

Kwame Dixon. *Afro-Politics and Civil Society in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), \$74.95, 192 pp.
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Is there a black civil society in Brazil? Why is it so hard to mobilize around racial identity in Brazil, despite the fact that it is the ‘blackest’ country in Latin America? What does the future look like for black politics given Brazil’s long history of racial denial and racial violence? These are some of the key questions political scientist Kwame Dixon asks in his book, *Afro-Politics and Civil Society in Salvador-Bahia, Brazil*. At the heart of Dixon’s analysis is the recurring question of how to make black voices heard in Brazilian civil society. Many scholars have asked this question before, among them Michael Hanchard in his 1994 groundbreaking book, *Orpheus and Power: The black Movement in Brazil*. Hanchard forcefully argued that mainstream Brazilian society establishes hegemony by de-politicizing the meanings of race, thereby preventing black mobilization. Because mainstream society denies the existence of racism, it is practically impossible for black activists to organize around race, unless such organizing relies on an almost folkloric celebration of black culture. The debate that followed Hanchard’s analysis criticized his U.S.-centered reading of the Brazilian black movement and his over-emphasis on what he called ‘culturalism’ without considering the diversity of strategies embraced by the black movement. Scholar Luisa Barrios (1996), for instance, contended that the ‘myth’ of racial democracy is called a ‘myth’ precisely because the black movement has occupied the public sphere and made its point. Others like myself contended that to understand the Black Movement in Brazil, one has to consider the many ways in which black politics are rendered not necessarily as a ‘black issue’ but rather as a struggle for daily demands such as public transportation, health care, and safety.

Dixon’s book is a welcome and timely contribution to this unsolved debate around black activism in Brazil. Centering his analysis in the post-democratization period (the early 1980s to the present), he is able to document several attempts by black activists to denounce and change the Brazilian racialized regime of citizenship. Particular attention is given to the emergence of the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) in 1978. The MNU, the author rightly affirms, presented a new paradigm in Black politics insofar as it tried to move beyond the ‘culturalist’ and fragmented perspectives embraced by black activism and instead embraced a radical black politics focusing on citizenship rights. Strongly identifying with the left-wing Workers Party (PT) (in fact many of MNU’s members were also members of PT), the MNU saw in the struggle against the military dictatorship an opportunity to “advance a series of critiques of the treatment of Blacks by state institutions” (p. 66) and to denounce the leftist parties’ silence on racial oppression. Members of the MNU actively participated in the first municipal elections after the twenty-four-year dictatorship was toppled and held some strategic positions in city halls around the country. Dixon dedicates some attention also to MNU’s political project, which could be summarized into what we (in the black movement) continue to call transformation from within and the author names as a “pressure on the state to recognize processes of racialization” (p. 8).

As a political scientist, Dixon provides an even closer analysis of black electoral politics. In doing so, he fulfills a void on the question (or lack) of the black vote in Brazilian society. Analyzing three decades of black participation in Salvador, the author shows the successes and pitfalls of the black movement in galvanizing black voters. From the first black mayor appointed for a two-year period by the military regime (1978-1979) to the current eleven black activists elected for Salvador’s city council (2013-2016), he provides a comprehensive analysis of the

controversial, multifaceted, and ideologically confused black vote. For instance, what should we make of a black woman who holds the position of vice-mayor for the main right-wing political party that is implicated in most of the structural violence perpetrated against Afro-Salvadoreans? What should we make of the growing black evangelical movement, which has established ties with conservative forces that persecute Candomblé, the main Afro-Brazilian religion? Dixon is able to bring these issues to the forefront of his analysis, sometimes with sympathy for the pragmatic approaches of black politicians and sometimes taking it a step further by unveiling the difficulties for black participation in a city dominated by a traditional political elite.

Similar to the explicitly politicized agenda of the MNU, black politics in Salvador also take the form of cultural production and self-help educational projects. Dixon studies the emergence of the Blocos Afros “Ilê Aiyê” and “Olodum” as an important arena for the affirmation of blackness (i.e., the “re-Africanization of Salvador,” in the case of Ilê Aiyê) and for building larger alliances under the premise of multiculturalism, as Olodum’s approach suggests. Another black initiative are the pre-vestibulares comunitarios or PVNCs, which focus on helping low-income students with poor academic performance pass Salvador’s public universities entrance exams. The PVNCs are part of a political strategy aiming to raise black consciousness through concrete demands, such as the access to free education. While in the case of the PVNCs the black movement has been able to push forward a national debate which resulted in the adoption of affirmative action policies in public education (the federal law was signed by President Dilma Rousseff in 2012), the ‘blocos Afros’ have succumbed to the ethnic marketing of Salvador’s tourism industry. Black culture has been consumed and appropriated as folklore by the white transnational civil society. As Dixon points out, while the ‘blocos Afros’ are still connected to the disenfranchised black and poor, “they do not challenge or represent a threat to the social order because they are now on some levels a wing of the state’s hegemonic discourse for black identity” (p. 62).

Although *Afro-Politics and Civil Society in Salvador* shines in providing insightful analysis of the painful and creative black activism in Brazil, there are some questions that the author fails to address. The reader may wonder, for instance, about the impact of 15 decades of the Leftist federal government of the PT on black politics in Brazil, particularly in the city of Salvador. To be fair, Dixon devotes a chapter to analyze the process of implementing the quota system in Brazilian and Salvadoran public universities. In doing so, he provides a fair and compelling picture of the black movement’s success in shifting discourses around race and educational attainment under Lula da Silva’s government. Still, insofar as participation in the political-electoral system is concerned, MNU’s thirty-year critiques still hold true. The Left is unable to accommodate black demands. Similarly, black politicians participating in conservative coalitions may subscribe to the Left’s incapacity (or unwillingness?) to accommodate black matters. These fundamental questions are buried in chapter seven, one of the main chapters of the book. Related to that, the author’s positive assessment of what he calls “Afro-civil society” may be met with skepticism. However, I do not wish to deny some remarkable achievement by the black movement in the last decade or so. In fact, what makes this book particularly compelling is Dixon’s resolute acknowledgment of black agency, despite (or because) of the constrained terrain of the politics of rights in the Brazil racial order. Such contribution should not be underestimated, especially within the context of a certain scholarly refusal to give the black movement’s credit for challenging the myth of racial democracy in Brazil.

We should not go too far, though. For instance, how would the black presence in the state

create a “radical new political space” (p. 126) for blackness? This question emerges from the author’s understanding that the black movement is expanding to the public sphere and creating new democratic possibilities in Brazil. Dixon believes that such radical politics resonate within the African diaspora for the transnational dimension of Salvador’s black culture. However, if we consider a marginal yet incisive critique of the antiblack animus of civil society and its public sphere (i.e., Vargas, 2014; Wilderson II, 2003), how would it affect the ways we understand black politics in Salvador? Likewise, if we consider Dixon’s own assertion that in Brazil, and Salvador in particular, blacks occupy a “schizophrenic social geography of belonging and non-belonging simultaneously” (p. 156), how sustainable is this emerging black civil society? Genocidal proportions of homicide, mass incarceration, residential segregation, and day-to-day humiliations invite serious doubts about the possibilities of changes from the paradigms of civil society or electoral politics. What are we left with then? Here is where *Afro-Politics and Civil Society in Salvador* makes its strongest contribution: in a society where black lives do not matter, the contradictions, pitfalls, and small victories of the black movement show that the reinvention of black civil life is a painful, compromising, non-linear, and sometimes seemingly impossible project. As Dixon does well, such a depressing context does not authorize us to take away black agency, even when it is contradictory (as in the black participation in the genocidal state) or pragmatic (as in the case of affirmative action policies). Without a doubt, this book is an important contribution to the emerging literature on the black public sphere, and black politics vis-à-vis racialized civil society in the African diaspora. If we consider the current anti-black climate in societies like the United States, Colombia, and Brazil, *Afro-Politics and Civil Society in Salvador* stands out as an engaging and serious attempt to recognize and understand the roadblocks blacks face in their (our) attempt to hold a civic existence.

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