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SMAIAS-ASN SUMMER SCHOOL
HARARE, 2–6 FEBRUARY 2026



From Internal Colonialism to Emancipation: Clóvis Moura and the Pan-African Marxist Horizon in Brazil

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Abstract

The hegemonic project of Brazilian nation-building, since 1822, has been grounded in the idea of “Europeanization” of South America, systematically denying the centrality of Black and indigenous populations in the country’s social formation. This project represented the persistence of colonial domination under internal forms after formal independence. Although Clóvis Moura did not explicitly address Pan-Africanism, his work offers crucial analytical tools to understand the national question in Brazil as inseparable from colonial structures. His Marxist interpretation of Black struggles reveals that slavery was not a peripheral mode of production but a structural element of national formation, and that the incomplete abolition perpetuated colonial relations within the State. Building on this reading, this paper connects Moura’s thought to Marxist Pan-African traditions, emphasizing how class struggle in Brazil is inseparable from anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle. It further explores the emancipatory horizon opened by the articulation between Pan-Africanism and Marxism, pointing toward a national liberation project that entails the effective decolonization of social relations and the State.

Keywords: Pan-Africanism, Internal Colonialism, Clóvis Moura, National Question, Decolonization

Introduction

The current historical conjuncture underscores the urgency of rejuvenating Pan-Africanism as an ideology of resistance, liberation, and collective defense, addressing the unfinished political, economic, social, and environmental projects of Africa’s liberation and transformation. This ideological framework is enriched by debates emanating from the “margins of theory,” particularly those raising questions of difference—such as gender, class, and race—as fundamental concerns in liberation ideologies. The national question in Brazil, characterized by the persistence of colonial structures after judicial independence, provides a critical case study for articulating Marxist and Pan-African perspectives.

This paper uses the critical, materialist framework established by Clóvis Moura (1925–2003) to understand the roots of racialized oppression and dependent capitalism in Brazil (Góes, 2023; Silva & Fagundes, 2022). Moura was a dedicated working-class intellectual and Marxist activist whose theoretical production aimed to support social movements (Elpidio et al., 2023; Góes, 2023; Silva & Fagundes, 2022). Although his work was often marginalized by the academic mainstream, it remains fundamental for analyzing contemporary Brazilian reality (Góes, 2023; Mesquita, 2003; D. de Oliveira, 2020). By locating

Black struggle at the core of Brazilian social formation, Moura's thought provides the analytical basis to connect the Brazilian national dilemma with the broader Pan-African and anti-imperialist project of the Global South (P. Oliveira, 2023).

The structure of this article will follow six key aspects to explore this intersectional framework, from the foundations of Brazil's colonial formation to the necessary horizon of decolonization.

1) A Review of Clóvis Moura's Thought and his Commentators

Clóvis Moura's primary contribution was identifying the dual nature of Brazilian capitalism, which combined the slave system with a specific ideology of racismo during the transition to wage labour (Góes, 2023). His methodology, which he termed the "Sociology of Praxis," contrasted sharply with mainstream academic sociology, seeking knowledge tied directly to transforming social reality (Góes, 2023; Mesquita, 2003; P. Oliveira, 2023). For Moura, slavery was a "decisive phase in forming the Brazilian ethos" (Moura, 1983, p. 132) and functioned as a structural impediment to Brazil's internal development, facilitating an export-oriented colonial economy at the expense of developing an internal consumer economy. Brazilian society subsequently constructed two models: the colonial slave system, subordinated to colonialism, and dependent capitalism, subordinated to imperialism (Moura, 1983).

Moura's work dismantled the myth of racial democracy, associated primarily with Gilberto Freyre's influence (Elpidio et al., 2023; Ferreira, 2013; Moura, 1983, 2019, 2020c, pp. 49–50; Silva & Fagundes, 2022). He argued that this myth was an ideological barrier (*mecanismo de barragem*) intended to mask concrete racismo and perpetuate a policy of whitening (*branqueamento*). Racism, in Moura's view, is not a residue of an archaic society but a central, structuring element inherent in the genesis of Brazilian capitalism (Góes, 2023; Moura, 2019, 2020a).

Central to Moura's historical analysis is the concept of Black rebellion and agency, famously detailed in *Rebeliões da Senzala* (1959). This work countered the prevailing paradigm that portrayed enslaved people as passive actors (Buonicore, 2020; Moura, 1986, 2020c; Silva & Fagundes, 2022). Moura insisted that the history of Brazil is driven by class struggle, with rebellions and quilombos (such as Palmares, which he considered a "nation in formation") being continuous expressions of resistance and anti-systemic praxis (Moura, 2019; D. de Oliveira, 2024).

Commentators highlight Moura's periodization of Brazilian slavery into Full Slavery (c. 1550 to 1850) and Late Slavery (1850 to 1888) (Góes, 2023; Moura, 2020a; D. de Oliveira, 2020; Silva & Fagundes, 2022; Vieira, 2024). Late Slavery saw the modernization of productive relations without altering the fundamental slave structure, a process of "modernization without social change" (Lauriano & Falavina, 2023; Moura, 2020b). Furthermore, researchers connect Moura's analysis of dependent capitalism to Ruy Mauro Marini's work, highlighting how racial mechanisms enable the super-exploitation of labor in Brazil (Lauriano & Falavina, 2023; Silva & Fagundes, 2022).

2) The "National" Project of Brazilian Settlers and the Construction of a European Nation in South America

The Brazilian independence movement in 1822 was primarily a movement led by local-born white settlers (Gissoni et al., 2024). This class, the colonists, was structurally positioned between the colonizers (Portuguese bureaucrats and merchants) and the colonized (enslaved Africans and Indigenous populations). The colonists' motivation for independence was not liberation for all but a desire to break the alliance with the Portuguese colonizers to "re-mint the colonial coin" in their favour (Mattos, 1987) and preserve the internal structures of value appropriation, which constituted the "colonial mode of accumulation" based on primitive accumulation of land and labour.

The resultant "national-settler development project" sought the construction of a sovereign state and, later, industrial development (especially from the 1930s onward). Crucially, this project defined the nation as belonging only to the settlers, aiming for an "European nation in South America". This ambition was reflected in an intense ideological drive for *branqueamento* (whitening) and the establishment of a "superior race" (Gissoni et al., 2024; Góes, 2023; Moura, 2019).

Conservative ideologues like Azevedo Amaral and Oliveira Vianna articulated this racial vision, advocating for immigration policies that favored white Europeans (especially Northern Europeans) to correct the perceived "racial degeneration" of the mixed population. This policy aimed to substitute the Black workforce, ensuring the ethnic superiority of white elements for the future of Brazilian civilization. This ideology of whitening, sustained by the dominant structures, demonstrated that the Brazilian elite was ideologically subordinate and alienated, reflecting the colonial mindset. (Góes, 2023; Moura, 2019).

3) Continuity of Colonialism after Judicial Independence (1822), Incomplete Abolition, and the True National Question

The Independence of Brazil in 1822 did not result in a definitive break with colonial structures. Instead, it consolidated the slavish economic and social structure (Moura, 2020b, 2020a, p. 74). Movements challenging the established order before and after 1822, such as the Pernambucan Revolution (1817) and the Confederation of the Equator (1824), largely excluded the abolition of slavery from their political agendas, demonstrating the centrality of the slave regime to the colonist elite (Moura, 2020a).

Moura argues that for nearly four hundred years, colonial slavery left deep traces on Brazilian society. Even after 1888, these vestigial elements were reorganized and utilized by the dependent capitalism model, subordinated to imperialism, acting as regulating mechanisms for the underdeveloped economy (Moura, 1983).

The true "national question" in Brazil, therefore, involves the effective liberation from persistent colonial structures. As analysts of the settler society framework contend, the national struggle for countries like Brazil must be understood as the fight against the bipolar contradiction between the settlers and the colonized, alongside the struggle against external imperialists—the colonizers. Juridical independence, in 1822, was merely a "national-settler" war against the latter that secured internal power for the white elite, delaying genuine decolonization, much like in Southern Africa where white minority regimes delayed liberation until the late 20th century (Gissoni et al., 2024).

The 1822 Independence did not fundamentally alter the economic and social structure of Brazil; on the contrary, it consolidated the slave system (Moura, 2020b, 2020a). The colonial type of economy persisted, focused on exportation, enabling the structural subordination to imperialism in the subsequent phase of dependent capitalism (Moura, 1983).

The transition away from slavery in the latter half of the 19th century—marked by laws like the *Lei do Ventre Livre* (1871) and *Lei dos Sexagenários* (1885)—was a gradual process spurred by external pressures (especially from the English bourgeoisie who saw slavery as a barrier to the realization of value) and internal struggles of the enslaved. However, the formal abolition in 1888 was a "compromised solution" (*solução compromissada*), achieved without addressing the underlying colonial structures. Moura emphasizes that Abolition did not bring substantial changes for African descendants, perpetuating aspects of slavery and colonialism.

The abolition, therefore, was incomplete, preserving the archaic social structures and maintaining the privileges of the dominant classes, leading directly to the marginalization of Black people within the nascent dependent capitalism. This highlights that the "true national question" in Brazil is not merely judicial independence but the liberation from these persistent colonial structures. The conflict between the colonists and the colonized became the internal material dimension of imperialism. For the formerly enslaved, national liberation could only be achieved through the revolutionary destruction of the colonial world, a process articulated through their radical anti-systemic praxis.

4) Incomplete Abolition and the Land Question: Internal Colonialism and the Racial Question

The Abolition of 1888, although ending slavery, did not qualitatively change the structure of Brazilian society; it merely replaced slave owners with powerful large landowners. This transition maintained a conservative modernization devoid of fundamental social change (Lauriano & Falavina, 2023; Moura, 2020b, 2020c).

The problem of incomplete abolition is intrinsically linked to the land question. The settler class guaranteed the maintenance of the colonial mode of accumulation by perpetuating the white monopoly over land (Gissoni et al., 2024). The 1850 Land Law (*Lei da Terras*) was a key mechanism in this strategy, eliminating the free distribution of public land (*sesmarias*) and establishing that

land could only be acquired through purchase. Enacted before abolition, this law transformed public land into commodities, making acquisition impossible for ex-slaves who were completely dispossessed and decapitalized (Góes, 2023; Moura, 2020a, pp. 106–108). This political strategy ensured the perpetuation of the great property (latifundio) and preemptively blocked the land acquisition by the mass of enslaved people who would eventually be freed.

This system established a clear racial hierarchy in access to labour and land. While the Black population was marginalized, the government subsidized—animated by eugenic thought (Ferreira, 2013)—European immigration, facilitating land acquisition for foreign settlers who were considered the ideal workforce and symbolic model for the desired Brazilian type: the white citizen (Moura, 1983, 2020a).

This process constitutes internal colonialism: the class struggle in Brazil is defined by the imposition of mechanisms of barragem (social barriers or selection strategy) that restrict the Black population to marginal spaces and the industrial reserve army (Lauriano & Falavina, 2023; Moura, 2019; Silva & Fagundes, 2022).

This maintains a high degree of land concentration and perpetuates a hierarchical, ethnic-racial division of labor (Góes, 2023; Moura, 1983). The ideology of racial democracy served as a democratic verbalization used by the colonizer to neutralize the ethnic consciousness of the Black segment, justifying this systemic exclusion and making the Black population introject the colonizer's values (Elpidio et al., 2023; Góes, 2023; Moura, 1983).

5) Connection between Clóvis Moura and Pan-African Thought: Class Struggle, Anti-Colonial, and Anti-Racist Struggle

Although Moura did not adopt "Pan-Africanism" as an explicit category, his work fundamentally links class struggle with anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle, positioning him within the global Black Radical Tradition (Nogueira, 2023; Robinson, 2000). Moura's analysis shows that the resistance of the enslaved African (the quilombagem) was inherently anti-colonial and anti-racist, as it was a radical negation of a system that reduced the human being to a mere object (instrumentum vocale or thing) (Gorender, 2016, 2022; Nogueira, 2023; P. Oliveira, 2023). The struggle of the Black segment to reclaim their identity and humanity (práxis negra) was revolutionary, transcending a mere fight for material improvement and aiming at the destitution of the colonial world (P. Oliveira, 2023).

Moura's engagement with global black movements is evident in his participation in the 1974 Colloquium on Negritude and Latin America in Dakar, Senegal (Nogueira, 2023). While critically approaching the concept of Négritude as a political ideology (Moura, 2020a, p. 322; Nogueira, 2023), he emphasized that the radical core of Black protest in Latin America resides in the concrete experiences of resistance against colonialism and capitalism. This focus aligns with the idea that the fight against exploitation and marginalization must move beyond simple color opposition, or white vs. black (Moura, 2020a, p. 322). The profound link between anti-racist struggle and anti-capitalist struggle is necessary in the Brazilian context, where the Black segment faces both color prejudice and



the miseries of proletarianization and marginalization (P. Oliveira, 2023; Silva et al., 2023; Silva & Fagundes, 2022).

6) Articulation between Pan-Africanism and Marxism and the National Liberation Horizon

Moura's Marxist approach offers the methodological prism of totality to understand that the question of race is integral to the mode of production (Monteiro, 2023; Silva et al., 2023, 2023). In Brazil, the failure to fully integrate the Black population and dismantle the latifundio structure after 1888 demonstrates that the "bourgeois revolution" occurred through a non-classical route, maintaining privileges and leading to the adoption of an authoritarian, dependent structure (Moura, 2020b; Silva et al., 2023).

The effective decolonization of social relations and the State constitutes the core of the national liberation project. Moura and the analysis of the "settler society" framework reveal that the State apparatus in Brazil, highly centralized and autocratic, was historically mounted to repress the struggle between slaves/colonized and the dominant class/settlers (Moura, 2019, 2020b).

The neocolonial transition in 1988, coinciding with the centennial of Abolition, saw political liberalization, including legal advancements against the myth of racial democracy. However, this transition was organized to preserve the colonial mode of accumulation. The implementation of neoliberal institutional mechanisms, coupled with a surge in state violence and mass incarceration against the colonized, confirms that the core project of the colonist class—the monopoly of land and internal colonial exploitation—was maintained, irrespective of political overture. The latter, for its turn, was conditioned upon external imperialist alignment (Gissoni et al., 2024).

The horizon of rupture with neocolonialism demands a truly popular political project that simultaneously confronts external imperialism and internal colonialism. Since the settler bourgeoisie has historically proven its willingness to sacrifice sovereign aspirations to maintain the internal colonial mode of accumulation, the path of effective national liberation must articulate the radical Black praxis (anti-racist and anti-colonial) with the broader Marxist class struggle against dependent capitalism (Farias, 2021; Silva et al., 2023; Silva & Fagundes, 2022). This articulation is essential to reverse the enduring legacy of modernization without social change.

Conclusion

Clóvis Moura's legacy provides the radical framework necessary to understand Brazil not as a country plagued by "racial prejudice" residuals, but as a structure founded on racialized capitalism where internal colonialism persists despite juridical independence. The historical continuum of domination, stretching from colonial slavery to the incomplete abolition and the neocolonial



transition of 1988, confirms that the national project of the Brazilian elites has always prioritized the maintenance of the colonial mode of accumulation and white privilege over genuine national development and democratic inclusion. Therefore, the path to national liberation in Brazil—effective decolonization—requires a revolutionary commitment, inspired by the convergence of Marxist critique and the Pan-African Black Radical Tradition, ensuring that the struggle of the marginalized Black majority becomes the driving force for overturning the state and social relations rooted in five centuries of oppression.

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HARARE, 2-6 FEBRUARY 2026



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