



The Black Voice: Edna Roland

A study of bridging leadership in Brazil produced in cooperation
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Edna Roland

Introduction

Brazilian, woman, from the north, and black. In this country, most people who fit this profile live a life associated with - and almost predetermined to - poverty, discrimination and social exclusion. But that is not the history of Edna Roland!

Edna Roland is a “maranhense” (from the northern state of Maranhão), and she was the creator of several initiatives and organizations tied to the black movement in Brazil. She currently manages the nonprofit organization “Fala Preta” (“Black Voice”), which is active in rural and urban communities, particularly in issues related to health and sexuality. She became known by the international community in 2001, when she was appointed Speaker of the III World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, of the United Nations, in Durban, South Africa. In recognition to her important work on defense of the black community in Brazil, in 2003 she was nominated an “eminent specialist” by the Secretary General of the United Nations, to monitor the implementation of the resolutions regarding racism and discrimination in Latin America.

Edna’s personal journey share interesting parallels with the history and evolution of the black movement in Brazil, and her actions have influenced public policies towards inclusion of the black community, with especial emphasis on questions of gender and health. Her ability to reach across conventional frontiers, form alliances, and play new roles seems to have brought new fire to the black movement, and allowed for a new light to the problem of racism in Brazil; a question that until recently the non-black Brazilian society prefer to ignore.

Edna Roland’s history shows an attitude of fight adopted by someone who is constantly exposing problems, searching for solutions and opportunities; of someone who believes that is absolutely necessary to act to change the society in which she lives, at the same time that she is willing to build bridges for social inclusion.

Racism in Brazil

Since its discovery and foundation as a colony of Portugal, the Portuguese, and later the Brazilians, had used slave labor in the economic activities of Brazil. Initially, they had used the Indian population, but later Brazil became involved in the very profit business of trafficking of slaves from Africa. The agro-exportation economy of the colony, and its empire, was based for centuries on slave labor who worked in sugar cane plantations and

other agricultural fields, and also for domestic service and all sort of jobs in town and cities. Contrary to popular belief, Brazil not only used the labor force of slaves, but it was also a magnetic pole of organized international slave trade. The truth is that the base of wealth of this country during most of the history of this land since 1500 was the commerce and forced labor of human beings.

By 1888 the late and shameful abolition of slavery occurred, making Brazil one of the latest countries to recognize the freedom of slaves. After centuries of servitude and exploitation the black population was let “free” without any form of recognition or compensation by the State that could help them build ties and create any social, cultural, economic, historic and religious space for them in society. Blacks, free, remained completely on the outside of citizenship.

Paradoxically, the situation of exclusion of the black population was never adequately addressed, and was even vehemently denied in the official culture and in the popular imagination.

Brazil is in fact the second biggest African nation of the planet, with a population of Afro-decent bigger than any other country in the African continent, with the exception of Nigeria. Approximately half of the Brazilian population is black or mixed. Its influence in the formation of the nation is incommensurable.

The population of African origin began along the centuries to take part in the Brazilian life, given fruits to important aspects of the national culture, influencing the religion, language, music, culinary, behaviors, and all types of cultural manifestation of what formed this country. The religious syncretism, the miscegenation and the permeability of the Portuguese, African and Native Indian cultures were celebrated as having been the originators of a new Brazilian “civilization.”

This absorption of the culture of the black population by the European population contributed to the construction of the myth of “racial democracy”; a belief disseminated (and proudly confirmed by the elite) that slavery in Brazil was more mild and “benign” than in other countries, such as the United States and the Caribbean, and that racism and prejudice are inexistent in this country. The social question in Brazil, even today, is not racial problem, but “only” inequalities between the rich and the poor.

It has been shown in an undisputable manner that blacks have worse levels of quality of life than whites, that poverty and inequalities are associated above all with racial variable when whatever indicators are used. The poor in Brazil is synonym with black, despite persistent

attempts at showing that there are exceptions. It is true that the Brazilian society is profoundly racist however this racism has to be understood in a different manner from the normal ways associated with racism of apartheid regimes of South Africa and the United States before the decade of the 50s. Racism in Brazil is not mild but less conspicuous, and therefore more successful. Thanks to that, and to a lack of concern with the situation of blacks in the country, Brazil holds the title as the country with most inequalities in the world.

Confronting prejudice of gender and race is without a doubt one of the most relevant problems of our contemporary society, which fights to minimize the historic and cultural inequalities and break away at once from the myth of racial democracy or have it implemented at once.

This historic context continues to reflect on the social, economic and cultural realities of the black population of today. Members of this ethnic group face barriers of prejudice, less access to schools and universities, big wages differences, difficulty at achieving professional promotion, and suffer more of violence and insecurity.

Data from research conducted by the IPEA (2001)

48% of the Brazilian population is black or mixed.

People from Afro-decent represent 80% of the poor population and only 10% of the more affluent population of Brazil.

In average, blacks have two years less of education than whites, and study 70% of the average of the years of a white person.

33% of blacks have formal jobs, while the percentage for whites is 41%.

The per capita income of a white person is US\$138, while for a black person is US\$58.

Black Awareness

Edna Roland was born in the Northeast part of Brazil and she spent most of her childhood and adolescence migrating between several Brazilian states: from Maranhão to Ceará, to Goiás, Minas Gerais to finally reach São Paulo. She attributes her experience of successful changes and adaptations with the development of her acute capacity to perceive the cultural differences of each place she went, adopting a posture of openness and adaptation to the new realities as a survival strategy which allowed her to reconstruct new values and concepts.

Edna was confronted very early with the many economic and social realities of Brazil, and was always involved with work to build a better society. At age 14, she began assisting the Catholic Church, and soon began her political militancy.

Daughter of a middle class family, she had access to education and information. Her father's childhood and the emphasis he put on education was fundamental to her formation. It was through education that she had opportunities that would mark her life, because the fact that her disciplinary family life was too conservative and rigid made her understand that "study was above all and with it all was possible". So, at age 16, she saw herself leaving to the United States as an exchange student.

The experience of living in the USA was fundamental to the awakening of Edna's ethnic and racial awareness. From her familiarity with the American reality of the 60s, permeated with racial conflicts, sexual revolution, students and hippies movements, drugs and protest of the Vietnam War, Edna perceives discriminatory behavior and racism in relation to a group only because of origin or the color of the skin. It was at that moment that her ethnic-racial awareness was born transforming her personally and physically, and she began to embrace her own black characteristics. She describes:

"During a trip to the USA, I was in a bus with only white children and parked next to it was a bus with only black children. We heard a blast that sounded like a bomb, and the white students in my bus went into panic and then I realized that they were afraid because the other students were black. And I was also afraid of those black students, so I stopped to reflect... Who am I? What am I? And so I immediately began to question my own ethnic identity. In my childhood I had faced some discrimination within the family with relation to my white friends, but that did not raise my awareness. The moment of revelation was during that incident in the USA. It was exactly at that moment that I realized my own discrimination and racism, and begin asking questions about my identity."

4. Public Life

The so called bullet years under the Brazilian military dictatorship were the first scenario of Edna Roland's first active participation in organized groups. Like so many other students and intellectuals, she became a member of the student movement. The political activity would bring important consequences for the personal and professional life of Edna Roland. The military repression forced her to live a clandestine life, and break all her social ties: with her family, with her university, and to abandon her post-graduation program and a promising career as a teacher.

This is the reality which shaped this determined woman who believes in the cause she is fighting for and is sure to be acting correctly towards her ideals of society. To her advantage, she has the support of a young population with a potential and capacity to promote ruptures and unimaginable transformations without taking into consideration the risks of their actions and behaviors.

Until the decade of the 70s her political actions had clearly a confrontational character towards the authoritarian military regime of Brazil. Edna still does not confront, at that moment, the racial issue. She understands that the central question then is to fight against the dictatorship to restore democracy in the country. Even understanding her position as a woman and black, she shares nevertheless the general position of the Brazilian leftists to see have the questions of gender and race as theme subalterns to the fight for the creation of socialism.

BLACKNESS

During the post decades of the abolition of slavery, the Brazilian black population began to organize to fight for rights and better conditions of living. However, it was only in the 1940s and 1950s of the Twentieth Century that the black movement gained some importance and visibility with the creation of the "Frente Negra Brasileira" (Black Brazilian Stand Up), an organization that would also become a political party acting in defense of the rights and integration of the black population. However, this organization would be shot down by the New State of Vargas (Getúlio Vargas was President of Brazil from 1937 to 1945), and the black cultural agremiacoes begin to be the most visible face of the movement. Only a few decades later the first black organizations begin to reappear with political agendas, coinciding with the beginning of Edna Roland's active involvement in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Unified Black Movement, (Movimento Negro Unificado - MNU) was born as a platform for organizations that came about in defense of the black population. “Unified” (“Unificado”), MNU became an organization of high influence and with an importance role in the history of the black movement.

In the beginnings of the 80s, Edna Roland tried to get involved with this organization, but without success. It is said that the predominant concept inside the Black Brazilian Movement at that time was that it was necessary to create a single vision in order to achieve the expected objectives and victories. However, as in so many other sectors of society, the black population also expressed a big diversity of opinion, visions and values. The shock between a search for a common vision and a reality markedly pluralist would debilitate a lot the black movement.

The openness that came with democracy starting in the middle 80s allowed for the reappearance of social movements interrupted during the years under a military dictatorship. Edna continued to separate her political militancy from her activities in the black movement. In the later, it is in the cultural sphere that she first becomes involved: the Afro-groups which parade during carnival.

The experience she gained from her involvement in the student movement and political life, both known for its diversities and pluralisms and practice of thinking outside the box - to find new ways and strategies – will mark Edna Roland’s actions in organizations of the black movement.

In a general sense, Edna’s journey will be characterized by her creation and structuring of several organizations which will have an important role in the history and practices of the black movement in the state of Sao Paulo and in Brazil.

The relevance of these organizations is due in great part to Edna Roland’s conscience, historic knowledge and capacity to take advantage of the opportunities, besides her own innovative vision of establishing partnerships with other social and governmental organizations.

So much so that in perceiving that the government in those days in the 1980s was becoming more sensitive and open to questions of gender, the already existent Collective of Black Women (Coletivo de Mulheres Negras); another organization of which she belonged; quickly initiated dialogue and negotiations from this perspective to later adopt actions and discussions related to racism. The women from the black movement were pioneer in this

kind of dialogue with the government and a fundamental tool for the success and consolidation of new forums of discussion created in the recent democracy.

Another of Edna's fundamental characteristics of her active participation in the black movement was her capacity to compromise and negotiate, making possible for important programs and projects to happen.

One example of that was the creation of the Tribunal Winnie Mandela, in partnership with the Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil (Brazilian Lawyers Association) and Conselho Nacional da Mulher do Ministério da Justiça (National Woman Council of the Justice Department). It was initially intended to create a simulated jury to analyze the Lei Áurea (Aurea Law) at the approach of its centenary. However, the Minister rejected the proposition for fear that this could be interpreted as having any similarity with the apartheid in South Africa and that the South African government would protest against it. It was only after negotiations, concessions and much pressure from organizers that the tribunal could be realized with a series of debates and seminars.

Despite the enormous success, the then government of Sao Paulo closed down the Conselho de Mulheres Negras and ended a prolific phase of dialogue between the public power and the social movements. However, anticipating this kind of response Edna Roland and other women decided to officially open an organization to become the alternative and independent space for debates and one that would not depend on politicians. And this is how the Geledes Instituto da Mulher Negra (Geledes Institute of Black Woman) was created.

In this organization, Edna Roland was responsible for projects and programs in the area of health. Once more she was a pioneer in dealing with issues never discussed before by the feminine black movement, such as reproductive health and AIDS. Besides coordinating the projects, she had a significant role in the discussion and elaboration of documents of the feminine movement for the International Conference of Population and Development, in Cairo, the Conference of the Americans and the Conferences in preparation for the World Conference against Racism and Discrimination, of the United Nations.

Edna was also active in the process of the national organization of Brazilian black women, participating in state and national gatherings, seminars and meetings with great performance as an intellectual of the black movement.

In April 1997 Edna Roland became President of the Black Voice! This organization of black women has its mission to promote the human rights of the black population, especially

women's. Edna is also involved with educational work with the population of lower means and the formation of black researchers.

CONCLUSION

Brazil is a society with profound social and economic differences. Such differences become even more accentuated and serious when analyzing the reality of women and black people. Being a woman and black herself, Edna Roland decided to devote her life to fight against one of the most disturbing and important issues to the Brazilian society: racism.

Her success can be explained due to her personal capacity and characteristics, which without a doubt constitute also characteristics of several leaders:

Political action and a great concern for social issues.

Confronting and comprehending problems and searching for solutions.

Observant of the society where they live.

Prioritize collective and social questions in detriment of personal aspects of their life, including personal and professional relations.

Offer new thinking, paradigms, and solutions, adopting a pioneer and innovative posture.

Have a vision of the future and the capacity to recognize and make best use of opportunities.

High capacity for flexibility, negotiation, compromise, etc.

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