

REVIEW OF IAN MERKEL, *TERMS OF EXCHANGE:
BRAZILIAN INTELLECTUALS AND THE FRENCH SOCIAL SCIENCES*,
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In Brazil in general but São Paulo in particular, the University of São Paulo (USP) foundation in the 1930s occupies a very special place in the local intellectual mythology. The same is true for the role played by the French mission, which was hired to organize the Human and Social Sciences in the newly created institution. As pointed out by many authors, young professors such as Fernand Braudel, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Monbeig, and Roger Bastide made the French intellectuality a decisive influence on the Brazilian academic world, then in formation. Furthermore, their legacy would last for many decades as new generations of Brazilian intellectuals were emerging, circulating, and attaching their own work to that heritage – sometimes indirectly through the official heirs that the French left in Brazil, other times directly with them, when visiting France and studying or working in Parisian Universities. From a symbolic perspective, for the Brazilians, to be associated with names globally recognized as great intellectuals could be an important capital in the local intellectual field. In fact, they used this as a capital to advance their agendas and careers.

Without denying this story, the recently published *Terms of Exchange: Brazilian Intellectuals and the French Social Sciences*, by the American historian Ian Merkel, argues that not only the French were crucial to the formation of the Brazilian academic world, but the Brazilian intellectuals (especially those orbiting the University of São Paulo) were also fundamental in building the French Social Sciences in the 20th century. Nonetheless, as

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the book title suggests, the traffic in each direction was unequal – there were unexplicit terms regulating the intellectual exchanges between Brazil and France, derived from deep-rooted power structures that maintained an insurmountable hierarchy between academics originated from both countries, regardless of the occasional but rare willingness of the individuals involved to smooth the inequality. In simple words, it was more honorable and advantageous for a Brazilian to be associated with a French name than the other way around, independently of their properly intellectual merits. Or, even better, Merkel's book shows how a given author's social (and, therefore, national) qualities are inseparable from the intellectual recognition they achieved, and both aspects should be analyzed together because there is no such thing as an isolated or natural intellectual merit.

To convince his readers of this argument, Merkel explores, in six thematic chapters, a wide range of materials, following, in the first place, the intellectual trajectories of the men mentioned above: Braudel, Lévi-Strauss, Monbeig, and Bastide. The first three chapters are dedicated to the intellectual and social context in which the French mission arrived in Brazil. They discuss their building of networks and partnerships while in the country and focus on how these experiences enabled the young Professors to develop new approaches to their respective disciplines – thus distancing themselves from the traditional French Social Sciences. Merkel delves into the specifics of São Paulo's elites, which were rethinking their role in Brazil's future after losing a civil war and, therefore, the control of the national politics. Since they lost the political grip on the federal government, they planned to exert influence over the country through economic, cultural, and intellectual spheres (and, of course, the political sphere too, when possible). The creation of the university and the French mission were part of this broad change of strategy. Therefore, the Frenchmen are presented in the book as a piece of a complex puzzle. To begin with, Merkel shows they were not only Professors in the newly founded university but also important additions to the local cultural scene. Among other more noble roles, they had an entertainment function for the cultural and intellectual elites in São Paulo, when, for example, showing up in the social events happening in the city (and they were very aware of that). At the same time, the new environment was not only favorable for "breaking the chains" of their French formation and developing new approaches. Indeed, one can say that without these new experiences and partnerships, these men would probably not have been able to reach the relevance they had as global intellectuals decades later.

The last three chapters show the development of the mature work and professional trajectory of each of the book's main characters, emphasizing precisely how the Brazilian experiences and partners were undeniably

present in advancing these French intellectuals' ideas and careers, and also demonstrating how these two aspects were usually (even if not always) invisibilized in the processes, tending to individualize the merits and efforts of what was, in fact, a collective work. Therefore, Merkel shows the building of asymmetrical relations, where the Frenchmen played a dominant role while the Brazilians, a dominated one. Of course, this social division of intellectual work and prestige was complex and volatile, subject to a great variety of changes throughout time – some structural, others conjunctural – many of them selected and explored by the book. In this effort, a great watershed analyzed by Merkel is World War II and its effects on the work of his four protagonists. Merkel argues that, for his main characters, the French debacle during the conflict was partially a failure of the local social sciences. All of them, each within their respective fields and always in dialogue with Brazilian intellectuals, worked to renew the French social sciences, at least partially having that supposed failure in mind. After the end of the conflict, these men helped each other to occupy or even to create very important institutional positions in the French academic world. In these processes, they developed and consolidated their careers – and it was also then that most of the Brazilian presence was sublimated to reinforce their individual relevancies.

To close the book, Merkel chooses to investigate a particular case: how the French dealt with Gilberto Freyre – probably the most famous and internationally recognizable Brazilian intellectual from the 20th century. In that context, Freyre was defending the supposed Brazilian racial democracy, a polemic thesis stating there wasn't racism in Brazil, only class struggles. This is a very interesting way to synthesize, on the one hand, the strong presence of Brazilian intellectuals in France (where Freyre occupied an ambiguous position) and, on the other, the autonomization of the Brazilian intellectual field – which was becoming less connected to the local political sphere and also less dependent of the French (or of any other nation) intellectual production. Freyre's case demonstrates these structural changes empirically since, in France, Freyre was uncomfortably celebrated while, in Brazil, his ideas were being refused by a new generation of social scientists that, in fact, came to prove through field research the inadequacy of the racial democracy thesis for the country.

Therefore, *Terms of Exchange* denounces the erasure of the Brazilian role in reshaping the French Social Sciences from the middle of the 20th century onwards while retrieving and highlighting the collective aspects of an intellectual venture. Furthermore, it reveals the entanglements in which a cluster of French and Brazilian intellectuals produced their works interdependently. It is interesting to emphasize, however, that the book is derived from a PhD research conducted by Merkel at the New York

University and, as the dissertation, was written to an English-speaking audience. On this account, one can assume that when the author claims his book “examines understudied institutions – the University of São Paulo first and foremost” (p. 4), he is referring to how much USP is being investigated in the United States academic world. In doing so, Merkel is also diminishing the huge amount of Brazilian research done about USP – probably the most studied academic institution in the country. The risk for Merkel, therefore, is to commit the same sin he so precisely and with justice identifies in the relationship among the French and Brazilian intellectuals, i.e., unintentionally reinforcing the centrality of his own position and the peripheral one of his Brazilian peers, as the French did so many times.

The book is especially persuasive in showing the invisibilization of the contribution of the Brazilian experience in those intellectual trajectories. That slip, therefore, may be more a rhetorical strategy to reinforce the novelty of Merkel’s work than a way to invisibilize his Brazilian peers. Because, indeed, Merkel knows very well the Brazilian references on the subject and promotes an open and frank dialogue with them, as the book’s extensive documentation reveals. The Brazilian literature with which Merkel chooses to build his debates is truly a strong presence throughout the book. In fact, an attentive reader can see two parallel “mana circulation systems” operating there. First, a substantial part of Merkel’s work was to identify and reconstruct the intellectual exchanges among the characters he studied – and these exchanges are configured as a complex “gift economy” worthy of Marcel Mauss’ descriptions. For the men discussed by Merkel (although women are mentioned, they play a less prominent role in the book), it was important to consciously calculate the weights of compliments and critics when writing to or about their peers (French, Brazilian, or others), taking into consideration both the intellectual qualities of a given author and the relationship that was at stake. These calculations, however, were ultimately sublimated and hidden between the lines of the published texts – even if somewhat less so in the private correspondences. In fact, without this elision, the gift economy of the intellectual world could not function effectively. These exchanges are vestiges of the first “mana circulation system” built among the characters analyzed by the book.

The second system, less explicit but still visible, has Merkel himself as a centerpiece. He is exchanging “gifts” fundamentally with his bibliography. Like the other system, this one is also traversed by complex calculations dealing with personal and affective relationships as well as intellectual and institutional ones. In fact, even this book review is part of that second “gift economy” since Merkel and I know each other, we have a friendly relationship, and, more importantly, we discuss related subjects, dialogue with the same literature, and, when our focus is Brazil, we are part of the

same academic network. In that sense, Merkel's book is inserted and reveals in its production the same kind of entanglements and collective work that characterized the exchanges among French and Brazilian intellectuals in the recent past.

In conclusion, *Terms of Exchange* is a relevant contribution to the history of the intellectuals and an important global history exercise that shows, through at least two superposed "mana circulation systems", how entangled the relations among intellectuals from different parts of the world could be if well analyzed, as Merkel does.