

Introduction

Nordeste and Nation

IN 1921, a future Brazilian bureaucrat named Agamemnon Magalhães asserted in a thesis written for an academic appointment that the northeastern region of Brazil was “a distinct ‘habitat,’ characterized by the rigor of its ecological conditions. Nature is reflected in man, imprinting his features, sculpting his form, forming his spirit.”¹ Magalhães wrote about the Northeast and *nordestinos*, as peoples of the region were called, as if they had long been thought of as a distinct political and geographic region and people. This was most certainly not the case. Just six years before, in 1915, Brazilian geographers had gathered in Recife, the capital of the northeastern state of Pernambuco, for the Fourth Brazilian Congress of Geography. In the official sessions and papers presented there, geographers referred only to the “states of the North,” the “problem of the North,” and the “droughts of the North.”² Magalhães also employed climatic, geographic, and racial determinism to describe *nordestinos*, calling them the product of interaction between rugged terrain, a harsh climate, and European, Indian, and African cultural and racial influences. Furthermore, he considered the peoples of the region to be “the producers of Brazilian nationality.”³ In other words, for Magalhães, the mixed-race *nordestino* was the quintessential Brazilian.⁴ This notion ran contrary to conventional wisdom. During Brazil’s First Republic (1889–1930), intellectuals and politicians

advanced new understandings of Brazilian national identity that idealized European immigration and racial whitening.

In 1925, after returning to Brazil from the United States, where he completed degrees at Baylor and Columbia universities, Gilberto Freyre wrote two articles for a commemorative work entitled *O livro do nordeste* (The Book of the Northeast), which celebrated the centennial issue of Recife's daily *Diário de Pernambuco*, Latin America's oldest continuously published newspaper. The first piece, "Social Life in the Northeast: Aspects of a Century of Transition," examined what Freyre understood to be essential aspects of northeastern society and culture and how those traditions had changed in a century's time.⁵ The second piece, "The Cultivation of Sugar Cane in the Northeast," examined the history of sugar cultivation in the region from the founding of the captaincy of Pernambuco in the 1530s through the transition from slave to free labor and the industrialization of sugar production in the late nineteenth century.⁶ In both pieces, Freyre treated northeastern sugar society as the foundation of Brazil, downplaying three centuries of African slavery and instead celebrating the social, cultural, and intellectual achievements of elite planter society and popular culture, which he attributed to the sexual, social, and cultural intermixing of Africans and Europeans. Like Magalhães, Freyre asserted that the Northeast was, and would continue to be, "the most Brazilian part of Brazil; the most characteristic."⁷ This was a remarkable position to take in 1925, given the economic and political decline of Pernambuco and other northeastern states and the concomitant rise of southern states such as São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul. In the 1930s, Freyre would further explore the role of race in the formation of Brazilian and northeastern society.⁸ In *Nordeste* (1937), he argued that the mixed-race worker of the sugar-growing region was a "strong and capable type with the capacity for constant effort" and that in the future "it would be perhaps possible to speak of a Brazilian race or semi-race of the *moreno* (brown) man of the Northeast."⁹ For Freyre, the *nordestino* personified the ideal of racial democracy, the idea that Brazil is a nation in which individuals of different racial identities compete equally in a society largely free from racial prejudice and discrimination. Freyre's understanding of Brazilian race relations, especially the notion of racial democracy, would become profoundly influential in Brazil during the postwar period.¹⁰ While the Northeast and *nordestinos* would become closely associated with regional social and economic underdevelopment in the 1950s and 1960s, they would nonetheless remain at the center of debates over Brazilian national identity and whether or not *nordestinos* were authentically Brazilian.

From the second half of the nineteenth century through 1945, Brazilian intellectuals, urban professionals, reformers, and political elites invented a

northeastern regional identity that was based on a complex and diverse array of sources. In the late colonial period and early national period, two political separatist movements gave rise to a distinct regional political identity. The Pernambucan Revolution of 1817, in which rural landowners, with the support of urban workers and the poor, called for independence from Portugal and the formation of a republican government, expanded to involve the provinces of Alagoas, Paraíba, and Rio Grande do Norte before it was brought under control by Portuguese troops. The Confederation of the Equator, which began as a rebellion against the Portuguese imperial government and the constitution promulgated by Pedro I in 1824, started in Pernambuco and expanded to include the same provinces as the 1817 revolution as well as the provinces of Ceará, Piauí, and Pará. While historians usually downplay the national significance of these separatist movements, they proved to be of lasting cultural and political importance within the region itself. Political restiveness continued with the Guerra dos Cabanos of 1832–1835, a popular uprising in rural Alagoas and Pernambuco, and the Praieira Revolution of 1848–1850, which pitted liberals against conservatives in Pernambuco. While neither of these later movements expressly advocated separatism, they nonetheless represented the ongoing spirit of political independence in the region and figured prominently in the civic imaginations of Pernambuco and other northeastern provinces. The revolutions of 1817 and 1824 were a source of regional pride and served to reinforce northeastern politicians' independence in national political conflicts during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Far from the capital city of Rio de Janeiro, northern economic and political elites, with some exceptions, were marginalized in national politics. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this sense of political exclusion constituted the basis of regional political grievances against the imperial government, which, according to northern politicians, favored southern planters.¹¹ This sense of marginalization was exacerbated with the overthrow of the monarchy and establishment of the republic in 1889. Reapportionment according to the 1890 census led to the further decline of northeastern political influence at the federal level.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, increasingly divergent regional economies were contributing to the sense that the North was a land apart from the rest of Brazil. As Barbara Weinstein and others have argued, regional identities reflect, in part, the unevenness of economic development.¹² During the colonial period and the nineteenth century, the North's most important economic activity was sugar production, especially in coastal areas, while cattle ranching dominated in the interior. Despite attempts to diversify and modernize the economy by promoting the cultivation of cotton and other export

crops, encouraging industrial manufacturing through tax breaks, modernizing sugar production, and transitioning from slavery to wage labor, northerners witnessed few fundamental changes in the economy in the nineteenth century. What did change, however, was the economy of southern Brazil. As had been the case since the early colonial period, economic development remained regional in nature, and the rapid expansion of coffee production and ancillary economic activity in southern provinces beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century led to considerable economic disparities between North and South. The reinvestment of coffee profits in industrial manufacturing in São Paulo beginning in the late nineteenth century exacerbated this trend. Northern sugar producers were well aware of these disparities, and when the imperial government convened a “national” congress in 1878 to discuss problems facing agricultural producers, representatives from northern provinces were not invited. Although sugar producers and government representatives from Pernambuco, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Alagoas, and Sergipe would hold their own congress to discuss the same issues, they increasingly believed that the imperial government favored the economic interests of southern coffee planters.¹³ In the 1880s and 1890s, continuing legislative debates in the Senado and Câmara over slavery, abolition, immigration, labor policy, agricultural credit, the modernization of sugar production, transportation, and taxation contributed to northern planters’ and politicians’ sense that the imperial and federal governments ignored their concerns. Political and economic elites’ sense of disenfranchisement from the political process does not alone constitute a sense of regional identity, however. Still, it is clear that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century the North constituted a region that could be differentiated from the South based on both its distinct economy and the way in which regional economic issues were represented and accommodated in Rio de Janeiro.

An additional source of northeastern distinctiveness was the region’s climate and geography. With the founding of the imperial Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro in 1838 and of provincial geographic institutes (including the Instituto Archeológico e Geográfico Pernambucano in 1862), the Brazilian government emphasized cartography and geography as essential tools in promoting the demographic and economic development of the nation. Ranging from the humid tropical coast to the arid interior highlands, the North’s geography and climate gave rise to distinct subregional economies based on sugar, cacao, cotton, and cattle. For geographers and politicians, the natural landscape offered possibilities limited only by the will to develop it. From the late nineteenth century, geographic congresses, geographic and cartographic surveys of the region, and later, the founding of the Conselho



Map 1. Brazil, ca. 1930.

Nacional de Geografia and the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística and the publication of the *Revista Brasileira de Geografia* produced an extensive body of geographic information about the region.¹⁴ Although geographic studies were intended to aid in the development of mining and agriculture, many geographers also investigated the racial, physical, and psychological characteristics of the populations of the region. Geographic and climatic determinism gave rise to the notion that regional populations were unique, shaped by telluric and climatic forces as well as the vagaries of race and history. Equally important, geographers posited, were the periodic droughts that affected the region, especially in the interior. Perhaps more than any other single event, the so-called Great Drought of 1877 to 1879, which caused an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 deaths, shaped intellectual, public, and political understandings of the region.¹⁵

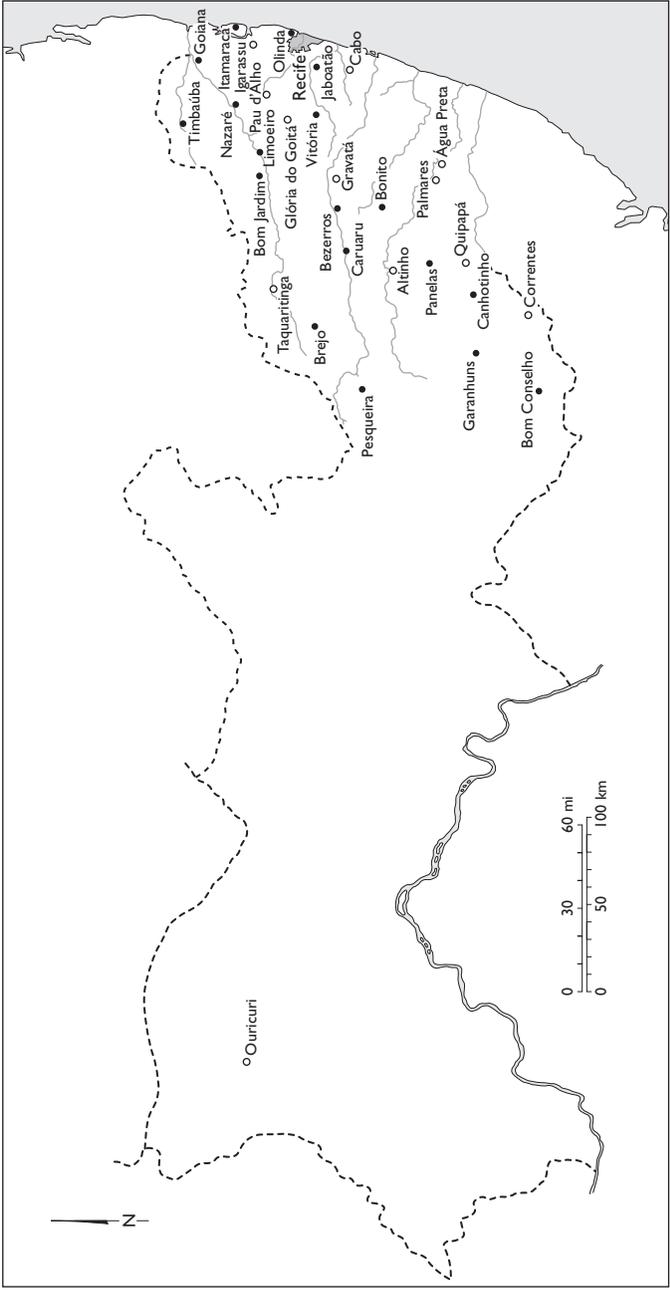
The term *Nordeste* (Northeast) was first employed by federal authorities to designate those states that were affected by drought.¹⁶ “*Nordeste*” was used interchangeably with “*Norte*” through the early 1920s, but by the mid-1920s, “*Nordeste*” was used almost exclusively, even though there was still disagreement about which states made up the region. In 1936, federal law identified the so-called *polígono das secas* (drought polygon), which ultimately included much of the states of Piauí, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Alagoas, Sergipe, and Bahia, as well as a small section of Minas Gerais.¹⁷ In 1938, the Ministério da Agricultura provided a more limited definition of the Northeast, including only the states of Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, and Alagoas. In 1942, the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), in a report entitled “The Regional Division of Brazil,” defined the Northeast as these same five states.¹⁸ The official geographic definition of the region changed frequently, and the current IBGE definition of the Northeast includes nine states: Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Maranhão, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte, and Sergipe.

Official geographic and political divisions, while important administratively and politically, were only one way in which the region was defined, however. Beginning with the establishment of sugar production in the early colonial period and continuing with the extension of Portuguese colonization into the interior, the region became known for its unique social and cultural traditions. The Dutch occupation of Bahia and Pernambuco in the first half of the seventeenth century produced the notion, especially in Pernambuco, that the region had been positively influenced in terms of culture, urban architecture, and social and racial composition of the population, by a northern European nation. Sugar production exacted a terrible toll, however, on the Indians and Africans who were forced to labor in the fields and mills. The Indian presence in the region was considerable through the early seventeenth century, and several Indian *aldeias* (villages) survived in coastal areas through the end of the nineteenth century. After independence, Indians figured prominently in constructions of national and regional identity as Brazilian intellectuals and social critics wrote Indians into foundational narratives of the nation and the region.¹⁹ In the twentieth century, the resilient *sertanejo*, the inhabitant of the arid *sertão* region of the northeastern interior, was constructed as the racial and cultural fusion of the European and Indian and became a popular figure in literary and political circles.²⁰

This understanding of northeastern regional identity was as much anti-African as it was pro-Indian. African slaves, free Africans, and their descendants have played an ambiguous role in constructions of northeastern regional



Map 2. Northeastern Brazil, defined by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística in 1942 as the states of Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, and Alagoas. Maranhão and Piauí were included after 1950, and Bahia and Sergipe after 1970.



Map 3. Pernambuco in 1925, showing each *município* with a population greater than thirty thousand. Based on “Estado de Pernambuco,” *Revista de Pernambuco* 2:9 (1925).

identity despite receiving considerable attention from Gilberto Freyre and other intellectuals. Constituting a majority of the population, especially in coastal sugar-growing areas, Afro-Brazilians nevertheless occupied a subservient role in northeastern society even after the abolition of slavery. While a few intellectuals of the period, including Sílvio Romero, questioned the widely accepted notion that Afro-Brazilians were inherently inferior, nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century understandings of northeastern regional identity tended to ignore, deemphasize, or denigrate *nordestinos*' African heritage. By the 1920s, Brazilian intellectuals showed a greater interest in this aspect of northeastern regional identity. Gilberto Freyre's reimagining of northeastern and national identity was predicated on the intellectual and cultural rehabilitation of mixed-race Brazilians, and in the late 1920s and 1930s, Freyre and other intellectuals, including Arthur Ramos and Mário de Andrade, again advanced the notion that Afro-Brazilians and *nordestinos* were not inherently inferior to Brazilians of European origin. Some northeastern intellectuals, including modernist José Américo de Almeida, argued that coastal populations, due to the historical presence of African slaves, were biologically and socially inferior to interior populations, positing a fundamental division between the peoples and culture of the interior and the coast.²¹

Political and intellectual conservatives, both in the Northeast and nationally, rejected Freyre's position on race and continued to argue that Afro-Brazilians were inherently inferior, that they possessed physical and psychological qualities that corresponded to the demands of agricultural labor, and, perhaps most significantly, that race-based social and political movements had no place in Brazilian society and politics. Despite elite attempts at suppression, these popular social and political movements influenced understandings of northeastern regional identity. In these uprisings, Indians and slaves rose up against landowners; rural workers and sharecroppers attacked landowners and government offices, laborers organized and went on strike; and communists revolted, forcing northeastern ruling elites to confront the economic and political demands of the region's poor and working classes. Although ruling elites used force to put down rebellions, they also understood the necessity of addressing social and economic conditions in order to avoid future conflicts. Intellectual and elite constructions of northeastern regional identity did not directly reference these violent episodes, and the ideal *nordestino* was understood to be a docile, hardworking agriculturalist, not a runaway slave, rebel, bandit, or unionized worker who challenged the social and political status quo. Concern about popular rebellions was implicit in this idealized characterization, however, and regional elites understood the immediacy of the threats to their dominance.

These, then, are the core aspects of northeastern regional identity. More than an expression of the region's unique geography, climate, culture, and racial history, northeastern regional identity, personified in the *nordestino*, represents the broader social, economic, and political history of the region in which the poor and working classes were subjected to the demands of an elite class that sought to structure northeastern society according to its economic and political interests. The *nordestino* is thus both a social and a political construction, reflecting the objectives of the northeastern ruling classes, the popular and working class responses to the challenges of planter rule, and the changing economic, political, and symbolic position of the region within the nation.

There is a rich and varied historiography on the social, economic, and political development of northeastern Brazil between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Including economic histories of sugar and cotton production, social histories of slavery, banditry, millenarianism, and urban areas, as well as political histories of patronage networks and party politics, this historiography has placed the region firmly within broader historical narratives of nation building, state building, and social and economic development while highlighting the ways in which the region's historical development differed from that of other regions and nations.²² Historians and literary scholars have examined the intellectual, artistic, and literary aspects of northeastern regional identity, especially the ways in which the northeastern modernist movement of the 1920s gave rise to a new cultural understanding of northeastern regional identity.²³ In his *A invenção do nordeste e outras artes*, Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. focuses on the ways in which early-twentieth-century northeastern and national intellectuals, literary critics, novelists, poets, painters, sculptors, filmmakers, and musicians created an understanding of the region as simultaneously a "space of longing for times of glory" and a "region of misery and social injustice, the *locus* of the reaction to the revolutionary transformation of society."²⁴ The idea of the Northeast thus reflected broader political debates about the social and economic development of the region and the relationship between the region and the nation as a whole. Albuquerque's work focuses almost exclusively on intellectual, literary, and artistic understandings of northeastern regional identity. "The Northeast," he argues, "was created basically by a series of academic and artistic discourses."²⁵

While literary and artistic constructions of northeastern identity succeeded in creating a set of literary narratives and cultural symbols that inspired continued reimaginations of the region, the idea of the Northeast and northeastern regional identity was also constructed in other, equally important, ways. Gerald

Greenfield and others have argued that a sense of northeastern regional identity arose first with elite understandings of the causes and effects of the region's Great Drought of 1877–1879.²⁶ Politicians, civil servants, urban professionals, scientists, and physicians participated in the process of creating a northeastern regional identity in order to advance their respective professional and political objectives and to improve social and economic conditions in the region. These groups exerted a profound influence on the economy, the legal environment, government, social services, education, medicine, and scientific research and ultimately shaped political, intellectual, and cultural understandings of the region and its peoples. The influence of these elite groups in the early twentieth century, a period of rapid social and economic transformations and changing expectations regarding the social and economic responsibilities of the state, has been well documented. Unfortunately, because of the region's economic position within the nation and its severe social and economic problems, academic assessments of the region have tended to conclude that the region's ruling elites, civil servants, and urban professionals have failed to improve social, economic, and political conditions in the region. An examination of social and labor legislation, social welfare programs, government responses to popular protests and rebellions, and the intellectual production and careers of academics and urban professionals, however, reveals that these groups took an active interest in improving social and economic conditions in the region and in shaping popular and elite perceptions of the region and its peoples.

Recent scholarship on the origins, development, and expansion of the nation-state in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin America has examined the ways in which changing understandings of the nation and citizenship are constituted through race, gender, and class, and advance the social, economic, and political objectives of the ruling classes. Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent's *Everyday Forms of State Formation* has led historians to pay attention to the ways in which conceptions of the nation-state and citizenship reflect a continuous, and often contentious, dialogue between elite and popular understandings of race, citizenship, and national identity.²⁷ Interest in national identities has led historians to reexamine the origins and development of subnational regional identities and their relationship with national identities.²⁸ The continuing political, social, and cultural significance of regional identities in the era of the nation-state suggests that there is a fundamental relationship between regional and national identities. On one level, regional identities reflect continuing conflict over national identity and the sovereignty of the nation-state.²⁹

Academic studies of Brazilian regionalism include a series published in the 1970s that focused on the economic and political dimensions of regionalism and state political machines' projection of political power at the federal level.³⁰ As Barbara Weinstein has pointed out, these studies defined "region" according to geopolitical borders, in this case state borders, and, with the exception of Robert Levine's study of Pernambuco, none of the studies considered the development of truly regional, or interstate, alliances.³¹ At the same time, these studies focused almost exclusively on politics, defining regionalism as "political behavior that accepts the existence of a larger nation but that seeks economic favoritism and political patronage from the larger political unit."³² Accordingly, the inability of less powerful states such as Pernambuco to influence national politics was interpreted as failure due to a lack of political coherence.³³ This interpretation did not take social and cultural aspects of regionalism into account.³⁴ More recent examinations of regionalism within Brazil have done precisely this. Barbara Weinstein's and James Woodard's studies of São Paulo regionalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including such topics as the intellectual and cultural origins of *paulista* regional identity and the political use of this identity as a justification for the São Paulo separatist revolt of 1932, emphasize the cultural, racial, and discursive aspects of regional identities.³⁵ Such an approach recognizes that regional identities represent much more than the region's relative economic and political power within the nation.

While regional identities represent distinct social, economic, and political practices, they both shape and provide content to understandings of the nation-state, citizenship, and national identity. Celia Applegate has argued that regional identities are either resistant, "taking shape around a claim to nationhood," or accommodating, "emphasizing a distinctiveness that can reinforce national markers of difference."³⁶ Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, northeastern regional identity has been both resistant and accommodating. In the nineteenth century, Pernambucan-led separatist republican movements formed the basis of a resistant regional identity, while in the twentieth century, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, northeastern regional identity served to reinforce conceptions of Brazilian national identity, especially with regard to race and culture. Scholarship on the origins of the nation-state and national identity in Brazil has focused on the arrival of the Portuguese court in Brazil, independence, nineteenth-century state-building efforts, the transitions from slavery to wage labor and monarchy to republic, as well as the ways in which the social, economic, and political crises of the 1920s and 1930s led to new understandings of the relationship between the individual, the state

and society, and the establishment of the nationalist and corporatist Vargas regime. This literature seldom addressed areas outside Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

Northeastern regional identity became an essential element of Brazilian national identity because it came to represent a social, racial, and political “other.” As Thomas Skidmore and others have cogently argued, however, understandings of Brazilian national identity changed considerably in the 1930s as politicians and intellectuals embraced Afro-Brazilians as the archetype of Brazilian national identity.³⁷ With this shift, certain aspects of northeastern regional identity, especially culture in the form of folklore, music, and traditional religious practices, were identified as authentically Brazilian, and social and political conservatives exalted the *nordestino* as the quintessential hard-working Brazilian. During the populist Second Republic (1945–1964), the view of northeastern regional identity emphasizing regional culture and tradition would be replaced by economic-based assessments of the region and its peoples, which were less favorable. By the 1960s, *nordestinos* and the Northeast would become powerful symbols of the failures of developmentalism and the dangers of more radical approaches to social and economic development. Changing understandings of northeastern regional identity have thus reflected broader historical trends in Brazil and Latin America, and it is clear that the Northeast, far from being a region apart within the nation, is intimately linked—materially, politically, and symbolically—to the Brazilian nation as a whole.

Scholarship on race in Brazil and Latin America is also of critical importance with regard to northeastern regional identity. Much of the literature on race in twentieth-century Brazil has focused on the concept of racial democracy, the idea that Brazil is a nation in which individuals of different racial identities compete equally in a society largely free from racial prejudice and discrimination. Recent studies have focused not on whether the concept of racial democracy accurately describes Brazil (an approach that many scholars have rejected since the 1950s) but rather on the ways in which racial democracy has been appropriated by Brazilians as a racial ideal.³⁸ The ways in which intellectual and cultural understandings of race shaped understandings of the populations of northeastern Brazil from the middle of the nineteenth century through the 1930s are of particular importance here. Thomas Skidmore’s work, in which he traces the relationship between understandings of race and national identity from the 1870s through the 1920s, is particularly relevant.³⁹ Since the publication of Skidmore’s *Black into White* in 1974, historians of Brazil have acknowledged the ways in which ideas about race and nation were intertwined in the public and political imagination. There has been little work,

however, on the origins and development of racial ideas in northeastern Brazil and the ways in which regional understandings of race differed from national and international racial ideas and theories.⁴⁰ Often, in both original scholarship and in critical approaches to Gilberto Freyre's work, northeastern understandings of race are characterized as, at best, out of step with the mainstream beliefs and, at worst, as antiquated and racist, characteristic, so the argument goes, of an older, more traditional generation of intellectuals and social critics. Thus, I examine the ways in which racial ideas in northeastern Brazil differed from mainstream ideas and how these unique regional understandings of race shaped the development of northeastern regional identity. At the same time, I show how northeastern ruling elites, civil servants, and urban professionals put these ideas into practice in governing the region and its peoples.

The ways in which the *nordestino* became a racial category in and of itself is another important topic. Scholarship on understandings of race in Brazil has revealed that individual and collective racial identities are socially and politically constructed and are historically specific, reflecting the changing racial demographics of the nation as well as the myriad social, cultural, and political upheavals that defined the First Republic and the Vargas era.⁴¹ Racial classification schemes have changed considerably since the abolition of slavery. In the late nineteenth century, Brazilian intellectuals and politicians regularly employed a tripartite division of the black-white racial continuum to describe Brazilian populations, employing the terms *branco* (white), *negro* or *preto* (black), and *pardo* or *mulato* (brown). When necessary, they also used the category *índio* (Indian) to describe indigenous populations.⁴² These categories were sufficiently flexible as to allow a degree of racial self-identification and limited mobility within the confines of Brazil's social and economic hierarchies.⁴³ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, foreign immigration forced a partial reconceptualization of racial categories to account for Asian, Jewish, and Middle Eastern immigrants who did not easily fit into standard racial classifications.⁴⁴ By the 1930s, the *nordestino* constituted a new racial category, one that simultaneously reinforced the dominant black-white racial continuum and embodied the new social and political ideal of racial mixing that undergirded new formulations of Brazilian national identity.⁴⁵

While *nordestinos* were clearly nonwhite, the continuing social and cultural stigma associated with blackness suggested that personifications of regional and national identity, including the *nordestino*, should be nonblack. Despite being nonwhite, however, the *nordestino* became a constituent element of Brazilian national identity, a category that was at once both racialized and

devoid of racial content. This changing position of the *nordestino* in Brazil's multiple racial taxonomies reflected the changing political ideals of the 1920s and 1930s. The *nordestino* emerged as a distinct regional and racial type in the 1920s, a period of social and political reforms designed to improve social and economic conditions in the Northeast. The *nordestino* became a national symbol during Getúlio Vargas's governments of the 1930s and 1940s, a period that saw the creation and expansion of social welfare programs, the implementation of nationalist economic development projects, and a fundamental transformation of the relationship between state and citizen. As a result of the suspension of individual political rights and party politics during Vargas's authoritarian Estado Novo, *nordestinos*, and indeed all Brazilians, were understood to be apolitical. The *nordestino* was thus stripped of both political and racial characteristics in order to conform to the nationalist corporatist ideals of Vargas's Estado Novo. Vargas applied the same strategy to all social, economic, and political interest groups, but at the time the *nordestino* was understood to be a "natural" category, one that reflected the racial, cultural, geographic, and climatic peculiarities of the region. In reality, northeastern regional identity reflected and advanced the political objectives of Brazilian elites as well as complex local and regional understandings of race and identity that are too often simplified for the sake of a cohesive national narrative.

Another important aspect of this study is the production and use of knowledge, an approach that owes much to cultural and intellectual history. Cultural theory, including the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and others, has exerted a profound influence in Latin American and Brazilian historical writing since the 1970s. The rise and dominance of military governments throughout Latin America from the 1960s through the 1980s led scholars to become increasingly focused on the expansion of the state and the surveillance and management of citizens as the objects of state power. In this context, Michel Foucault's notion of biopower and Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony became useful tools to historians, sociologists, and political scientists studying Latin America.⁴⁶ Since the return of democracy to Latin America in the 1980s, theorists and historians alike have come to recognize the ways in which popular understandings of identity, citizenship, and politics have both directly and indirectly challenged elites' attempts to impose their views on society.⁴⁷

This work is not, however, intellectual history or cultural theory as such but rather focuses on the ways in which ideas about northeastern regional identity and *nordestinos* were put into practice in the process of state building and in the management of civil society. State-generated understandings of northeastern regional identity were especially important because *nordestinos* were

defined primarily in terms of supposedly “objective” and “scientific” characteristics and their status as objects of state-sponsored development projects. It was not until the 1940s and 1950s that cultural definitions of the Northeast would become more important politically, when state-sponsored constructions of northeastern regional identity had become firmly established. The approach to northeastern regional identity here focuses on scientific and medical ideas and practices. Since the 1970s, scholarship on the history of science and medicine in Latin America and elsewhere has explored how scientific and medical ideas and practices are socially and culturally constructed and serve to advance the social and political objectives of modernizing elites.⁴⁸ Rather than show how northeastern scientists, physicians, public health officials, and their political interlocutors deviated from national and transnational scientific and medical paradigms, this work examines the way in which local and regional scientific and medical knowledge gave rise to uniquely regional understandings of nature, society, and the body.⁴⁹

Another issue this book addresses is the fact that the historical processes that produced northeastern regional identity and the *nordestino* constitute an example of modernity. For both theorists and historians, the terms *modern*, *modernity*, *modernism*, and *modernization* are fraught with ambiguity.⁵⁰ Here modernity refers neither to cultural and aesthetic modernism nor to economic modernization but rather to the idea of modernity as a historical moment defined by a sharp rupture with a traditional, or premodern, past. Sociologists further define modernity as a historical period characterized by the predominance of a monetarized capitalistic economy and secular forms of political power and authority, as well as by the decline of traditional social relationships and a religious worldview.⁵¹ The emergence of modernity in the more socially and economically developed centers of Brazil is well documented, but to argue that this process took place in a region of Brazil generally considered to be backward or underdeveloped is counterintuitive. As Néstor García Canclini and others have shown, however, in Latin America, modernity coexists with traditional, premodern institutions, social relationships, and systems of knowledge. The same can be said of northeastern Brazil.⁵² A distinction must be made, however, between process and outcome. Although northeastern regional identity and the *nordestino* were ideas that developed concordantly with Brazilian modernity, in terms of Brazilian national identity, especially from the perspective of southern Brazil, the Northeast and its peoples remain symbols of traditional, premodern Brazil. What is significant, however, is that regional reformers and elites attempted to create a modern state that possessed the capacity to remake northeastern society and *nordestinos*.⁵³ That the

Northeast occupied an increasingly marginal position within the nation does not mean that the northeastern ruling classes did not attempt to improve social and economic conditions in the region and to redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens. Thus, northeastern Brazil was not unlike other regions in Latin America and the developing world where ruling elites attempted to gain and to maintain power by imposing on the public their own unique visions of modernity.

The focal point of this study of northeastern regional identity is the state of Pernambuco. Since the colonial period, Pernambuco had exercised considerable economic and political power over the neighboring provinces of Alagoas, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, and Ceará, with its economic influence extending to the provinces of Piauí and Maranhão.⁵⁴ In the nineteenth century, Pernambuco emerged as the leading intellectual and cultural center within the region. Recife's publishing industry rapidly expanded, disseminating newspapers and books throughout the northeastern region, and the state's law school, the Faculdade de Direito, produced lawyers, judges, civil servants, and politicians who pursued careers in the region and throughout the Empire of Brazil.⁵⁵ Pernambucan politicians exercised considerable influence in the national legislature and government throughout the nineteenth century and during the First Republic.

There were, however, limits to this influence. The province of Bahia exerted economic and political influence over a wide area within the region, including the São Francisco river valley and the neighboring province of Sergipe. Bahia possessed a sugar economy rivaling that of Pernambuco, and Bahian planters successfully diversified agricultural production to include the cultivation of cacao and cotton. Salvador, Bahia's largest city and capital, served as the colonial capital from 1549 to 1763, and Bahian politicians were equally, if not more, influential in national politics than their Pernambucan counterparts. Despite their common social and economic history, Pernambuco and Bahia did not often cooperate politically; their respective political leaders proved content to carve out and protect spheres of influence at both the provincial and federal levels. Pernambuco and Bahia also disputed authority over several São Francisco valley *municípios* that had been transferred to Bahian control in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁶

The ratification of the republic's constitution in 1891 and the ensuing decentralization of political power led the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul to dominate the new federalist system. Northeastern states lost congressional seats as a result of reapportionment and were excluded from the so-called *café com leite* (literally, coffee with milk) alliance, in which

the São Paulo and Minas Gerais republican machines controlled national elections. As they had during the nineteenth century, northeastern states competed rather than cooperated in their pursuit of federal largess. Northeastern politicians who challenged *paulista* and *mineiro* power were cowed and, if intransigent, removed from power by military force, as in the case of the 1911–1912 federal interventions in Ceará, Alagoas, Pernambuco, and Sergipe. Republican federalism also exacerbated state rivalries over territory and tax revenues.⁵⁷ States that had been subject to Pernambucan political and economic control during the empire period attempted to achieve a degree of economic and political autonomy. Most notable among these was Paraíba, which during the presidency of Epitácio Pessoa (1919–1922) attempted to make infrastructure and port improvements in order to decrease its economic dependence on Pernambuco.⁵⁸

While federalism renewed long-standing political and economic rivalries within the region, paradoxically, the region's political and economic decline vis-à-vis southern states produced new intellectual and political interest in the region's common characteristics. Intellectuals and politicians took an active interest in studying the geographic, social, and cultural aspects of what they believed to be a distinct northeastern regional identity.⁵⁹ These multiple perspectives reflected not only the diversity within the region but also alternatives to Pernambucan dominance.

I take the position that by the 1920s, Pernambucan intellectuals and politicians, including Gilberto Freyre and Agamemnon Magalhães, were the leading intellectual voices of the region. The First Regionalist Congress of the Northeast (1926) marked the beginning of Gilberto Freyre's ascension to such a position, despite the fact that the Regionalist Congress was little known outside Recife and was criticized as a reactionary distortion of Brazilian modernism, which had inspired the original movement. After Freyre returned to Brazil from political exile in Europe and the United States and published *Casa-grande & senzala* in 1933, he actively promoted the idea that the colonial-era Pernambucan sugar society was the sine qua non of Brazilian national identity. This idea resonated with Brazilian political and intellectual elites, who were in the process of redefining Brazilian national identity in the face of a global economic crisis, declining foreign immigration, the São Paulo separatist movement, and the centralization of political power under Getúlio Vargas. While Freyre's regionalism found a national audience, his reception was less favorable within Pernambuco. Agamemnon Magalhães, perhaps the most conservative federal *interventor* (federally appointed state governor) to hold power during the Estado Novo, rejected Freyre's views on race and regional identity during his administration.

Racial politics did not unfold in the same way in every state in the region, however. In Bahia, *interventor* Juracy Magalhães (1905–2001) pursued policies that, according to Kim Butler, allowed a degree of protection for Afro-Brazilian culture and religion.⁶⁰ In Pernambuco, by contrast, the Magalhães administration attempted to eradicate the practice of Afro-Brazilian religion. It promoted a version of northeastern regional identity in which *nordestinos* were understood to be docile agricultural workers devoid of African racial characteristics. During the Estado Novo, the Magalhães administration's idealized *nordestino*, rather than Pernambucan or Bahian Afro-Brazilians, would become the personification of northeastern regional identity. This debate about northeastern regional identity reflected political and intellectual conflicts that were taking place primarily within Pernambuco. Although Pernambucan conservatives rejected Freyre's positions on race and northeastern regional identity, after Vargas was removed from power in 1945, Brazilians would embrace the ideal of racial democracy and Freyre would be regarded as the intellectual authority on Brazilian race relations. The big houses and slave quarters of Pernambucan sugar plantations, as imagined by Freyre, served as the crucible of the myth of racial democracy. Within the region, other social and racial identities would remain important, most significantly Bahian Afro-Brazilian identity and the distinct traditional culture of the arid northeastern interior. However, it was Gilberto Freyre's understanding of northeastern regional identity in Pernambuco that would dominate debates about the region and its peoples in the twentieth century.