

International Workshop

When Conviviality Hides Inequality: On Brazilian Racial Democracy

04 June 2024

Conference Room, Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (IAI), Potsdamer Str. 37, 10785 Berlin

Agenda

17:00 – 17:15

Introduction: Peter Birle (IAI)

17:15 – 18:00

Presentation of Rúrion Melo (USP/Cebrap)

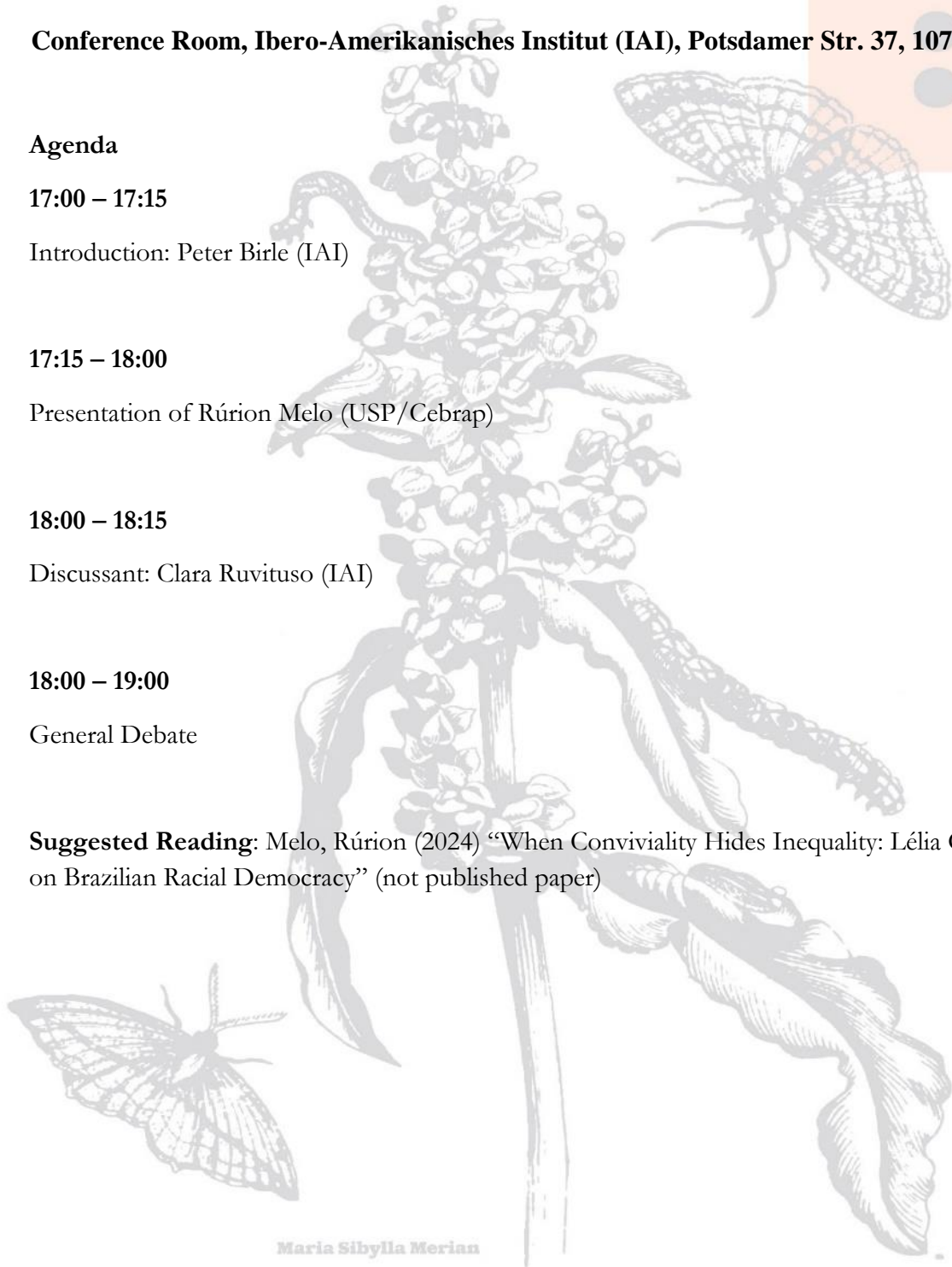
18:00 – 18:15

Discussant: Clara Ruvituso (IAI)

18:00 – 19:00

General Debate

Suggested Reading: Melo, Rúrion (2024) “When Conviviality Hides Inequality: Lélia Gonzalez on Brazilian Racial Democracy” (not published paper)



Extended abstract

When Conviviality Hides Inequality: On Brazilian Racial Democracy**Rúrion Melo (USP/Cebrap/Mecila)**

Extended abstract

There seems to be no doubt anymore that Brazilian racial democracy, that is, the idea that Brazil was formed based on “a kind of racial paradise, a harmoniously mestizo country” (Santos, 2022, p. 211), is a “myth”. Anti-racism theorists and activists have been combating this myth for many decades and sought to reinforce that Brazilian society is racist, that is, that the structures of racism are constitutively rooted in our way of life (Moura, 2019). Still, when we look at the most diverse spheres of our daily lives, there seems to be an uncomfortable but permanent truth content surrounding this “myth”: we continue to be a society that produces and reproduces means to perpetuate everyday racism. How and why, despite all the questioning and anti-racist struggle, do we still embrace, so to speak, the forms of segregated integration of the population, allowing “racism to continue there, silent, but keeping the wheels working”? (Santos, 2022, p. 211). The answer that Nilma Lino Gomes offers to this question is unequivocal: Because we are still “a society that *hides and keeps racism behind* the discourse of racial democracy, miscegenation, diversity” (Gomes, 2018, p. 111).

Saying that racial democracy is a myth does not just mean concluding that, in reality, we live in a racist democracy or that true democracy is only possible without racism. It means that racism is perpetuated through a “false” democracy, and only for this reason it ensures its effectiveness in social terms: “Racial democracy or the myth of racial democracy is not merely a false belief, but involves a way of functioning and regulating social practices, power relations, forms of sociability and social thought that make up a certain historically constituted ethnic-racial domination regime” (Sales, 2023, p. 105). It is not, therefore, a question of denying that racial democracy operates effectively in the perpetuation of racism, nor of concluding that its effectiveness presupposes affirming that we live in a democracy without racism. Certainly, “the denunciation of racial democracy as a myth occurs [...] in the context of criticism of political democracy as a farce” (Guimarães, 2001, p. 147). But its criticism is directed less at some ideal of interracial democratic coexistence than at some hegemonic mode of domination and oppression that acts through everyday racial sociability itself. Who is interested in hiding the racism that actually exists behind discourses and practices that deny its existence? On the one hand, according to Antonio Sérgio Guimarães, “‘Racial democracy’ was extensively used to make Brazilian racial inequalities invisible [...] there is no need to deny its effectiveness in

inhibiting more crude manifestations of racism” (Guimarães, 2019, p. 41-42). On the other hand, racial democracy wouldn’t have just the intention of perpetuating social inequalities (i.e., racial, class and gender) between white and black people. This would have the function of preventing critical anti-racist behavior, demobilizing indignation and resistance (Santos, 2022; Theodoro, 2022).

But if something like racial democracy fulfills the role of hiding or dissimulate racism, what are the social practices that materialize, sustain and simultaneously prevent the recognition of everyday racism? According to Lélia Gonzalez's formulation: “What happened for the myth of racial democracy to have so much acceptance and dissemination? What were the processes that determined its construction? What does it hide, besides what it shows?” (Gonzalez, 2020, p. 76). Recent literature has sought to investigate this issue on different fronts based on processes of subjectivation of domination and the internalization of racism. Concepts such as color blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2020), whiteness (Bento, 2022; Theodoro, 2022) or even interdicted (Faustino, 2021) or ambivalent recognition (Melo, 2024) refer to attempts to explain the persistence of racism and social inequality in our democratic ways of life.

The purpose of this text is to re-read some of these attempts to understand the paradigmatic issue of Brazilian racial democracy from the “conceptual framework” of *conviviality* (Costa and Nobre, 2019, p. 12). More precisely, admitting an “inseparable nexus between conviviality and inequality” (Costa, 2019, p. 28). Instead of an analysis specifically focused on social structures (although never failing to consider them), “conviviality specifically refers to the interactions observed in the realm of common life. They obviously include not only interactions based on cooperation but also those marked by competition, conflicts and violence” (Costa, 2019, p. 27). According to our hypothesis, the social interactions that constitute conviviality can be the path to understand the aspects of hidden inequalities that operate in the perpetuation of racism. How does conviviality hide inequalities? And how could the nexus of conviviality and inequality contribute to the understanding of racial democracy?

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