

## **Political Consciousness as a Component of Black Consciousness in Brazil: Its Presence in the Popular Media**

**David Covin**  
**California State University, Sacramento**

This research presents a study of articles in six Brazilian mass circulation magazines between 1983 and 1992. It combines the study with an earlier analysis conducted by the author. The research depicts the extent to which political consciousness is represented as a component of Black consciousness in the publications. The research finds that one-third of the articles in the popular press on Black consciousness include an element of political consciousness. This is a significant percentage of the total. The article concludes that, though to a minor extent, Black political consciousness has entered the public discourse in Brazil's popular press.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the extent to which political consciousness may be found as a component of Black consciousness within a sampling of the Brazilian popular press, and to suggest some significance of that description for the political lives of Afro-Brazilians. In the first section the paper identifies the popular press reviewed and examines the relationship between the popular press and the Afro-Brazilian population. Next, the relationship between Black consciousness and Black political consciousness is discussed, including the significance of that relationship for this paper. It examines the role of the cultural question in some detail. Thirdly, the paper sets forth its working definitions, including those of Black consciousness and Black political consciousness, among others. The paper illustrates how each of those definitions plays out in the general findings and reaches some conclusions on their significance.

## The Sources

This study utilizes work published during the Spring of 1992 in the *Western Journal of Black Studies*.<sup>1</sup> That work focused on Black consciousness as it appeared in the Brazilian mass circulation magazine, *Veja*, between 1978 and 1982. I concluded that article by noting that my research confirmed my two initial hypotheses: (1) that *Veja* promoted the notion of racial democracy and minimized the presence of Black consciousness, and (2) *Veja's* reportage reflected the veiled character of Brazilian racism.<sup>2</sup>

This study revisits those data and expands the data base. There was a minimal presence of Black consciousness in *Veja's* pages. In the 1992 study I found only seventeen articles which I identified as representing some form of Black consciousness. Additional sources examined for this study include *Veja* throughout 1983, 1991, and some of 1992 editions; *Afinal* in 1989, *Isto E* in 1991, *Visao* in 1989, *Manchete* in 1988, *Placar* in the late 1980's and early 1990's, and a special literacy supplement of *Minas Gerais* in 1988 entitled, "100 Years of Abolition: The Black Man Today."

While, except for the special supplement, I again found pickings slim—I found no articles meeting my tepid definition of Black consciousness in *Placar* (a soccer magazine)—there were enough articles overall to enable me to determine the extent to which a political element was present in the coverage. I found forty-one articles in the categories I identified in the mass circulation magazines. There were also twenty-three articles in the special literary supplement. I am reporting on a total of eighty-one articles.

## The Popular Press and the Afro-Brazilian

It is important to point out that the Afro-Brazilian population is largely illiterate or semi-literate.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Afro-Brazilians are not, primarily, consumers of the popular press, but to the extent that they are present in it, are primarily objects of its scrutiny. Hence there is little need and little intent for that press to address them. With regard to the subject matter of this research, what we see in the press is for the most part a reflection of how white Brazilians see Black consciousness. The first statement we must make about that vision is that it is decidedly limited. Black consciousness is peripheral to white Brazilians' view of the universe and to their view of Brazil. They are much more attuned to Black consciousness within the United States,<sup>4</sup> but it is a phenomenon which, to them, is alien to Brazil.<sup>5</sup>

## **Black Consciousness and Political Consciousness in Brazil: The Prevailing Tendencies**

Throughout the literature on Brazil, both on Brazil at large and on Afro-Brazilians in particular, there is no small recognition of a continual and widely recognized tradition and presence of Black consciousness.<sup>6</sup> It is specifically **not** political, and that has been one of the major complaints of Black activists.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the obvious character of Black consciousness has been the practice of Yoruba-Nago religions as manifested in Candomblé', Macumba, and to lesser extents Umbanda; in the widespread teaching of the martial art, *capoeira*; in the use of African foods and musical instruments; in widespread recognition of the African contribution to Brazilian culture; in historical sites specifically related to the African and slave experiences; in the literature; and in cultural organizations such as Samba schools, Blocos Afros, and Afoxes'.

However, this widespread and long lasting Black consciousness has had scant political expression.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it is possible, in fact, it has been the norm, to have extensive cultural expression of Black consciousness in Brazil with an accompanying void of political expression. If, on the other hand, contemporary expressions of Black consciousness, even in mainstream media, include a significant political component, then the potential for political activity rooted in Black consciousness must be recognized. As Karl Mannheim reminded us long ago, it is the mind that prepares the way for action.<sup>9</sup>

### **A Note About Culture**

During the Black Power Movement in the United States of the late 1960s and early 1970's, the Black Panther Party asserted a distinction between what it called its own members (Revolutionary Nationalists) and what it labeled some of its adversaries (Cultural Nationalists, or perjoratively, "pork chop nationalists").<sup>10</sup> This emphasis was in part, at least, an expression of the Maoist line **politics takes command**.<sup>11</sup> This accent highlighted the importance of politics in social change. For that reason, if no other, the Panthers' emphasis on the political line was significant.

However, many argue, and argued then, that the Panthers' distinction was a false one. Culture cannot be extricated from politics, such thinkers asserted, and any political line has a cultural base, whether its adherents are aware of it or not.<sup>12</sup> Specifically with regard to the purpose of this paper, such thinkers would argue that one cannot usefully separate political from cultural factors, and that to do so is not only an exercise in the absurd, it is analytically counter-productive. Hence, what this paper contemplates is misguided.

Indeed, many Afro-Brazilian activist adamantly assert this position. I was lectured on this very point by members of the Unified Black Movement (MNU) in Salvador during the summer of 1992. Our stance, they maintain, is at its roots cultural. Our cultural view and our cultural activities cannot be separated from our political views. They are one and the same. However, much political power may grow out of the barrel of a gun—a **political** stance represents the leaves and flowers of a tree whose roots and trunk are cultural.

The analysis in this paper accepts that line of reasoning. It does not, however, accept as a corollary that a cultural stance which is specifically Afro-Brazilian in and of itself assumes a political direction which is Afro-Brazilian. I argue that an Afro-Brazilian cultural stance can be the base for a reactionary, a conservative, a moderate, a liberal, or a radical political perspective. Indeed, I maintain that a clear, Afro-Brazilian cultural stance can even be the basis for an entirely confused and befuddled political stance. Therefore, a Black cultural consciousness, while it may be a prerequisite for a Black political consciousness, does not guarantee it. Afro-Brazilians who created Candomblé and Macumba, who practiced Capoeira, who chanted Yoruba, played African drums, celebrated Carnival, wore African masks, and maintained tribal identities, were and are entirely capable of accepting the Brazilian myth of racial democracy and of whitening as an acceptable form of social uplift. Their Afro-Brazilian cultural base allow them to take a political stance which is not at all Black, or African-centered. It is not a stance which could be associated with Black **political** consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, in this research I look, specifically, for political expressions which are African-centered, which are rooted in a concern for the political well-being of Afro-Brazilians. Because Afro-Brazilian culture alone has not proven itself a sufficient base for a political consciousness attuned to the specific imperatives and visions of Afro-Brazilian people, it is important to identify a component of Afro-Brazilian consciousness which has. In this study I look explicitly for expressions of Afro-Brazilian political consciousness. I look for them in the mass media, in part, because to the extent that they have filtered into media, they have entered the public dialogue as a legitimate viewpoint.

### **Definitions of Black Consciousness**

To ground the paper I must establish what I mean by Black consciousness and, specifically, Black political consciousness. As the base definition of Black consciousness I use the one I had applied in my earlier study of *Veja*. Most simply stated it is this: I will consider as representing Black consciousness an article in which a distinction is made between Afro-Brazilians and other Brazilians.<sup>14</sup> I have, additionally, added six other dimensions to Black consciousness. I classify an article as: (1)

limited to the presence of Black consciousness, (2) containing Black consciousness which is cultural, (3) containing Black consciousness which is political, (4) containing Black consciousness which is both cultural and political, (5) containing Black consciousness which identifies racial prejudice, and (6) articles which deny the existence of racism in Brazil.

I use the following working definitions for each of the six categories. To be placed in a category an article needs to have only one of the major identifiers for the category, e.g., cultural consciousness might include only lifestyle elements, or only artifacts. It need not include both.

*Black consciousness:* A specific awareness of a particular identity for persons of African descent, a distinction between Black people and others.

*Cultural:* A recognition of common elements of lifestyle, formal and informal expression (including art forms), production and consumption of artifacts which derive from a common African ancestry.

*Political:* A recognition of the importance of mobilizing the Black population to participate in and influence political power as Black people, and the recognition of political and social factors which have a pronounced effect specifically on the lives of Afro-Brazilians.

*Political/Cultural:* A combination of any of the elements of Cultural above with any of the elements of Political below.

*Racial prejudice:* An expression of racial prejudice related to Afro-Brazilians.

*Denial of racial prejudice:* Explicit denial of racial prejudice in Brazil, particularly with regard to Afro-Brazilians.

### **Illustrations of the Categories of Black Consciousness**

The following examples are intended to serve as illustrations of how I operationalized identifications of each category of Black consciousness.

#### **Black consciousness:**

An article on crime in the 28 August 1991 edition of *Isto E* mentioned, "...a mulatto youth, 17 years old..."<sup>16</sup> An article in the 17 September 1988 edition of *Manchete* providing background about an opera singer said, "Black and poor, she was born and raised in Niopolis, in the center of Baixada Fluminense, a suburb of Rio."<sup>17</sup>

#### **Cultural:**

An article in the 19 December 1989 edition of *Afinal* was entitled, "Black Culture." It was about a documentary film which, the article

## *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* Vol. 18, No. 1

said, was, "...91 minutes on black culture that had crossed over from Africa to the Americas."<sup>18</sup> An article in the 29 March 1989 edition of *Visao* covered a Candomble' priestess in Salvador, Mae Aninha, who was the Mae de Santo do Opo Afonja', a *terreiro* in Salvador.<sup>19</sup> An article in *Veja* of February 1991 was on the Bloco Afro, Oludum, the musical group which performed on an album with Paul Simon. It identified them as an Afro-Brazilian musical and cultural group.<sup>20</sup>

### **Political:**

A 14 May 1988 edition of *Manchete* carried an article about an exposition on the history of Black people in Brazil which was entitled, "Slavery in Brazil, the extinction of the Traffic, the Campaign for Abolition and the Search for Citizenship."<sup>21</sup> On 16 November 1983, *Veja* carried an article about race and poverty. It showed how greater poverty is associated with Afro-Brazilians than with white Brazilians.<sup>22</sup> On 8 May 1991, *Isto E* had an article stating that the death penalty applies most directly to poor people and Black people.<sup>23</sup>

### **Cultural/Political:**

On 18 May 1983, *Veja* printed an article entitled, "Rhythm in Black." It was about the growth of the Black movement in Salvador, and it mentioned Blocos Afros and Afoxes, both of which it called traditional carnival groups in Bahia. It described such groups coming together in a neighborhood to dance and to discuss the Black problem.<sup>24</sup>

### **Racial Prejudice:**

On 24 January 1979, *Veja* had an article about the racist town of Itapocu where Blacks and Whites had separate and exclusive parties, ballrooms, and Catholic churches.<sup>25</sup>

## **Distribution of Articles by Categories of Black Consciousness**

In the initial study, four of the articles were political, two were cultural, three were both political and cultural, five were simple expressions of Black consciousness, two identified the existence of racial prejudice, and one denied it. In later issues of *Veja* I identified four political articles, seven cultural, two both political and cultural, six expressing Black consciousness, and three denying the existence of racial prejudice. My review of other publications found *Afinal* with two cultural articles and *Isto E* with three political articles, two Black consciousness articles, and four articles denying existence of prejudice. *Manchete* produced two political articles, one cultural article, one both political and

cultural, and one indicating Black consciousness. *Visao* showed three cultural articles. Combined, these later magazines printed five Black consciousness articles, thirteen cultural, ten political, three with cultural and political combined, four which cited racial prejudice, and six which denied the existence of racial prejudice. The special literary supplement produced one Black consciousness article, two cultural, seventeen political, two combined cultural and political, and one denying the existence of racial prejudice.

In the press at large, a total of twenty articles had some explicit political content. That number was exceeded only by articles with some cultural content. For all the magazines reviewed, 34.5% of the articles had some political content, as compared to 64.5% which did not. The literary supplement was altogether different. Eighteen of the twenty-three articles had some political content, or 73.9% of the total.

There can be no question that with over one-third of the articles in the popular press in which Black consciousness appears having some political consciousness content, Black consciousness which appears in Brazilian mass circulation magazines has a significant political element. If one looks at treatments which focus specifically on Afro-Brazilian concerns, one finds an even higher incidence of political elements—73.9% in the *Minas Gerais* supplement. Despite the overall paucity of articles in which Black consciousness appears, that such a proportion of the total is explicitly political is a matter of no small import.

## Conclusions

Keep in mind that I reviewed literally thousands of articles to come up with eighty-one expressing some political consciousness: over 13,000 in my earlier study and a like number in the more recent magazines. In short, the articles reported on here constituted approximately 0.313 of one percent of the popular press articles I surveyed. This hardly speaks to a significant presence of articles on black consciousness in the popular media. As I suggested earlier, however, there is at least one very good reason for this. The overwhelming numbers of people buying and reading these magazines are not Afro-Brazilians. White Brazilians do not pay much attention to Black consciousness. Yet interestingly enough, when they do, at least one-third of the time they recognize that it has political dimensions.

In 1988, when a number of publications drew special attention to the plight of Afro-Brazilians, it was the 100th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. In those publications, as represented by the *Minas Gerais* literary supplement, much more concentrated attention was given to the recognition of political elements in Afro-Brazilian self-consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

This trend reverses the long-standing tendency for the Afro-Brazilian voice to be specifically a cultural voice, devoid of a political dimen-

sion. With at least forty-four percent of the Brazilian population having African ancestry, and possibly more than fifty percent,<sup>28</sup> should such an emphasis make more than marginal headway among the Afro-Brazilian population, the potential impact on national political life is immense. Imagine the Civil Rights movement in the United States magnified by a factor of five. The prospect is almost incomprehensible.

I make no claim that anything remotely like that is now underway. I simply point out that even in the almost exclusively white Brazilian mass circulation magazines, there is some, even if minute, recognition that Black consciousness in Brazil sometimes contains a political component. Black political consciousness has attained at least a modicum of acceptability in public discourse. This condition has great potential for the future of Brazilian political life.

### Afterthought

We do not know from these data how widespread attitudes incorporating some Black political consciousness are among the Afro-Brazilian population. But we do have some evidence of the significance of Black consciousness for communication with the Afro-Brazilian masses, and the degree to which Afro-Brazilian activists who possess Black consciousness are attuned to that significance. I will provide three examples by way of illustration.

In Brazil there is an extensive public education campaign to combat AIDS. One element of it, published by the Institute of Religious Studies in Rio, consists of a comic book which illustrates the dangers of AIDS through the cosmology of Candomble'.<sup>29</sup> The opening words of the comic book are a Candomble' greeting, "Odo Ya'!" The next words are addressed to devotees, "To Babalorixas, Yalorixas, omon orixas and everybody that attends the terreiro communities." The comic book proceeds then with three separate picture-stories illustrating basic Candomble' myths, and following each with a specific lesson that the particular story can teach about AIDS: (1) If you follow certain rules, you can avoid it; (2) Avoid exchanging blood or touching instruments contaminated with human blood; (3) Seek help and provide support for those who are sick with the disease. This use of Black consciousness is entirely cultural, but it is used in a public health approach. It is a deep use of Black culture. It is esoteric, accessible only to those familiar with it, it is quite detailed, and it is used for specific purpose. Religious and health activists realized that Black culture has tremendous potential for reaching, and possibly transforming, the lives of the Afro-Brazilian masses.

The second has to do with the Bloco Afro, Ile' Aiye', in Salvador. This is an extremely popular carnival group, ostensibly a cultural group. Yet they tell us otherwise. In a May 1992 information bulletin, *O Mondo*, announcing the theme for the 1993 Carnaval, Ile' Aiye' says, "In 1974



we of Ile' Aiye' began our work of raising the consciousness of the Black Baiano and Brazilian, we had as one of our basic references, the struggle of North American Black people for equal rights and citizenship in the United States."<sup>30</sup> In other words, since 1974, they have been self-consciously using a cultural group and cultural activities to raise political consciousness. They say, "Ile' Aiye' is one of the most significant examples of this resistance of Black people in the Americas."<sup>31</sup> They not only recognize the role of Black consciousness in reaching the Afro-Brazilian masses politically, they are steadfastly using it.

The third, by far the most powerful, is the campaign of Benedita da Silva for the mayoralty of Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Her campaign explicitly expressed a Black political consciousness. Benedita said, "For years, a Brazilian politician has always been rich, white, and male. Now we have a new profile: a black woman from a poor background."<sup>33</sup> Yet hers was not a campaign which was marginalized. Though at the beginning of the primaries she had only four percent voter support, she ended the primary with the highest number of votes, guaranteeing a place for herself as one of the two candidates in the general election. Though she lost the general election—she garnered forty-eight percent of the vote while explicitly and adamantly articulating a vision informed by Black **political** consciousness—Benedita de Silva is a member of the Unified Black Movement.

With occurrences such as these and with the incredible popularity of a group such as Oludum, there may be in the scant references to Black political consciousness in the overwhelming white popular magazines of Brazil...more than meets the eye. The ground is ripe for further study.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>David Covin, "Black Consciousness in the White Media: The Case of Brazil," *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 15(1992): 95-101.

<sup>2</sup>Covin, 95-101.

<sup>3</sup>In November of 1979, a *Veja* article showed 52.4% of Blacks and 44.3% of part-Blacks with less than one year of education, pp. 121-122. On 16 November, *Veja*, p. 91, shows thirty-nine percent of Blacks and part Blacks with less than one year of education and sixty-seven percent with three years of school or less.

<sup>4</sup>For example, on 4 April 1991, *Veja*, in a review of this United States movie, *Glory*, p. 86, the reviewer writes about Colin Powell, as a Black General who is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest

*Explorations in Ethnic Studies* Vol. 18, No. 1

position in the United States military. The reviewer labels the United States situation strikingly different from the case in Brazil, where Afro-Brazilians did not fight in a war for their freedom, rather, they were used as slave soldiers in Brazilian wars. And in *Veja* of 23 January 1991, Powell is labeled, "a Black Eisenhower," for which, of course, there is no counterpart in Brazil.

<sup>5</sup>Typical of this position is an article in the *Minas Gerais* literary supplements entitled, "The votes of this Black man don't have a color," *100 Anos do Abolicao-o Negro Hoje*, 7 May 1988, Ano XXII, No. 1098, 8.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, *A Mao Afro-Brasileira*, Emanuel Araujo (ed.), (Sao Paulo: Tenenge, 1988).

<sup>7</sup>Paulo Bonfim, "Crioulo Fala," *Nego*, 4 April 1988, No. 14, p. 6. Bonfim says in a country replete with Afro-Brazilian cultural organizations, the presence of an Afro-Brazilian organization with a political line is unusual and critical.

<sup>8</sup>Most scholars note only two major Black consciousness movements prior to 1978 in the twentieth century. They were the Brazilian Black Front (FNB), 1931-1938; and the Experimental Black Theatre (TEN), 1945- 1948. Both were limited geographically and temporally. With 1978 and the birth of the United Black Movement (MNU), a new wave of Black consciousness began which persists to this day.

<sup>9</sup>Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, (New York: Harvest, 1936).

<sup>10</sup>Huey P. Newton, "To the Black Movement: May 15, 1968," *To Die For the People* (Vintage Books, 1972 92), "Cultural nationalism, or pork-chop nationalism as I sometimes call it, is basically a problem of having the wrong political perspective."

<sup>11</sup>Huey P. Newton, "The Correct Handling of a Revolution: July 20, 1967," *To Die For the People*, 14. "The primary job of the party is to provide leadership for the people." Also, 17, "...if the Chinese Revolution is investigated it will be seen that the Communist Party operated quite openly in order to muster support from the masses."

<sup>12</sup>Maulana Ron Karenga, "Ideology and Struggle: Some Preliminary Notes," *The Black Scholar*, Volume 6.5, (January-February, 1975) 25, "Blacks are more than their music and color...The whole shapes the parts and gives them function, but the parts also give meaning to the whole and make it a functioning system or alter it."

<sup>13</sup>Tania Regina Pinto, "Centuria Armagura," *Afinal*, 19 April 1988, No. 190, 38. She cites a poll in which 89.5% of Brazilians (including Afro-Brazilians) declare that the President of Brazil must be white. Also on the same page, she quotes Flavio Jorge, saying, "A Black person does not vote for a Black person..."

<sup>14</sup>In "Black Consciousness and the White Media," the wording, exactly, was, "...any article which spoke specifically to the racial condition of Afro-Brazilians."

<sup>15</sup>*Covin*, 94-101

<sup>16</sup>*Isto E'*, 28 August 1991, 42.

<sup>17</sup>*Manchete*, 24 December 1988, 102.

<sup>18</sup>*Afinal*, 19 December 1989, 50.

<sup>19</sup>*Visao*, 29 March 1989, 58.

<sup>20</sup>*Veja* 27 February 1991, 77.

<sup>21</sup>*Manchete*, 14 May 1988, 76.

<sup>22</sup>*Veja*, 16 November 1983, 91.

<sup>23</sup>*Isto E'*, 8 May 1991, 45.

<sup>24</sup>*Veja*, 18 May 1983, 77.

<sup>25</sup>*Veja*, 24 January 1979, 38.

<sup>26</sup>*Veja*, 26 October 1983, 10.

<sup>27</sup>In addition to the *Minas* supplement, see, for example, *Manchete*, 17 September 1988; 14 May 1988, 76, especially; 21 May 1988. Also see *Afinal*, 19 April 1988; *Isto E'*, 20 April 1988; special collections of articles from 1988 published by the Ministry of Culture.

<sup>28</sup>While the forty-four percent figure came from the 1980 census, *Veja*, 20 January 1982, 20-22, the latter figure comes from Benedita de Silva, elected member of the National Constitution Assembly (the National Congress), and elected to the National Senate in the last Senatorial elections and also in the MNU, according to an interview with Luiza Bairros, National Coordinator of the MNU, July 1992, Salvador, Bahia.

***Explorations in Ethnic Studies Vol. 18, No. 1***

<sup>29</sup> *Odo Ya'!* Published by the Institute of Religious Studies (Rio: 1991).

<sup>30</sup> *O Mondo*, Bulletin of Information, No. 2, Salvador, May 1992.

<sup>31</sup> *O Mondo*, 1992

<sup>32</sup> *New York Times*, 4 November 1992, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *New York Times*, 16 November 1992.