tuskegee, one of the oldest and most important universities for Blacks in the country, to reorganize its graduate programme. This was certainly no small tribute to a white man, and especially a German, in the age of segregation and the Second World War.

We might say that, like a few other activists and intellectuals in the United States at the time, Bilden's struggle for the improvement of race relations was part of a reaction against fascism at home, since forms of oppression such as segregation and discrimination in the USA were considered no less harmful than the regimes of Hitler or Mussolini. They were all the result of the same fascist ideology which denies the fundamental freedom and equality of human beings. Franz Boas, who remained Bilden's faithful friend and supporter until his death in

1942, founded the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom in 1939, with exactly the aim of warning the intellectuals and scientists in the country about the increasing danger of internal fascism. If convinced, they in turn – so it was hoped – would influence public opinion.

Going back to the idea of Brazil as a laboratory of civilization – thanks to the role of miscegenation and cultural hybridity, and the slave past in the country's history and its promising future – what can be said about its fate? For a while, in the short term – up to the 1940s or early 1950s, to be precise – Bilden's name was connected to this idea in spite of the relative silence of one of the scholars who owed most to Bilden's ideas: Gilberto Freyre.

In Brazil, important intellectuals such as Arthur Ramos and Roquette-Pinto, the sociologist and geographer Carlos Delgado de Carvalho and the essayist Luis Washington Vita were quite clear about Bilden's pioneering efforts to fight the prejudice against the so-called 'ugly races', to use Roquette-Pinto's expression. Roquette even places Bilden side by side with Fritz Müller, a very important German scientist and correspondent of Charles Darwin, in the fight against race prejudice and the racial theories that supported it. Arthur Ramos and Vita refer to the "leitmotiv of Freyre's *Casa-Grande & Senzala*" being Bilden's ideas on slavery and miscegenation (Pallares-Burke, 2012, pp. 368-369).

Abroad, later on, we can find critics of the idea of the 'Brazilian solution for the race problem' denouncing Bilden as a pioneer in the 'nurturing of a beautiful myth' and in the 'construction of a fantasy' that miscegenation is beautiful and racial harmony does exist 'in the land of sun, samba and saudade', as one of the critics, Leslie B. Rout Jr, put it (Pallares-Burke, 2012, pp. 370-371; Rout Jr, 1973, p. 487). In short, Bilden's ideas – misinterpreted and deprived of their nuances – were, at one point, blamed for the mystification of Brazil.

In the long term, though, even if Bilden's name has been forgotten, some of his ideas on the re-evaluation of Brazil in the first half of the 20th century, both at home and abroad, are alive and well. They include the success of the idea of mixture and race harmony, known as the Freyre legacy to the country, and long incorporated in official or semi-official discourse in Brazil, even if denounced from time to time as pure idealization. 'We are not only a mixed people, but a people who likes very much to be mixed. That's our identity', said President Lula da Silva, in Denmark, in the bid to host the 2016 Olympic Games.

## Epilogue

Finally, I should like to draw attention to a few general points that are raised by the trajectory of Rüdiger Bilden.

The American sociologist of science Robert Merton coined the phrase "the Matthew Effect" to describe the process whereby important scientific discoveries by minor scientists are remembered by posterity as if they were the work of major figures such as Galileo or Einstein. In fact, as an anonymous scientist interviewed by Warren Hagstrom pointed out,

“big steps forward in science are really built up out of a large number of small contributions”. In other words, those famous names never worked alone but relied on forgotten figures, the ‘small losers’ (Hagstrom, 1965; cf Merton 1968, pp. 56-63). In the same way, one can say that important innovations in culture are not produced by one ‘star’ alone, but are, on the contrary, the result of the contribution of a ‘whole constellation’ of individuals, hardly ever recognized by posterity. In other words, we might say that thousands of Bildens live and die undiscovered, their real successes hidden by the appearance of failure.

In Bilden’s case, we see a failed professional career together with a life furthering causes in which he believed. The causes for which he worked – such as the importance of stimulating black pride in order to fight against the racist ideas of the age – causes that seemed at the time to be condemned to failure, now appear to be successful, given that racial theory (if not racism) has become “devalued currency”. It is in this sense that, at least posthumously, Bilden is an example of one of the ironies of history, showing that what in the short term seems to be a failure, can eventually turn into victory. That is why his trajectory might be described in the long run as ‘the triumph of failure’.

His life also vividly illustrates the destructive impact of major events on individual biographies, as in the case of the many lives wrecked by the Great Crash of 1929, by the election of Hitler in 1933, and so on. And because of that, his life reminds us of the question pondered by dramatists since the Greeks and the Elizabethans: how much of our lives do we make ourselves and how much is made for us by circumstances or luck, good and bad, to which all human beings are so vulnerable? Put another way – a way that challenges one central myth in modern society, the belief that the ladder of success can be climbed by anyone determined to work hard – what are the relative roles in success of favourable circumstances and of individual merit?

## Works and Correspondence of Rüdiger Bilden

### I – Works

‘Accomplishments’: 3, Project presented to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1936, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Archives.

‘Accomplishments’: 5, Group Anthropology, 1937. John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Archives.

‘Brazil, Laboratory of Civilization’, *The Nation*, vol. 128, January 1929, no. 3315.

‘Comment’ on Samuel H. Lowrie, Racial and National Intermarriage in a Brazilian City, *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1939), pp. 698-701.

‘Memorandum for Dr William Jay Schieffelin’, 13 October 1943. Rockefeller Foundation Archives, General Education Board Collection.

'Proposal for an Inter-American Regional Institute, University of Virginia'. Rockefeller Foundation Archives, General Education Board Collection.

'Race Mixture in Latin America', in H. W. Laidler (ed.) *The Role of Races in Our Future Civilization* (New York, 1942), pp. 49-54.

'Race Relations in Latin America with Special Reference to the Development of Indigenous Culture', 1 July 1931. Institute of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library.

'Rural Brazil: its problems and the challenge', *The Pan American* 10, no. 9 (1950), pp. 37-41.

'Slave and Citizen: the Negro in the Americas', *Survey Graphic* 83 (1947), pp. 294-5.

'Slavery as a Factor in Brazilian History', 1922. Project sent to Carnegie Foundation (copy for Oliveira Lima), Catholic University of America, Lima Family Papers.

'South's Reaction to Supreme Court Decision may increase Segregation of Negroes', *The New Leader*, 14 June 1941, pp. 1, 6.

## II - Correspondence to and from Bilden can be found in the following archives:

Archive Arthur Ramos Biblioteca Nacional, RJ

Archive Roquette-Pinto, Academia Brasileira de Letras, RJ

Archives of Fundação Gilberto Freyre, Recife

Franz Boas Papers, American Philosophical Society

George Herzog Papers, Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University

Melville Herskovits Papers, Northwestern University Archives

Oliveira Lima Family Papers, Catholic University of America, Washington, DC

Schomburg Papers, Manuscript Collection, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library

Simkins Collection, Greenwood Library, Longwood University, Virginia

William Robert Shepherd Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscript Library

## Select Bibliography

Boas, Franz, *Anthropology and Modern Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929).

Brady, Cioran. (ed) *Worsted in the Game: Losers in Irish History* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1989).

- Cortázar, Fernando García de, *Los Perdedores de la historia de España* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2006).
- Freyre, Gilberto, *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (1933: 29th edition, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1992).
- Hagstrom, Warren O., *The Scientific Community* (New York: Basic Books, 1965).
- Hannerz, Ulf, *Flows, Boundaries and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Merton, Robert K. "The Matthew Effect in Science: the reward and communication systems of science are considered", *Science*, vol. 159, January 1968.
- Morris, Ivan, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic heroes in the History of Japan* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975).
- Pallares-Burke, Maria Lúcia G. *Gilberto Freyre – Um Vitoriano dos Trópicos* (São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2005).
- Pallares-Burke Maria Lúcia G. (with Peter Burke), *Gilberto Freyre – Social Theory in the Tropics* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).
- Pallares-Burke, Maria Lúcia G. *O Triunfo do Fracasso - Rüdiger Bilden, o amigo esquecido de Gilberto Freyre* (São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2012).
- Pallares-Burke, Maria Lúcia G. "A Two-Headed Thinker: Rüdiger Bilden, Gilberto Freyre, and the Reinvention of Brazilian Identity," in *Indigenous Visions: Rediscovering the world of Franz Boas*, ed. Ned Blackhawk and Isaiah L. Wiener (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 316–343.
- Riesman, David, *Individualism Reconsidered and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954).
- Roquette-Pinto, Edgar, *Ensaio de antropologia brasileira* (1933; new edition, São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1978).
- Rout Jr., Leslie, "Sleight of Hand: Brazilian and American Authors manipulate the Brazilian racial situation, 1910-1951", *The Americas*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1973, p. 471-488.
- Sandage, Scott A. *Born Losers: A history of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- Shepherd, William H. "Brazil as a Field of Historical Study", *Hispanic American Historical Review* 13 (1933), pp. 427-436.
- Vasconcelos, José, *La raza cósmica, Misión de la raza iberoamericana. Notas de viajes a la América del Sur*, Madrid, Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1925

Zahlmann, Stefan; Scholz, Sylke. (eds.), *Scheitern und Biographie: Die andere Seite moderner Lebensgeschichten* (Giessen: .Psychosozial Verlag, 2005).

---

[1] Rüdiger Bilden was the protagonist of my book, *O Triunfo do Fracasso - Rüdiger Bilden, o amigo esquecido de Gilberto Freyre* (2012).