



Forgetfulness as an Institutional Policy: The Case of the Palmares Foundation During the Jair Bolsonaro Government (2019-2022)

O Esquecimento como uma Política Institucional: o caso da Fundação Palmares durante o governo de Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022)

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Abstract: The Palmares Foundation was created in 1988 in the context of Brazil's process of re-democratization and the celebration of the one hundred year anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the country. Since then, it has played a central role in Afro-Brazilian memory and in the articulation of public policies in this area. The election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 marked a turning point for this Foundation insofar as it began to be used as a space for the dissemination of a certain conception of the racial debate present in conservative movements in Brazil, marked also by a denial that racism exists in the country and a reworking of the long-standing "myth of racial democracy." In this study, I analyze how forgetfulness became an institutional policy of the Palmares Foundation and how this policy relates to a particular interpretation of racial relations in Brazil.

Keywords: Palmares Foundation; Jair Bolsonaro; Racial Relations; Afro-Brazilian Studies.

Resumo: A Fundação Palmares foi criada em 1988 no contexto da redemocratização brasileira, e da celebração dos cem anos de abolição da escravidão no Brasil, desde então ela tem ocupado um lugar central na memória afro-brasileira e na articulação de políticas públicas neste campo. A eleição de Jair Bolsonaro em 2018 marca um ponto de inflexão para esta fundação, na medida em que ela passou a ser utilizada como espaço de divulgação de determinada concepção do

debate racial presente em movimentos conservadores no Brasil, marcada pela negação do racismo e pela atualização do “mito da democracia racial”. Neste trabalho analiso como o esquecimento se tornou uma política institucional na Fundação Palmares, e como que esta política se relaciona a determinada concepção acerca das relações raciais no Brasil.

Palavras-chaves: Fundação Palmares; Jair Bolsonaro; Relações Raciais; Estudos Afro-Brasileiros.

INTRODUCTION

Brazil was proclaimed a republic on November 15, 1889, just one year after the country abolished slavery (May 13, 1888), their proximity meaning that the two events are considered together as a significant milestone in terms of understanding the political and social changes that would shape Brazil over the following period. These events unfolded in a singular way compared to other countries in Latin America. Unlike what happened in the rest of the region where countries transformed from colonies into republics, Brazil was a colony that became an Empire, in 1822, and only later turned into a republic. In terms of slavery, meanwhile Brazil was notoriously the last country in the Americas to ban slavery.

In 1890, Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca (1827-1892), the first president of Brazil, launched a public competition to write a new Brazilian anthem. The winners were José Joaquim de Campos da Costa de Medeiros e Albuquerque (1867-1934), who wrote the lyrics, and Leopoldo Américo Miguez (1850-1902), who composed the music. Despite the pair winning the competition, there were protests on the streets because of the result. Even so, the song written by Albuquerque and Miguez was officially decreed the anthem for the proclamation of the new republic. National anthems, along with other civic symbols, are significant elements in the process of building a nation, understood here as a sociopolitical production (Anderson 2005) that can only be fully analyzed by taking into consideration elements belonging to the collective memory, not just what is remembered, but also what is forgotten (Pollak 1989). Indeed, the following verse from the new Brazilian republics anthem highlights this very point: “*Nós nem cremos que escravos outrora / Tenha havido em tão nobre país*”.¹ Significantly, this verse emphasizes the effort made for Brazil’s slavery past to be forgotten, seeking to reinforce an idea of racial harmony, even if the effects of the slave system are still alive today more than 100 years after its official end (Pinsky 2012; Schwarcz and Starling 2015; Schwarcz 2019; Souza 2019).

As Pollak (1989) pointed out, it is important to recognize that silence and forgetting are not necessarily coincident. At times, silence may also signify a form of civil society resistance to official discourses. Just as I understand memory as a collective and selective construction (Michel 2016), I also perceive forgetfulness to be the same, shaped by the power relations in any given society. Indeed, forgetfulness can even take

¹ “We do not even believe that slaves once existed / in such a noble country”.

the form of an official policy influenced by specific political agents. In this text, I will primarily employ this concept through the lens of the idea of a “politics of forgetfulness” (Michel 2010), taking the view that there is a political use of this collective construction that directly impacts memory policies. The choice of what one intends to forget also implies a selectivity about what one intends to remember.

In the same year 1890, the Treasury Minister at the time, Ruy Barbosa (1849-1923), also ordered the destruction of documents that referred to slavery held in the offices of the ministry. Again, we can observe that forgetfulness here was a political strategy, a resource for the erasure of “slavery” without having to confront the debate on racism in the Brazilian society, reinforcing a harmonious view of race relations.

The relationship between slavery, politics and forgetfulness is thus crucial to understanding racism in Brazilian society. Albeit indirectly, this forgetfulness helped consolidate interpretations that had already become crystallized on racism in Brazil, reinforcing the claim that the process of miscegenation had enabled a coalescence of racial relationships and that slavery in Brazil had been milder than seen in other parts of the world, as Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) defended in his renowned book *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (2005 [1933]). This perspective culminated in the elaboration of the idea that Brazil was a racial democracy (Brochier 2014). Other works from the first half of the twentieth century based on quite distinct theoretical premises, such as *Raízes do Brasil* (1995 [1936]) by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1902-1982),² still replicated the notion that racial prejudice was virtually absent in Brazil, an idea that gained more visibility in the international scientific community in the period after the Second World War, often being contrasted with the tense racial relationships in the United States (Degler 1986; Oliveira 2019). It is equally the case that future generations of social scientists began to consider the idea of racial democracy in Brazil a myth, analyzing instead the particular features that defined racism in Brazilian society and emphasizing the violence inherent to this process (Fernandes 2008 [1968]).

This brief summary is intended to situate the reader in the debate on race, memory and forgetfulness in Brazil. Nevertheless, the focus here is not on the history of this discussion. This would divert us from the article’s focus and scope: namely, how, in the context inaugurated by the government of Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), elected President of Brazil in 2018, was a policy of forgetfulness adopted, through the Palmares Foundation, that reupdated and reinforced the so-called “myth of racial democracy”?

In this article, my aim is to analyze how the Palmares Foundation was employed by Jair Bolsonaro’s government as an instrument in a “culture war,” seeking to construct a national memory and identity that negates the prominence of key historical figures from the Brazilian black movement. I argue that the primary tool used to achieve this

² It is worth emphasizing that Holanda’s book has been modified over time, including substantial alterations between the 1936 first edition, which included a preface by Gilberto Freyre, and the 1948 second edition, this time without Freyre’s preface (Oliveira 2023).

goal was the development of a policy of forgetting, which became an official stance at the Palmares Foundation over this period (2019-2022).

It is important to state from the outset that “Bolsonarism” is a complex and multifaceted political phenomenon (Cesarino 2019; Pinheiro-Machado and Freixo 2019; Avritzer, Kerche and Marona 2021). Nonetheless, we can note that the rise of “Bolsonarism” to some extent reflects the rise of other conservative leaders in the rest of the world –including Donald Trump in the United States, Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Andrzej Duda in Poland, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. These movements interconnect, albeit filtered through the local reality (Miskolci 2021), and in this regard the racial issue gains a central importance in the Brazilian context.

THE PALMARES FOUNDATION: FROM THE 1988 CONSTITUTION TO THE JAIR BOLSONARO GOVERNMENT

The Palmares Foundation was created in 1988, a hundred years after the abolition of slavery in Brazil, amid a process of redemocratization of Brazilian society following two decades of military dictatorship (1964-1985). The Foundation’s aim was “promover a preservação dos valores culturais, sociais e econômicos decorrentes da influência negra na formação da sociedade brasileira” (Brasil 1988, Art. °1).³ Its founding objectives seem to run entirely counter to the political strategy of forgetfulness, therefore, since they highlight the dimension of memory among Afro-Brazilian populations, making references, in its very name, to the Quilombo dos Palmares, a community of escaped slaves that resisted European slavery for more than a century.⁴ Referring to the story of this quilombo, Schwarcz and Starling (2015, 102) write: “Palmares também se converteu em símbolo de uma luta negra por inclusão social e em referência para uma interpretação do Brasil que não leva aos escravos apenas o papel de vítimas passivas”.⁵ Taking this into consideration –recalling the central hypothesis of this paper concerning forgetfulness as a political strategy– it may initially appear contradictory that an institution founded to preserve memory became used to promote forgetfulness.

Historically, the Palmares Foundation had been linked to the Ministry of Culture, but after the abolition of this ministry by the Jair Bolsonaro government in 2019, the foundation was transferred to the Ministry of Tourism in the guise of a Special Secre-

³ “[...] to promote the preservation of the cultural, social and economic values that derive from the black influence on the development of Brazilian society” (translation by the author).

⁴ For a deeper understanding of the Quilombo dos Palmares’ history, see Carneiro (1958).

⁵ “Palmares has also been converted into a symbol of the black struggle for social inclusion and for an interpretation of Brazil that goes beyond attributing the enslaved population the role of merely passive victims” (translation by the author).

ariat of Culture.⁶ In addition to its headquarters in Brasília, the Foundation also has six Regional Branches in the states of Bahia, Alagoas, Maranhão, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul.

Over the years, the Palmares Foundation has performed a central role in policies supporting Afro-Brazilian populations, such as the recognition and delimitation of the lands of quilombo populations (Leite 1999). Historically, the Foundation has also been at the forefront of developing initiatives to promote the memory of Afro-Brazilian culture, as well as being the principal articulator of a series of actions focused on Afro-Brazilian populations designed and implemented in other secretariats and ministries.

The issue of Afro-Brazilian memory is an extremely complex element in the self-representation of Brazilian society, which rejects the idea of itself as a population that is mostly black and perceives itself as tolerant and open, a society in which racism is not structurally disseminated. As Schwarcz (2019) shows, it is a mistake to interpret Brazilian society this way, since it is actually a markedly violent society, one that is both excluding and intolerant.

In the current political context, one of the strategies for reproducing the “myth of racial democracy” has been to transform policies of remembering into policies of forgetfulness. Put succinctly, the “myth of the racial democracy” refers to the idea elaborated over the years that racial prejudice is absent in Brazil and that, due to the process of miscegenation, the Brazilian population is deeply mixed, making it impossible to distinguish black and white people in Brazilian society. As Motta (2000) emphasizes, innumerable authors have attempted to understand racial relations in Brazil, setting out from distinct premises to interpret the singularity of the country’s racial relations.

The notion that Brazil was a home to a true “racial democracy,” contrasting vividly with countries like the United States and South Africa where racial segregation laws were in force, was disseminated for a long time and even incorporated by black scholars in the United States (Sansone 2011). This idea began to come under stronger scrutiny and criticism following the findings of the “UNESCO Project,” which investigated racial relations in post-war Brazil, reaching the conclusion that racism did indeed exist in Brazilian society.

Despite the advances in the field of academic investigation, the idea that Brazil was a mixed country devoid of racial prejudice was embraced throughout the twentieth century by diverse authoritarian regimes, including not just Vargas’s Estado Novo

⁶ The Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) ran in Brazil from 1953 until 1985, when it was split into two autonomous ministries. The Ministry of Culture then continued as an autonomous institution until 2019, when it became a special secretariat. The Ministry had been briefly abolished in 2016 during a ministerial reform promoted by President Michel Temer, but, due to negative repercussions, the government backed down. The same Ministry was abolished again during the Bolsonaro administration, but after Luís Inácio Lula da Silva’s electoral victory in 2022, it was recreated. Today, the Palmares Foundation is linked to the Ministry of Culture.

(1937-1945)⁷ but the military dictatorship as well (1964-1985). It was during the process of redemocratization of Brazilian society in the 1980s that the action of social movements began to make this debate visible to civil society more widely. The creation of the Palmares Foundation in 1988, the year of the centenary of the proclamation of the *Áurea Law*, alongside the promulgation of a new constitution –also known as the citizenship constitution– reflected the proactivism of these agents in the public sphere and a recognition of the processes of exclusion deeply entrenched in Brazilian society.

It is important to observe that the debate on Afro-Brazilian memory was given special prominence between 2003 and 2016, a period in which the Worker's Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*: PT) was in government. In 2003, the Secretariat of Policies for the Promotion of Racial Equality (SEPIR) was created⁸ and Law 10,639/03 was approved, which made the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture mandatory at all levels of basic education. In 2012, Law 12,711/2012 was issued, which provided for the reservation of higher education places (quotas) for students who had completed their secondary education in public schools and who came from families with an average income equal to or less than one and a half minimum wages, as well as quotas for candidates who self-declared black, brown (*pardo*)⁹ or indigenous and for disabled people. Undeniably, all these actions are intertwined with the debate on Afro-Brazilian populations and their memories.

The election of Jair Bolsonaro as president in 2018 made international headlines, not just because of the dissemination of “fake news” during the electoral process, but also due to his political stances, deemed racist, sexist, homophobic and anti-human rights (Klem, Pereira and Araújo 2020). Analyzing the treatment of racial issues under the Bolsonaro government, Campos (2021, 370) observes that: “As referências à questão racial brasileira, por parte da articulação bolsonarista no governo são recorrentes, porém fragmentárias. Elas se distribuem entre declarações polêmicas, negação do racismo brasileiro e ode à nossa mestiçagem”.¹⁰ During his campaign for president,

⁷ The Estado Novo, or New State, was the name given to the civil dictatorship headed by Getúlio Vargas (1882-1954) who came to power through the so-called “Revolution of 1930”. It is notable that after this period Vargas was re-elected President of the Republic, serving from 1951 to 1954, when he took his own life.

⁸ In 2015, this Secretariat was merged with two other Secretariats –the Secretariat of Human Rights and the Secretariat of Women's Policies– to form the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality and Human Rights. This ministry was transformed into the Ministry of Human Rights under the government of Michel Temer in 2016 and later into the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights under the Jair Bolsonaro administration in 2019. After the election of Lula in 2022, separate ministries were formed: the Ministry of Women, the Ministry of Racial Equality, and the Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship.

⁹ *Pardo* is an official classificatory category used in the national censuses conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The term *pardo* is more commonly used to refer to Brazilians of mixed ethnic ancestries. The IBGE also considers the black population in Brazil to be composed of those who declare themselves *preto* (black) and *pardo* (brown or mixed). This is an extremely complex discussion in Brazil but is a crucial element in making visible the non-white population.

¹⁰ “References to the Brazilian racial issue by Bolsonarist members of the government are recurrent but fragmentary. They range from polemic statements and a denial of Brazilian racism to an ode to our miscegenation” (translation by the author).

Bolsonaro had already denied the existence of racism and even claimed in one interview that “Portuguese people didn’t even set foot in Africa. It was black people themselves who handed over the slaves.” This reinforced a stance that is deeply revisionist in historical terms, something Bolsonaro had already been asserting for a long time, closely associated with his revisionism concerning the abuses of the Brazilian military dictatorship (Almada 2021), which became even deeper in the context of the Covid-19 global pandemic (Avritzer 2021; Oliveira 2020).

During the same electoral campaign in 2018, the candidate to the vice-presidency on the same slate as Jair Bolsonaro, Hamilton Mourão (elected Senator in 2022), declared in an interview that: “We have a certain heritage of indolence that comes from indigenous culture. I have indigenous ancestry. My father is from the state of Amazonas. And *malandragem*,¹¹ Edson Rosa [a black politician present in the debate], nothing against them, but it comes from the Africans.” When questioned about this statement, Mourão claimed that these ideas originated in the writings of Gilberto Freyre. However, it is worth stressing that Freyre had worked hard to denaturalize such conceptions by separating race and culture (Oliveira 2017).

Amaral (2020) calls attention to the fact that issues such as race, gender and religion have been central to defining Bolsonaro’s electoral base in Brazilian elections from 2018 onwards, which seems to have coincided with the trajectory of the candidate himself, marked by the presence of racism and sexism, combined with proselytizing statements in relation to Pentecostalism. Barcelar Silva and Larkins (2019) emphasize how Bolsonaro achieved more electoral success in the whiter regions of the country (the South and Southeast) and performed worst in the Brazilian region with proportionally the highest number of black people (the Northeast). The authors also show how, through his discourse, Bolsonaro has given visibility and legitimacy to racist views in Brazilian society.

Also in the area of racial debate, Campos (2021) argues that the racial issue in Bolsonarism has two axes, discursive and practical:

O pilar discursivo baseia-se em uma reciclagem do mito da democracia racial em um enquadramento levemente distinto de suas apropriações pretéritas. Se antes a narrativa era baseada na diluição das fronteiras raciais entre brancos, negros e indígenas, tal mito agora aparece com um enfoque que reconhece a divisão em raças fundadoras, mas que enfatiza as relações de fraternidades entre elas. O pilar prático envolve uma estratégia, já em curso, de minar mais as instituições e as condições básicas de funcionamento das políticas raciais do que os procedimentos estritamente voltados para a população preta, parda e indígena. Em outros termos, os ataques e o desmonte das instituições de ensino superior e de organizações como a Fundação Palmares comprometem o funcionamento de tais políticas sem depender de uma declaração explícita de intenções (Campos 2021, 360).¹²

¹¹ *Malandragem* is a Portuguese term for a supposed lifestyle of idleness, fast living and petty crime. It also can be understood as a strategy used to gain advantage in certain situation. For a deeper analysis of this cultural concept, see DaMatta (1979).

¹² “The discursive axis is based on a recycling of the myth of racial democracy in a framework slightly different from its earlier appropriations. While the earlier narrative was based on a dilution of the

In this sense, the Palmares Foundation was central to government interventions in the racial debate under the Bolsonaro administration. However, the literature specifically dealing with this issue remains slight, and, in particular, lacks a more incisive analysis of the work of the Palmares Foundation in the context of Bolsonaroism. Here I identify the use of the Palmares Foundation as a space for the reaffirmation of a policy of forgetfulness, which sought to reaffirm a harmonious view of Brazilian society in which racial divisions are absent.

The weakening of the Palmares Foundation under Jair Bolsonaro's government (2019-2022) can be observed in a series of actions and omissions –beyond the personal actions of Sérgio Camargo, who served as the foundation's president during this period. Notably, the lowest number of demarcations of quilombola territories since 2004 occurred during this period, with only one territory being officially recognized in 2020. The Palmares Foundation is responsible for the process of certifying quilombola territories, marking the initial step towards regulation and emitting land titles.

In the final year of his term of office, Jair Bolsonaro issued a decree that added even more bureaucracy to the Palmares Foundation's certification of quilombola communities, further complicating the process of officially recognizing these territories.

We can identify the existence of not only a policy of memory but also a policy of forgetfulness (Ferreira 2011) among the initiatives pursued in the Palmares Foundation during the Bolsonaro government. This is compounded by the fact that:

A construção de arquivos, notação de dados, organização de eventos e celebrações são atividades da memória que cumprem papéis sociais fundamentais na sociedade em que vivemos. No que diz respeito à formação e preservação de arquivos relacionados a períodos de dominação e violência, em que direitos humanos são desrespeitados, há sempre uma luta política importante sendo travada a cada momento. (Araújo and Santos 2007, 99).¹³

When exploring issues such as racism in Brazilian society, therefore, or the history of the Afro-Brazilian population more generally, we need to consider the implications of forgetfulness for the elaboration of the official narrative, which emerges at a certain political moment driven by determined agents. In our specific case, we need to assess how these elements arose in the work of the Palmares Foundation over the period under examination.

racial boundaries between white, black and indigenous people, this myth now focuses on recognizing the division into founding races but emphasizes the fraternal relations between them. The practical axis involves a strategy, already under way, designed more to undermine the institutions and basic operational conditions of racial policies rather than the procedures strictly focused on the black, brown and indigenous population. In other words, the attacks on and dismantling of higher education institutions and organizations such as the Palmares Foundation compromise the working of such policies without depending on an explicit declaration of intentions" (translation by the author).

¹³ "The building of archives, annotation of data and the organization of events and commemorations are memory activities that play fundamental social roles in the society in which we live. When it comes to the compilation and preservation of archives related to periods of domination and violence in which human rights were disrespected, there is always an important political struggle being fought at every moment" (translation by the author).

During the Jair Bolsonaro government, the president of the Palmares Foundation was Sérgio Camargo (from November 27, 2019 to March 31, 2022),¹⁴ a journalist who made countless public statements denying the existence of racism in Brazil, or indeed the relevance of the black movement. His work at the Palmares Foundation was criticized by intellectuals and militants of the black movement, and there were multiple requests for his dismissal through petitions, mobilization on social networks and judicial processes. As president of the Foundation, Sérgio Camargo – himself black – played a vital role in translating the syntax of President Jair Bolsonaro for the racial debate.

Some actions at the Palmares Foundation were directly intended to promote a policy of forgetfulness. On its website, the Foundation has a list of black personalities and highlights some of the black people who left a historical mark in Brazil and the world over. Recently, during the Bolsonaro administration, some names were excluded from this list, such as Gilberto Gil (singer), Elba Soares (singer), Martinho da Vila (singer), Benedita da Silva (politician), Madame Satá (a historical figure from the first half of the twentieth century) and Marina Silva (politician). This exclusion brings to mind the argument made by Schwarz (2019) that “slavery is only apparently in the past” and that it caused and still causes the deletion of a significant portion of prominent black people in our society. As a phenomenon, this has been concomitant with an increasing presence of black scholars in Brazil (Gusmão 2014) and has unfolded amid numerous tensions and questionings about this process.

In the same way, the Palmares Foundation has clashed with many social movements, especially in relation to two commemorative dates: May 13, which marks the proclamation of the Áurea Law in Brazil that abolished slavery, and November 20, the date when Zumbi dos Palmares (1655-1695) was assassinated. The latter commemorative date was instituted in 2011 as National Black Consciousness Day.¹⁵ While the first date has historically given prominence to Princess Isabel (1846-1921) who signed the abolition law, the second date emphasizes the last leader of the Quilombo dos Palmares. The Palmares Foundation website published a number of articles emphasizing the importance of Princess Isabel and downplaying the role of Zumbi dos Palmares in the history of the Afro-Brazilian history.

In May 2020, the Palmares Foundation website published an article by Laércio Fidelis Dias entitled “Por que lembrar, em 13 de maio, a Princesa Isabel do Brasil?”. In this article the author writes: “Se soa ingênua uma história da abolição da escravatura no Brasil que constrói uma imagem idílica da Princesa como a única responsável pelo

¹⁴ In March 2022, Camargo was dismissed from his position for him to run for the post of federal deputy for the Liberal Party (the same party as Jair Bolsonaro). However, he was not elected.

¹⁵ On December 22, 2023, National Black Consciousness Day became a public holiday in Brazil.

fim da escravidão, uma história que lhe confere um papel de ostracismo, soa igualmente ingênua”.¹⁶

In May 2021, the site also published an article written by Luiz Gustavo S. Chrispino: “O Treze de Maio - um dia redentor” in which he states: “Ainda há quem fale mal da Princesa Isabel que os libertou [os escravos]”.¹⁷

In an opposite direction, in May 2020 an article was published on the Palmares Foundation website entitled “Machado de Assis e Zumbi Noel”,¹⁸ written by Vera Helena Pancotte Amatti. In her article, the author states that: “Assim também esse Zumbi Noel tem entorpecido a consciência dos negros e gerado discriminação, separação, divisão, racismo”.¹⁹ She also quotes the article “Zumbi e a Consciência Negra – Existem de Verdade?”.²⁰ In the latter work, Luiz Gustavo dos Santos Chrispino argued that the figure of Zumbi as a hero had been created by Cultural Marxism as part of its ideology of class division: “Começava aí a Luta Esquerdista usando o povo negro como massa de manobra”.²¹

According to Lopes and Neves (2022), the Palmares Foundation had been an important ally in acknowledging Brazil’s racial inequality and in implementing the first public policies for promoting racial equality under the Brazilian governments that came to power in the post-redemocratization era. The authors also point out that on May 13 each year, the Foundation had been used to support the historical agenda of the black social movement – a policy that underwent a substantial change in direction following the hard-right government elected in 2018.

It is important to highlight three points in these texts: a) the recursive use of the date of May 13 in order to channel the debate and “redirect memory,” exalting Princess Isabel and attacking the figure of Zumbi dos Palmares; b) the use of categories like “Cultural Marxism,” “leftist ideology” and others to invoke a series of campaign slogans widespread in “Bolsonarist” politics and also deployed in other contexts with a very vague and imprecise definition; c) most of the authors commissioned to write these articles have little by way of scholarly background, such as a significant body of academic writing or affiliation to research institutions.²² Luiz Gustavo dos Santos

¹⁶ “If a story of the abolition of slavery in Brazil that constructs an idyllic image of the Princess as the sole person responsible for ending slavery sounds naive, a story that consigns her with a role of ostracism sounds equally so” (translation by the author).

¹⁷ “There are still those who speak ill of Princess Isabel who freed them [the slaves]” (translation by the author).

¹⁸ The term *Noel* is a reference to *Papai Noel* (Santa Claus in Portuguese). The intention of the text is to indicate that the propagated image of Zumbi dos Palmares does not exist in reality, making a comparison with the non-existence of Santa Claus.

¹⁹ “This Zumbi Noel has also numbed the consciousness of black people and has generated discrimination, separation, division and racism” (translation by the author).

²⁰ This article was taken down after a court ruling.

²¹ “This was the beginning of the Leftist Fight, which used black people as its ground force” (translation by the author).

²² It is important to stress that although some of the authors do have institutional affiliations to universities, they are not researchers dedicated to the field of Afro-Brazilian studies.

Chrispino, for example, is presented as a journalist and teacher and runs a blog where he broadcasts his ideas.

The publishing of these texts was the subject of a lawsuit filed by the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, which led to a court order for them to be taken down from the Palmares Foundation website. According to the FPPO, there had been administrative improbity on the part of Sérgio Camargo, given that:

A Fundação Palmares já nasce vocacionada à promoção dos valores culturais, sociais e econômicos decorrentes da influência negra na formação da sociedade brasileira. Negar ao povo negro a sua história e seus heróis, como é o caso de Zumbi, é atentar contra a instituição que Sérgio Camargo preside (PFDC 2020, 5).²³

In this vein, we can observe that the Palmares Foundation, under the command of Sérgio Camargo, has elaborated a policy of forgetfulness with regard to some of the key figures in African-Brazilian memory, especially Zumbi dos Palmares. In 2022, through his social networks, Sérgio Camargo announced that he had submitted a project to change the name of the foundation, which would be called the Princess Isabel Foundation instead.

In Michel's (2010) analysis of the politics of forgetfulness, he identifies the existence of five ideal types: omission-forgetfulness, negation-forgetfulness, manipulation-forgetfulness, command-forgetfulness and destruction-forgetfulness. According to the author, however, only the last three types can be linked to a public policy of forgetfulness, given that any such policy depends on the existence of both a clearly identifiable public decision and a deliberate project to silence certain historical events. As I have shown, these characteristics can be identified in the actions of the Palmares Foundation under the Bolsonaro government. In my interpretation, following the ideal types proposed by Michel (2010), we are faced with a public policy of the type manipulation-forgetfulness type:

Nesse caso específico, sem dúvida o mais fácil para ser analisado e determinado, trata-se de um procedimento ativo e voluntário, por vezes estruturado, de esquecimento diretamente imputável aos atores públicos encarregados de elaborar e transmitir a memória pública oficial (Michel 2010, 18).²⁴

Moreover, he adds: "Comandar, manobrar, agir formalmente em prol do esquecimento vincula-se a uma prerrogativa dos poderes públicos que em geral se

²³ "The Palmares Foundation was created from the outset to promote the cultural, social and economic values derived from the black influence on the formation of Brazilian society. Denying black people their history and their heroes, as in the case of Zumbi, is to attack the very institution over which Sérgio Camargo presides" (translation by the author).

²⁴ "This specific case –undoubtedly the easiest type to be analyzed and determined– involves an active and voluntary procedure, sometimes structured, of forgetfulness directly attributable to the public actors responsible for elaborating and transmitting official public memory" (translation by the author).

servem de instrumentos legislativos ou regulamentários para esse fim” (Michel 2010, 21).²⁵

In another recent initiative from 2021, the Palmares Foundation announced that half of its bibliographic archive would be excluded for being “ideological”. A report called *Retrato do Acervo: a dominação Marxista na Fundação Cultural Palmares 1988-2019*, published by the Foundation itself, stated that 54% of the archive included topics such as the “sexualization” of children, gender ideology, pornography and eroticism, manuals on guerrilla warfare, labor strikes and revolutionary tactics, the idolization of bandits and “oddities” (Fundação Palmares 2021). The material to be discarded included works by authors as diverse as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Bronisław Malinowski and Celso Furtado. Thanks to judicial intervention, the Foundation was prevented from discarding its archive. Nonetheless, Sérgio Camargo responded by promising to inaugurate a “Museum of Shame”, containing the works that, in his assessment, should be excluded the Foundation’s archive.

In his report on the archive, Sergio Camargo provides a brief summary, in which he declares:

Todas as pessoas de bem ficarão chocadas ao descobrir que uma Instituição mantida com o dinheiro dos impostos, sob o pretexto de defender o negro, abriga, protege e louva um conjunto de obras pautadas pela revolução sexual, pela sexualização de crianças, pela bandidolatria e por um amplo material de estudo das revoluções marxistas e das técnicas de guerrilha (Fundação Palmares 2021, 5).²⁶

Yet, according to this report, in 54% of the archive, the following topics can be found: Sexualization of children, Gender Ideology, Pornography and Eroticism, Guerrilla Manuals, Strike Manuals, Revolution Manuals, Idolatry of Bandits, Oddities.

It is notable that the classification of these topics echoes many of the rallying cries of conservative groups in Brazil today, especially issues relating to the campaign against (Cultural) Marxism and so-called gender ideology (Miskolci 2021; Barbosa and Oliveira 2024).

It is clear, therefore, that a conscious action is under way to exclude certain names from African-Brazilian history, combined with other processes of exclusion, using forgetfulness as a political tool for the building of a specific representation of the Afro-Brazilian population and Brazil itself. This movement, articulated through forgetfulness, has also produced a particular interpretation of racism in Brazilian society, denying its existence and foregrounding instead the idea of integration, miscegenation and the absence of conflicts.

²⁵ “To command, maneuver and formally act in favor of forgetfulness is linked to a prerogative of the public powers that generally serve as legislative or regulatory instruments to this end” (translation by the author).

²⁶ “All decent-minded people will be shocked to discover that an institution funded by taxpayers’ money, under the pretext of defending black people, contains, protects and extols a series of works based on the sexual revolution, the sexualization of children and the idolization of bandits, and by comprehensive study materials on Marxist revolutions and guerrilla techniques” (translation by the author).

Fernandes, in his classical book *A Integração do Negro na Sociedade de Classes* (2008 [1968]) developed the theory that the singularity of Brazilian racism lies in the “prejudice of being prejudiced”, meaning that in Brazil prejudice is constantly used to conceal the existence of racism, denying its existence. The debate elaborated by Fernandes was in direct dialogue with earlier generations who argued for the absence of racial prejudice in Brazil, or who downplayed its reality, such as Gilberto Freyre and Donald Pierson (1900-1995). Following Fernandes’s ideas (2008), it can be argued that Brazilian racism has lasted across time through denial and forgetfulness. Motta (2000) draws attention to the fact that, in Fernandes, racism is a survival of ideologies or attitudes that, in the past, emerged from class relations and subsist in the present. Authors like Souza (2019), however, emphasize the empirical inseparability between class and race in Brazil for an understanding of its deep inequalities.

In his classic text on education after Auschwitz, Adorno (1995) argued that all political education should henceforth strive to ensure that the barbarism of Auschwitz would never be repeated. Here the author simultaneously defends a project of memorization and emphasizes the risks of a policy of forgetfulness. In the same way, we could affirm that the policy of forgetfulness concerning the history of part of the Afro-Brazilian population, especially those linked to the struggle to resist slavery and racism, poses substantial risks to the project of consolidating a democratic society in Brazil.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this brief paper I have sought to analyze how, under the government of Jair Bolsonaro, there was a policy of forgetfulness regarding African-Brazilian memory, implemented through the Palmares Foundation, whose consequence was the reinforcement of the “myth of racial democracy”. As part of this movement, we can highlight the direct attack on the figure of Zumbi dos Palmares and the attempt to re-found Afro-Brazilian memory around other figures, including Princess Isabel. I believe that this *modus operandi* is a type of reactualization and reinforcement of the so-called “myth of racial democracy”.

One of the characteristics of the rise of conservative movements in Brazil has been precisely the denial of racism in Brazilian society, combined with a deep historical revisionism that aims to reevaluate the era of colonial slavery. It should be stressed that the relativization of slavery in the colonial period is no new phenomenon: its intellectual roots can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, a major landmark being the book *Casa-Grande & Senzala* by Gilberto Freyre. Yet we can observe a radicalization of this argument in the contemporary period. Furthermore, despite the association of Freyre’s work with the “myth of racial democracy”, it is important to emphasize that it continually reaffirms the existence of a “color prejudice” in Brazilian society, while today’s conservative movements deny the existence of any kind of

prejudice, arguing that the true antagonism of Brazilian society is found between the political left and right.

As Cesarino (2019) rightly points out, Bolsonaroism in the post-truth context tends to generate ideas that reveal themselves as empty signifiers, such as “gender ideology” or “Cultural Marxism”. Such ideas are also recursively deployed in this dispute between narrative and memory, situating the discussion on racism in Brazilian society not as a fact but as part of a culture war, a narrative supposedly “built by the leftist party”.

Considering the events studied in this article, an attempt to use forgetfulness as an institutional policy has undeniably been under way in contemporary Brazil: it was a strategy incorporated in the Federal Government agenda and articulated primarily through the Palmares Foundation. Nevertheless, there has been a redirection of forces, not only ideological, but in a search to re-found an Afro-Brazilian memory that distances itself from the black movements and identifies with a conservative agenda, starting to incorporate the racial debate into its grammar, taking as a central axis the denial of racism in Brazilian society and the forgetting of whatever evokes this reality.

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