

Chapter I

Slavery and capitalist sociability: an essay on social inertia

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CARDOSO, A. Slavery and capitalist sociability: an essay on social inertia. In: *Work in Brazil: essays in historical and economic sociology* [online]. Rio de Janeiro: EDUERJ, 2016, pp. 19-48. Sociedade e política collection. ISBN: 978-85-7511-455-1. Available from: doi: [10.7476/9788575114551](https://doi.org/10.7476/9788575114551). Also available in ePUB from: <http://books.scielo.org/id/tskp8/epub/cardoso-9788575114551.epub>.



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CHAPTER I
SLAVERY AND CAPITALIST SOCIABILITY:
AN ESSAY ON SOCIAL INERTIA¹

Over the last two decades the social history of labour has experienced a seachange in Brazil with the routinization of rigorous empirical investigation by stable research groups in diverse academic institutions. This work has led to the discovery of new sources, innovative exploration of old documents, the proliferation of new hypotheses and the emergence of new categories of explanation. The present essay on Brazilian social inertia makes use of this new historiography in order to formulate a number of sociological hypotheses on the pattern of incorporation of workers in the early stages of capitalism in Brazil. I suggest that slavery left profound marks on the ensuing social imagination and practices, functioning as a kind of ballast that subsequent generations found extremely difficult to jettison. Around slavery were constructed an ethics of demeaning labour, a pejorative image of the people or the national workforce, the moral indifference of the elites to the needs of the majority and a highly rigid social hierarchy polarized by enormous inequalities. Combined, these legacies shaped the environment in which free labour developed at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th, determining the wider parameters of social

¹ Translated by David Allan Rodgers from *Novos Estudos Cebrap*, No. 80, p. 71-88, Mar. 2007, for the *Scielo Social Sciences* (http://socialsciences.scielo.org/scielo.php?pid=S0101-33002008000100003&script=sci_arttext).

reproduction. Here I look to reconstitute the multidimensional nature of the legacy of slavery on the capitalist sociability as the first step in a wider argument concerning the conditions of the reproduction of social inequality in Brazil².

The slow transition to free labour

One salient aspect of the contemporary revision of historiography is the recognition of slavery as a specific moment in the history of labour in the country³. For reasons that are not immediately obvious, but which are linked more to disciplinary dynamics than the world order, the studies of slavery have formed part of the genealogy of a branch of social investigation that could be denominated ‘race relations’, while investigation of the early constitution of the work society in Brazil has traditionally taken European immigration as its foundational moment. This approach was not inevitable given that an eminent thinker like Florestan Fernandes was initially interested in the fate of the former slaves. For him, this ‘marginal’ (or ‘maladjusted’) figure expressed the ills endemic to the construction of Brazil’s competitive social order. Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Octávio Ianni, disciples of Fernandes, also explored the topic from the same angle. In historiography it is worth recalling the pioneering work of Emilia Viotti da Costa and the studies of Brazilianists such as A. J. R. Russell-Wood, Stuart Schwartz,

² The chapter must be read as an introduction to the wider argument, the developments of which was published in Cardoso (2010). The ideas represented here were gestated during two courses I gave at IUPERJ in 2006 and 2007 on the transition to free labour and class formation in Brazil. My sincere thanks to the masters and doctoral students who honoured me with their dedication and debates. Naturally they are exempted from any mistakes that may still remain.

³ Cf. Negro and Gomes (2006). For a wide-ranging synthesis of this new historiography, see Fragoso (2000), whose central theses are radicalized in Fragoso and Florentino (2001).

Robert Conrad, Peter Eisenberg and Herbert Klein, to cite just some of those who examined the social fate of ex-slaves under the slavery regime.

The reason for this disciplinary division perhaps resides in a certain matrix of ideas promoted from the 1950s onwards in which it was presumed that modern Brazilian capitalism had first emerged in São Paulo, meaning it would be *sufficient* to search there for its socioeconomic roots. This idea persisted even after Celso Furtado had shown, in the 1950s still, that while the capital freed by coffee production lay at the origin of the industrial accumulation of São Paulo (and, by extension, Brazil), capitalism in the country was unequal but integrated, such that the fate of the Northeast or Amazonia was not disconnected from the São Paulo dynamic. As a result, the vast literature on the consolidation of capitalism and the labour market in Brazil had an undeniable ‘São-Paulocentric’ flavour.

The concentration of research funds in the latter state was a necessary condition for this development, but not a sufficient one. Just as important was the notion of modernity that informed the elaboration of economic and social research programs not only at the University of São Paulo (USP) but also the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB), the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV). This notion dictated that any country wishing to modernize had to be capitalist, industrial and urban, marking its position in the community of nations, moreover, from a self-determined position, a feat only possible if it managed to create the internal conditions for economic development. Here we can identify at least part of the reason why until very recently the transition to free labour has been interpreted in conjunction with overseas immigration, insisting on a sharp break between the slave-based economy of the past and the new competitive environment. It is as though the slavocratic regime had been

buried with abolition without passing on to the future any of its general dynamic (and inertia). Qualifying and complicating this interpretation, the more recent literature enables us to formulate strong hypotheses that emphasize, along with the evident ruptures, deep continuities with the earlier slavery system in the process of building capitalism in Brazil⁴.

The first hypothesis is that the São Paulo model of transition to free labour was by no means typical or representative of what happened in the rest of the country. In many ways, São Paulo was the exception, since it was only there that immigration was presented (and implemented) as the sole possible solution for what contemporaries perceived as the ‘workforce problem’⁵. In states like Minas Gerais, Rio Grande do Sul, Bahia, Pernambuco, Ceará or Maranhão, production work (in farming or mining, in the pampas or in the towns) was gradually taken over by former slaves and their descendants, as well as free Brazilians. Previously seen as merely peripheral agents in the slavery system, the social status of the latter has been entirely revised by new research. In Pernambuco, for example, at the start of the 1870s when immigration had already won over the minds of the São Paulo elite, most rural work was undertaken by free men whose smallholdings had been expropriated from the end of the 18th century onwards, as Palácios (1996: pp. 127-28) demonstrates. According to the author, this led analysts

⁴ The historiographic revision of the transition to free labour does not apply to the Brazilian case only. On the Argentine case and on the Americas in general, see, respectively, Johnson (1997); and Turner (1995). Adopting a somewhat radical approach, Marcel van der Linden (2005) proposes a complete restatement of the history of the working class in the world.

⁵ This question, analysed in the seminal book of Celso Furtado, *Formação econômica do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundo de Cultura, 1959), was evidently a burning issue for São Paulo’s coffee-growing elites, as shown by Dean (1977). The topic was re-examined in an excellent work by Azevedo (1987), especially chapters II and III. In relation to the Brazilian northeast, see Andrade (1980 [1963], pp. 88-93).

of the transition to free labour to believe that the process had been ‘smooth’ and ‘painless’ in Pernambuco, when in fact the (violent) expropriation of the peasantry had taken place decades earlier, freeing the workforce needed by sugar plantations from the 1850s onwards, a period during which the exodus of slaves to the São Paulo coffee industry intensified. This phenomenon occurred throughout the Northeast⁶, as well as Minas Gerais and the South: when foreign immigration to São Paulo began, captive labour represented just a small minority. These events suggest that there was not just one single transition to free labour (or, as Fragoso, 2000 suggests, to ‘non-slave’ labour, since in the 18th and 19th centuries most free men were subject to various forms of forced labour), but various transitions at distinct historical moments across different regions of the country.

Regional differences in the pace of transition reflect another important aspect of the slavocratic system: the existence of distinct forms of slavery. Today we have a much clearer understanding of the different regimes for subjugating captives employed in the sugar plantations of Pernambuco or Bahia, the southern Brazilian pampas, the gold and diamond mines of Minas Gerais, the coffee plantations of the Paraíba Valley, the small towns in the interior of São Paulo state, or large cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In the case of sugar production, for example, occupational hierarchies distinguished slaves according to their adeptness in using machinery, their capacity to produce sugar to a particular standard of quality and so on, generating expectations of social mobility and emancipation that

⁶ ‘In the Northeast, abolition took place without major readjustments and the former slaves were incorporated into the different sectors of the region’s rural workforce. Their fate was subsequently conditioned by the region’s economic and social immobility’. (Hasenbalg, 2005 [1979]: p. 164). Hasenbalg also draws attention to the exceptional nature of the São Paulo case, which extensively incorporated the black population into the expanding capitalist labour market (cf. Hasenbalg, 1992).

simply did not exist in the sugarcane and cotton fields (Eisenberg 1974 and 1989).

In the Northeast, small slave owners tended to form less predatory relationships with their workforces, bought at relatively high prices for the economic resources of the majority. They allowed slaves to form families and often released captives in their wills. Furthermore the low capitalization of most of the North-eastern properties meant that slavery coexisted with free (or non-slave) labour at moments of peak demand, such as the sugarcane harvesting period (Andrade, 1980). Smallholders who were more or less independent of the big estate owners were called upon seasonally to work on the lands of the slave owners (Schwartz, 1992). This practice was less frequent in the wealthier regions or on the large sugar plantations where owners had the resources to purchase the slaves needed for the work.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro slaves had considerable freedom of movement since most of their owners lived from their work as street vendors, *palanquin* (sedan chair) carriers, or water and waste bearers for wealthy families, or indeed any kind of job compatible with their status as 'paid' or 'rented' slaves (Karasch, 2000; Chalhoub, 1990; Florentino, 2005), many of whom managed to buy their freedom eventually with their savings⁷. This situation contrasted profoundly with the slavery conditions found on coffee plantations in the Paraíba Valley, typified by long working days and very few chances of ever being freed. In addition, 19th century slavery was very different, especially from 1850 onwards when the price of slaves rose steeply and the predatory use of slaves typical to earlier centuries became economically unviable.

⁷ Debret's estimates for Rio de Janeiro suggest that in fifteen years a 'rented slave,' *escravo de ganho*, would have earned enough to purchase his or her freedom (cf. Fragoso, 2000; Karash, 2000). On the case of 'rented slaves' in São Paulo city, in many ways similar to the situation in imperial Rio, see Dias (1995).

The identification of different slavery regimes has shown that colonial Brazil was not a homogenous territory dominated by monocrop plantations, nor was its social structure as simple as presumed by the literature produced at least until the start of the 1970s⁸. Slaves and landowners undoubtedly comprised the core social classes, but there was a series of other groups who also played an important role in sustaining the slavocratic system, including artisans and craftsmen from the urban guilds, traders, cattle drivers, livestock breeders, small food producers for the domestic market, slave traders, financiers, militiamen, builders, supervisors, small rural landowners producing for themselves, and so on. Moreover, large tracts of land planted with a single crop and employing hundreds of slaves was an *exception* rather than the rule, both during the colonial period and afterwards.

Indeed a census conducted in Bahia in 1788 recorded an average number of slaves per property varying between 4 and 11.7 across the different regions of the Bahian Recôncavo. In 1816-17 when the overall slave population corresponded to nearly 31% of the Brazilian population, the average across the Recôncavo as a whole was 7.2 slaves per proprietor. True, the richest 10% owned at least half of the total slaves, but even so the average number of slaves on these large properties was 34 people (Schwartz, 1995). Similar ratios were encountered on the large São Paulo farms in the first three decades of the 19th century: in 1804 just 1% of farm holdings had forty slaves or more and held 13% of the total slave population; in 1829 these figures had risen, but even so large properties accounted for just 3% of the total, holding 24% of the total number of slaves (Luna and Klein, 2003: p. 122). The general average was no higher than

⁸ The classic *Casa-grande & senzala*, by Gilberto Freyre, adopts this simplifying view of colonial Brazil's social structure. A systematic analysis that influenced generations of researchers was *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo*, by Caio Prado Júnior.

7 slaves per proprietor. The situation was no different during the same period in the towns of Minas Gerais, the Zona da Mata of Pernambuco or the interior of São Paulo state (Luna and Klein, 2003: p. 166)⁹. In some regions of Paraná slavery had already become relatively insignificant by the second half of the 18th century, and the properties producing subsistence crops were run by families that bore no similarities, for example, to the patriarchal Pernambucan families depicted by Gilberto Freyre¹⁰.

One important consequence of identifying distinct slavery regimes has been the observation that even as early as the 18th century slave labour coexisted with various forms of non-slave labour. This means that the transition to free (or non-slave) labour was extremely slow with a merely conventional landmark being established in 1850, the year the international traffic of African slaves was abolished. Free or freed people swelled in number over the centuries, obtaining forms of livelihood that increasingly lost the peripheral nature attributed to them by the literature until the mid-1980s¹¹.

At the same time, the mortality rates of Brazilian slaves were very high in comparison to those of the United States, for example, and here recent historiography corroborates the standard interpretation¹². Compiling data from numerous sources, Schwartz shows that in Brazil in the last quarter of the 19th century the life expectancy of slaves at birth was around 19 years (Schwartz, 1995: p. 303). The horror provoked by this figure in the contemporary reader is perhaps only dampened slightly by the knowledge that the life expectancy of a non-slave

⁹ See also Eisenberg (1974) and Moura (1998).

¹⁰ Cf. Machado (2006). The article resumes the hard-hitting criticism of the Freyrian model of patriarchy formulated in Corrêa (1994). The author reveals that in São José dos Pinhais, Paraná state, 58% of slave owners possessed just four captives or less.

¹¹ Cf., for example, Kowarick (1987) and Souza (2004 [1982]).

¹² For example, the interpretation found in Furtado (1959: chap. 21).

Brazilian was just 27 years in 1879. In the United States the life expectancy of slaves was 35.5 years around 1850, just 12% less than that of the population as a whole and much higher than that of the average Brazilian. Living conditions in the colony and for a considerable part of the 19th century were bad for everyone and much worse for slaves. This led Schwartz to conclude that the system was unsustainable without the transatlantic traffic and the continual replacement of the slave population, dying in their thousands each year.

While this is true – that is, while the Brazilian slavocratic system was indeed highly predatory in its treatment of the slave workforce – it is also the case that manumission formed a constitutive element of the different slavery regimes implemented in the country. In the sugar mills of Bahia or Pernambuco, the gold mines of Minas Gerais, the cattle ranches of the South, the city of Rio de Janeiro, the São Paulo coffee plantations, the cotton fields of the Northeast – in every part of Brazil women employed in the manor houses, illegitimate children of whites, or old, sick and incapacitated slaves acquired their freedom. Many captives eventually purchased their liberation with the savings from their work – ‘rented slaves’ (*escravos de ganho*) in Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais are the classic examples, but not the only ones¹³. In the town of Campinas, in 1829, 8.6 per cent of the owners of one to nine slaves were black or brown (Fragoso, 2000: p. 155), a statistic that indicates the very real possibilities not only of freedom but also of the social mobility of former captives and their descendants. Furthermore slaves are known to have ran away in large numbers, a phenomenon that generated considerable social tension throughout the 19th century.

¹³ On ‘rent slaves’ in Rio de Janeiro, see Karash (1987); Sampaio (2005). For the Minas Gerais case, see Russell- Wood (1999: chap. 7).

Thus the transition to free labour in Brazil was not necessarily a transition to *capitalist* or *wage* labour¹⁴. Over the centuries, captives and/or their descendants freed themselves from slavery and began to make up the growing population not directly involved with the slave economy and which became increasingly mixed. In 1850, when the Atlantic slave traffic was abolished, there were around two million slaves among a total population estimated at eight million people (Oliveira Vianna, 1920), more than 90% of whom lived in rural areas. The workforce had already ceased to be predominantly composed of slaves. The demographic census of 1872 recorded nearly ten million Brazilians, 1.5 million of whom were captives. How can we consider the 75% of Brazilians who were not or no longer slaves in 1850 peripheral or irrelevant to the system?¹⁵ This heterogenic group, the majority impoverished, scattered across the country and accustomed to migrating constantly in search of a livelihood¹⁶, did not participate directly in the dynamic sector of the economy (which by then had shifted to the São Paulo coffee plantations) *but they were part of the wider social dynamic*. Undoubtedly the means of survival available to this group were limited and extremely uncertain, very often gravitating around

¹⁴ The most important studies in this area, especially on the 18th century, are contained in Russell-Wood (1999). An excellent survey of the vast bibliography produced up until the 1980s is found in Schwartz (1992).

¹⁵ As Georges Duby (1987) points out, medieval European society produced its own contingent of ‘disgraced’ or ‘maladapted’ folk, but as small minorities, not as *the most likely fate* of non-slaves. Also see Castel (1998: pp. 119ff).

¹⁶ ‘The [Brazilian] population grew dizzily during the 18th and 19th centuries, the lands were appropriated by capital and the growing pauperization forced people to relocate continuously’ (Moura, 1998: p. 27). During the same period, southern Brazil, for instance, served as a magnet for the vast non-white free or freed population coming from other regions, who settled in rural areas to produce subsistence goods far from the Colony’s general economic dynamic (cf. Lima, 2002). Franco (1997) shows how nomadism was typical to the poor populations under the slavocrat system, ref a decisive aspect in terms of weakening social ties. See also Huggins (1985).

the large properties, meaning they could be considered captives of other mechanisms of subjugation, such as tenant farming and share farming. Yet even so their status was unequivocal, albeit defined in negative form: they were a group composed of non-slaves (Costa, 1999; Fragoso, 2000).

Consequences of the slow transition

This process of slowly constructing a free population – which, though not directly involved in the universe of socioeconomic relations defining the hegemonic structure of the Brazilian Colony and Empire, cannot be considered peripheral or superfluous – was decisive in terms of shaping post-slavery Brazil. I focus on five consequences with a direct relevance to what interests me here, namely, the social configuration that gave meaning to the class relations woven during the early constitution of the ‘competitive social order’ in Brazil.

Firstly, the São Paulo choice of immigrants as the solution to the ‘workforce problem’, in detriment to the national population, is a clear expression of the widespread inertia of the social structure in crisis. The São Paulo capitalists even took ‘primitive accumulation’¹⁷ to be a possible unfolding of the 1850 Land Law, which denied access to unoccupied lands to those unable to purchase them, thereby preventing former slaves and future immigrants from obtaining *legal* access to a plot¹⁸. However, the big question that drove on the Paulistas was whether the national population *could be expropriated*. For a long time this burgeoning population had lived in close interaction with Brazil’s slavocratic society in vulnerable (but stable) conditions of survival, only

¹⁷ As had occurred in Pernambuco in the 18th century, as shown by Palácios (1997).

¹⁸ In the felicitous expression of Martins (1979), the condition for the end of captivity for human beings was making the land captive.

indirectly associated with market production¹⁹. Perhaps it would be possible to force the ‘vagrants’ to sell their labour by law, under penalty of imprisonment or physical punishment. But how far would the definition of vagrancy need to be stretched for it to encompass all the workforce required by the expanding coffee production, including, for example, small leaseholders or the small land and livestock owners scattered across the vast province of São Paulo? This alternative would require a police force distributed throughout the territory, something which did not exist²⁰, or the hiring of large private militias, unthinkable at a time when all available capital was being channelled towards coffee production.

But this inertia was manifested at another level, a deeper one since it was the direct result of the effect of centuries of slavery on the imagination of the São Paulo elite. The debates in the province’s Legislative Assembly during the 1870s and afterwards, opposing those for and against foreign immigration, reveal the strong resistance from most of the governing elite to incorporating the national population in coffee production through a combination of financial incentives and the penalization and repression of vagrancy²¹. This resistance combined racial prejudice and disdain for Brazil’s own free workers, seen as lazy, unreliable and lacking a modern (bourgeois, accumulative) mentality: they were satisfied with very little, meaning they could not be subjected or disciplined by financial incentives. Moreover much of the national population was ‘coloured’ – and ‘men of

¹⁹ ‘How could men who planted enough to survive, who lived at their own devices and luck, be forced to submit, in exchange for scanty wages, to the arduous work demanded on the plantations? For them, working as wage-earners on the big estates meant assuming the condition of slaves’ (Costa, 1999: p. 311).

²⁰ Cf., among others, Huggins (1985); Holloway (1997); Vellasco (2004); Russel-Wood (1999).

²¹ Cf. the debates transcribed in Azevedo (1987, especially pp. 125ff). Also see Dean (1971: pp. 95-124).

colour,' so the São Paulo elite imagined, could only be subjugated through brute force and lashings. It seemed unthinkable to try to incorporate them into the labour market voluntarily. Here we can cite a revealing letter from the councillor Paula Souza, transcribed by Florestan Fernandes in his classic text on the integration of blacks into class society (Fernandes, 1978: pp. 31-33), where Paula Souza suggests to his correspondent that the freed black population worked in just the same way as they had when slaves, simply because 'they need to live and feed themselves and, therefore, to work, something that they quickly comprehend [after being freed]'. Presumed in this argument is the idea – clearly shared by the letter's recipient – that the only way to extract labour from this 'brute' was by force, given that he seemed genetically inclined towards indolence and vagrancy. The councillor, who had quickly learnt how the free labour market functioned, knew that hunger was the best antidote for any atavistic slothful tendencies²².

The prejudiced perception of the letter's recipient stemmed from the second consequence of the inertia of the previous system: the degradation of manual labour by slavery²³. For many centuries the rational, legal and theological justification for the captivity of African blacks was their indelible *impurity*, their barbarous, pagan and thus heretical customs, their inferiority, opacity and frightening alterity²⁴. In this aspect – and this only – the New World slave had the same status as the Greek or Roman

²² In the words of one foreign observer already in the 20th century: 'The negro is indolent; work inspires him with a profound horror; he will allow himself to be driven to it only by hunger or by thirst' (Denis, 1911, cited in Andrews 1988, p. 515).

²³ '[F]or the whites, work, especially manual work, was seen as the obligation of negroes, of slaves ∴. The idea of work carried with it a suggestion of degradation' (Costa 1982 [1966]: p. xi).

²⁴ On the process of transforming the opaque other into a monstrous 'alien' whose identity was thereby inaccessible, see Kearney (2003). Schwarcz (1987) provides an ingenious argument on the late 19th century press' construction of the 'Brazilian negro' as 'violent and degenerate' and later as 'strange' and 'foreign'.

slave in Hegel's famous formulation: he recognized his master as such because of the master's freedom and individuality (as a being-for-itself), but the master did not recognize the slave in the same way; since the slave was a thing, a natural entity, a being-in-itself and thus incapable of freedom (or self-consciousness), his identity (as an alterity) was inaccessible to the master. In the ancient world, however, enslavement derived from a fight in which one of the opponents (the winner) placed his liberty above all else, while the other (the loser) desired above all life and was therefore disposed to relinquish his own freedom. For Hegel, the subjection of the slave, though resulting from the imbalance of forces between the two opponents, had an undeniable aspect of consent insofar as the *desire* of the weaker rival for life (or self-preservation) persuaded him to submit to the other rival who wanted freedom, something he could ensure by being stronger (Hegel, 1992: pp. 126-34).

In modern slavery, the dialectic of slave-based domination cannot be read as anything more than a metaphor. Clearly the slave *defines* the master, in the sense that the latter would not be free without the existence of the former. Neither would his identity as a master be tangible (in the sense of being true) without his ownership of the other's body as a capacity to manipulate and transform nature, from which the master, for this very reason, distanced himself, interposing between himself and things (nature) the subjugated desire of the other, objectivized in turn. And consequently the master's freedom immediately becomes subordinated to the thingness of the slave without which his access to nature (in other words, his material survival) would be impossible. The master is condemned to – or is a slave to – his slave. But here the immanence of the process ceases for at least three reasons.

Firstly, in the New World the warfare that opposed the desires of the two agents did not place them in direct

confrontation. The slave was captured in a distant land by an intermediary with whom the future owner related through the mediation of the market. For the slave, the 'master' is an abstract entity who changes face as he is forced to leave his tribe, forced to embark on a slave boat where his life is constantly at risk, forced to accept his sale in public and to be sent to perhaps his final proprietor. 'Prefer life', in this case, is materialized in the slave's constant confrontation with the other who needs to affirm his physical superiority, his unequal resources, his desire to subject the slave not to appropriate the result of his manipulation of nature, but to appropriate the slave himself as merchandise. The slave trader is not Hegel's master except in a highly metaphoric sense, and the metaphor, in this case, provides no insight into the actual relation of subjection involved. The trader (or his future overseer) is nothing more than raw violence, immediately dehumanizing *both* agents, master and slave.

Secondly, the war of subjection of the slave does not take place once and for all, and nor does the slave 'consent' once and for all. The relation of subjugation must be reimposed every day by each new master, especially by the final recipient of the 'merchandise', who has to maintain whole groups of slaves. Here too the Hegelian dialectic of consensual subordination cannot be read as anything more than a metaphor. The modern slave does not *choose* life, since slavery is simply a death sentence, albeit one carried out over a longer period than those who end up on the gallows. As Schwartz demonstrated, a Bahian slave who survived ten years on a farm with forty slaves would see the entire cohort die out, not infrequently through suicide, and be replaced (Schwartz, 1995). The master needed the *collective slave*, but could do without the person *of each slave in particular*.

Here is revealed the tyrannical form of slavocratic domination in the New World and especially in Brazil where slavery was especially bloody and predatory: the master could take

any decision in relation to his slave's life according to his whim. If he believed that a slave posed a threat to him, he could order his feet to be cut off, blind him, have him lashed or kill him. The master/slave relation was not a pact: the master was not obliged to preserve the life of his individual slave; much the opposite, his freedom to take the life of the other he had objectivized defined his position of master, even more so since the flux of slaves on the market allowed him to replace the entire cohort as he wished. In Brazil slavery meant not just the negation of the slave as a person (his objectification) but his negation as a living being. Here we are talking about centuries of horror during which slavery, ruining the black bodies of the captives and corrupting the minds of their owners, needed to be re-imposed day after day with an ever renewed violence, continually annulling one of the poles of the Hegelian dialectic, which therefore needed to be constantly replaced. Long-term slavery ended up abstracting the slave's face, depersonalizing him and objectivizing him in a repeated and permanent form. In the end only his colour remained, definitively associated with hard and degrading labour.

Finally, the Hegelian metaphor fails to take into account that the search for black Africans as an enslaved workforce was already predicated on the idea that they were not human. In this sense, black people were not turned into things by slavery. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British and French already saw Africans as barbaric beings from the outset, slaves to necessity and thus objects, their individuality completely opaque. From there transforming the captives into merchandise was a simple step, one which de-territorialized them without interfering in their essence as things – but which could 'save their souls' by ripping them out of the pagan universe in which they lived²⁵.

²⁵ A view shared by the Jesuit jurist Alonso de Sandoval, the priest Antônio Vieira, the 'humanist' Maurício de Nassau and by many others in the 17th century (cf. Alencastro, 2000, especially chap. 5). Even radical abolitionists like Joaquim

Consequently, the ex-ante degradation of the black African degraded the work that he, as a thing, executed. The long duration of slavery, whose predatory aspect depersonalized the captive, led to an image of manual labour as something unworthy of anyone who was not black, who, though 'atavistically inclined to avoid work' due to his 'barbarity' and 'foul blood,' could be persuaded only by force²⁶. The image of work and the worker consolidated during slavery was produced, therefore, from the overlapping hierarchies of colour, social status associated with property, and material and symbolic domination in a mixture of meanings that converged on the perception of manual labour as something degrading²⁷. More emphatically, the work ethic derived from slavery was an ethic of *devaluing work*, and rescuing it from the lingering traces of impurity and degradation would take many more decades²⁸.

Nabuco (1999: pp. 142-45) saw the African as a blemish left on the face of Brazilian nationality by the Portuguese.

²⁶ 'For more than three centuries [the population of the Brazilian interior] was accustomed to seeing rural labour as something fit merely for slaves. For this population, almost all of which had emerged from slavery, freely declining the kind of work forced on slaves increased the distance between themselves and the latter.' (Nabuco, 1999: pp. 164-65).

²⁷ On the view of the national worker by landowners from various regions as incapable, lazy, indolent, and therefore unsuited to work, see Eisenberg (1999) and Eisenberg (1974: pp. 194-98). On the perception of the São Paulo elite, see Dean (1971); Azevedo (1987).

²⁸ Something similar occurred in France in the first half of the 19th century where industrial work was seen, for example, as 'corrupting of the mental faculties,' as declared in the *Dictionnaire d'économie politique* [1891-92] by Léon Say & Joseph Chailley, cited by Castel (1998: p. 288) amid other evaluations of the working class ('barbarians,' 'vile multitude'...) which, the latter author argues, amounted to an 'anti-working class racism widespread [among] the 19th century bourgeoisie.' Consequently the workers movement asserted from its outset 'the dignity of manual labour and its social pre-eminence as the true creator of wealth' as decisive aspects in the construction of class identity (*ibid.*, p. 443; also see Thompson, 1987: vol 2). The same phenomenon occurred in Brazil at the beginning of the 20th century, as shown, among others, by Moraes Filho (1952), Dias (1962), Fausto (1977), and Hall and Pinheiro (1981, vol. II).

The third important consequence of the slow transition to free labour, closely connected to the previous two, is that the apparatus of financing, reproducing, supervising and repressing slave labour, highly decentralized and with loose control from the Portuguese and later Brazilian Empire, consolidated a pattern of state and private violence that outlasted the end of slavery. This violence was transferred to various dimensions of the relationship between the State and the 'world of work'. In fact the process of consolidating the forces of repression and administering justice in colonial Brazil and well into the 19th century granted considerable leeway to powerful local figures to suppress and punish acts considered deviant. Both Oliveira Vianna and Gilberto Freyre called attention to this problem. In the patriarchal Brazilian system, the owner of a sugar plantation or a large landowner had the power of life and death over his family and slaves. The authors argue that the dispersal of rural estates across the vast national territory, along with their relative autonomy in terms of self-sufficiency, made any attempt at coordinating a centralized police force extremely difficult. This reduced the economic exchanges between them, and neither encouraged the interdependence of the economic agents nor made them dependent on the vicissitudes of politics, which equally distanced them from the State's affairs. As a consequence, any intervention by police forces in the master/slave relationship was seen as undue interference by public authorities²⁹.

Some aspects of this interpretation have been qualified by more rigorous historiographic research, which has shown, for example, that the sugar plantation owners in Pernambuco were also federal deputies, governors, mayors and high-level administrators in the State machine, including the police force; that the São Paulo legislators who opted to promote foreign

²⁹ As clearly demonstrated by Franco (1976).

immigration were for the most part landowners; and that even the university-educated administrators of the Empire in Rio de Janeiro came from the rural elite in their home provinces³⁰. Hence the State's affairs were not indifferent to the big landowners, but the principle was the same: social relations until the end of the 19th century (with legacies evident in the 20th century) were marked by privatization of the mechanisms of social control, a process in which the State functioned as an accessory of the slave owner in the task of disciplining his 'merchandise'. This practice can be traced in part to the Portuguese tradition of social control, based on civil militias capable of being mobilized at any moment by *homens de bem*, 'good men', in the name of the Crown. This delegation of power was how the latter made itself present across the imperial territory, thereby granting huge autonomy and decision-making powers to powerful landowners (Costa, 2005).

The re-organization of social control in the 19th century maintained these prerogatives, as shown in the context of Rio de Janeiro by the existence of the Calabouço, the 'Dungeon', a jail where guards whipped the slaves taken there expressly for this purpose by their owners. At least until the 1830s the owner had no need to prove that his captive had committed an offence: he simply sent the 'delinquent' to the prison with instructions for the number of lashes to be given (usually two hundred strokes), thereby exempting himself and his family from witnessing the torture, which very often led to the 'condemned' slave's death (Holloway, 1997; Karasch, 1987). The Calabouço lasted until the 1870s, carrying out this same function among others. According to Holloway, in Rio de Janeiro at the start of the 19th century,

³⁰ Cf., respectively, Eisenberg (1974); Dean (1977), and Azevedo (1987). See also Carvalho (1980).

the police functioned as a state-sponsored extension of the control of the owner class over people who were their property. The police grew accustomed to treating slaves and the free lower classes in similar ways, and as the proportion of slaves in the population declined after mid-century, the attitudes and practices of the system of repression were transferred smoothly to the nonslave lower classes, and persisted (Holloway, 1997: p. 215).

There is no reason to suppose that the pattern prevailing in the Empire's capital would not have been reproduced in other urban settings³¹, let alone rural enclaves. On the other hand – and this aspect is of decisive importance – the virtual absence of external conflicts that would have required a full-scale professional army to protect Brazil's frontiers meant that the embryo of a national armed force that emerged in the 19th century ended up working alongside the local militias to identify and suppress *internal enemies*. True, the working classes have been seen as dangerous throughout the world and during various moments of Western history (Chevalier 1984 [1958]). The massacre in Peterloo, Manchester, in 1819 (Thompson, 1989, vol. III: pp. 256ff), the bloody suppression of the working classes during the 'June Days Uprising' of 1848 in Paris (Tocqueville, 1991; Marx, 2012), and Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg in 1905 are all examples of the exorbitant action of the forces of law and order in repressing movements with very often peaceful intentions (as in the case of Peterloo and St. Petersburg), a fact

³¹ On the São Paulo case, see Fausto (1984). Citing the description by a police chief of a young woman of 20 years, accused of stealing in 1892 – 'She was a black woman of average height, frizzy hair, large eyes, good teeth, thick lips' – therefore using a terminology typical of the slave market, the author asks: 'A simple vestige of an old habit still existing in the years immediately after Abolition and on the way to vanishing? Nothing suggests this' (p.54). Also see Pinto (1994). On the Bahian case, see Fraga Filho (2006).

that illustrates the immense fear of the dominant classes vis-à-vis the dispossessed majority.

In Brazil the view of the slave as a potential collective enemy worsened in the imagination of the elites after the Haitian revolution of 1804, which freed the country from the French colonizers by massacring them cruelly. The fear of a catastrophic slave rebellion that could overturn European-style ‘civilization’ became more pronounced from 1835 onwards with the Muslim Uprising in Bahia (Reis, 2003), the culmination of a series of clashes and uprisings that helped spread the idea of the aggressiveness of the slaves, keeping their owners in a state of permanent tension³². The ferocity of the punishments inflicted on captives in Brazil may have stemmed in part from this consummate fear³³, incited more by imaginary threats than real ones. In the case of São Paulo, the end of the Atlantic slave trade in 1850 and the importation of slaves from other Brazilian provinces, especially the Northeast, meant that the perception of the internal enemy was even more decisive in terms of determining the form of suppression of black rebellion, with private and state forces combining to react with extreme violence to the slightest display of slave resistance³⁴. As Florestan Fernandes astutely observed,

³² In 18th century Minas Gerais it was common for slaves to bear arms in defence of the Crown’s interests, as Costa (2005), for example in this passage: ‘In 1719, fearing acts of sedition on the part of the black population of the captaincy, [the count of Assumar] informed the king that the climate of tension was worsening because the ‘negroes’ had in their favour ‘their multitude and the foolish trust of their masters, who not only entrusted them with weapons of all kinds, but also covered up their insolences and crimes’ (pp. 495- 96). The idea of the threatening black ‘multitude’ is synonymous with the ‘black wave’ of the second half of the 19th century studied by Azevedo (1987).

³³ While in the south of the United States the number of lashes for ‘misdeeds’ never exceeded 25, in Brazil it was common to torture captives with two hundred or more strokes, very often administered by other slaves.

³⁴ Examples can be found in Dean (1977); Azevedo (1987); Schwartz (1995); Carvalho (1987); Machado (1994).

in the slavocratic society the prevailing wisdom was to prevent any flourishing of organized social life among the slaves and former slaves because of the constant fear of the 'black rebellion'. As Perdigão Malheiros wrote [in 1866], the slave appeared like 'a domestic enemy', 'a public enemy': 'he is the volcano that continually threatens society, the landmine ready to explode with the slightest spark' (Fernandes, 1978, vol. 1: pp56-57).

During the Vaccine Revolt of 1904 in Rio de Janeiro, the state repression largely reproduced the pattern of the exacerbated knee-jerk responses instilled in the dominant classes decades earlier by the fear of a slave rebellion. José Murilo de Carvalho points out that in Brazil at the time,

in the case of popular revolts, the bulk of the prisoners were never taken to court. Only the leaders were tried, very often members of the elite. The rest were simply placed in ships and banished to some remote point. They didn't even pass through the Detention House where their personal information would have been recorded (Carvalho, 1987: p. 113).

In the case of the 1904 revolt, we are talking about hundreds of people exiled without trial or any production of proof. The other thousands of rebels were not recognized to have taken part in the crisis voluntarily, the elites preferring to label them as merely rash, manipulated by the 'disorderly' and 'disqualified' – a view shared by luminaries such as Rui Barbosa, Olavo Bilac and many others³⁵.

At the end of the 19th century the fear of the unknown hordes still persisted in the minds of the São Paulo elites. In

³⁵ Cf. Carvalho (1987: p. 115). Also see Sevckenko (1984); Pinheiro (1991); Bretas (1997); Misse (1999).

1893 Siqueira Campos, the São Paulo Justice Secretary, told the State President, Bernardino de Campos, that the cause for this feeling of insecurity experienced by Paulistas was perhaps ‘the growth of the population and principally [...] the increase in a fluctuating population hidden from view that renews itself from one moment to the next’³⁶. The fear, then as now, was fear of the unknown, of that which could not be controlled or dominated because it was not submitted to the traditional forms of domination. This was the fear of the *opaque other*, anonymous, containable only through brutal and indiscriminate repression³⁷.

Siqueira Campos also asserted that this feeling of fear and insecurity jarred with the ‘general physiognomy of our people’³⁸, which, he claimed, was peaceful. This viewpoint announces the fourth consequence of the slow transition to free labour: in the context of the social relations between capitalists and workers at the start of industrialization the idea persisted, among the economic elites, of the Brazilian worker as ‘peaceful’, ‘orderly’ or ‘cordial,’ in opposition to the immigrants, bearers of alien ideologies such as anarchism and communism. The notion of the ‘peaceful’ Brazilian pertains to the same semantic field as the idea that slavery in the country had been ‘benign’, to cite Gilberto Freyre’s classic formulation in *Casa-grande & senzala* (Freyre, 1994 [1933]). Both notions presume subaltern classes who ‘know their place’, which consequently legitimizes (private and state) repression and violence when these same classes rebel or assert their autonomy.

³⁶ Cited in Santos (2005: p. 35).

³⁷ On this point it is notable that throughout almost the entire First Republic when anarchists, socialists, strikers, feminists, union leaders and the like were imprisoned they were indiscriminately recorded as offenders and, therefore, as public enemies (cf. Fausto, 1984: p. 34).

³⁸ Cited in Santos (2005: p. 35).

The idea of ‘benign’ slavery had first been cultivated in the 19th century and owed much to the work of travellers like Auguste de Saint-Hilaire, Henry Koster and John Luccock whose books frequently contained favourable assessments of the treatment of slaves in Brazil (Versiani, 2000). These opinions deeply influenced the work of Gilberto Freyre, who in turn left his mark in much of what was written about slavery in Brazil in the 1940s and 50s, especially by American investigators interested in Brazil’s ‘racial democracy’³⁹. Freyre attributed the structural benevolence of the Brazilian slave owner to the charitableness of Portuguese Catholicism and the Moorish (or Arabian) influence on the way in which the colonial family was organized, contrasting these with the American slavocrats, for example⁴⁰. True, Freyre did not ignore what he called the ‘sadistic’ attitude of some sugar plantation owners, the result of an arrangement in which violence was always ready to surface as part of the control and submission of captives. For Freyre, the ‘sadism of power’ sustained the ‘conservative tradition in Brazil’ (Freyre, 1994: p.52), placing it at the centre of the equilibrium in Brazilian political life, but cruelty against slaves was an exception, not the rule, and was mostly absent from the *casa-grande* (the plantation house system identified as the ideal type of Brazilian social order by the author), though it was sometimes necessary in the treatment of captives working the land.

This image was contested from birth by abolitionists of various kinds as an anti-abolitionist propaganda of the Empire

³⁹ Frank Tannenbaum, in his classic *Slave and citizen* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1946), was decisively influenced by Freyre’s ideas, identifying miscegenation and the *mulato*’s possibility of social mobility (the Freyrian explanation for the success of Brazil’s ‘racial democracy’) as a potential solution to the American racial dilemma.

⁴⁰ On Freyre’s study, see Araújo (2005).

intended to ‘spread a rosy picture of the situation of the slaves’⁴¹ and use this to justify captivity. Moreover the ideology of ‘benignity’ was linked to the fear of a slave rebellion similar to what had happened in Haiti and to the growing rebelliousness of the slaves in the second half of the 19th century (Azevedo, 1987; Moura, 1981). In other words, neither was slavery benign, nor were the slaves peaceful or submissive, but, as far as the dominant ideology was concerned, passivity was the most common description applied. In fact the Empire’s elite, especially in the big cities, perceived day-to-day violence as deviant conduct by degenerate and barbaric individuals, lost to civilization (Holloway, 1997).

The orderly nature of the Brazilian population has been praised at various moments of the country’s history, remote or recent⁴², and provides the basis to the argument, promulgated by many thinkers of the time, that the transition to free labour took place in a mostly atraumatic form in contrast to events in the United States or Haiti, for example. In the first decades of the 20th century the nascent Brazilian sociology saw the peaceful nature of the country’s people as a defining element in Brazilian nationality, with deep roots in the previous socioeconomic system, marked by familism, individualism and patrimonialism – that is, the country’s Iberic inheritance, averse to open conflicts and above all to collective action. These ideas are equally present in Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Oliveira Vianna or Gilberto Freyre, albeit interconnected in distinct forms in each author and treated with varying degrees of critical distance. In this view,

⁴¹ See Versiani (2000: p. 7). The author cites Conrad’s text (op. cit.), arguing that the idea of benignity had first originated in a publicity campaign run by the Brazilian government.

⁴² In 1831, after quelling a mutiny of Republican soldiers, Regent Feijó claimed that ‘the Brazilian was not made for disorder, his natural state is tranquillity and he aspires to nothing more than the sworn Constitution, the enjoyment of his rights and freedoms’ (cited in Patto, 1999: p. 171).

collective action appears as a *corruption of the natural order of things*, marked by the individual subjection of subalterns to a powerful local figure that would control everyone's destiny.

The alien element brought to the country by European immigration – foreign but white and therefore civilized – was absorbed into the same worldview, appearing as a bearer of ideas with no place in Brazil's social reality since they had been gestated in a disturbed environment steeped in class struggle, opposed to the spirit of conciliation supposedly reigning in the new country. The foreigner with socialist or anarchist ideas became an even more dangerous other than the slave since he could contaminate hearts and minds with ideas capable of transforming the very structure of traditional domination. The slave was feared for his *difference* and above all his *opacity*, which provoked the fear of a black uprising capable of ending *civilization*. The fear of the European socialists and anarchists went further. They did not want the end of civilization, but a model of civilization that included them in a non-subordinate or egalitarian form. Their proselytism could *show* the peaceful and orderly Brazilians that their position in the social hierarchy was unjust and that the system was therefore illegitimate. It could transform the people into the internal enemy formerly represented by the slave in the minds of the elites.

This led, then, to the transposition of the symbolic imagery surrounding slavery to the capitalist order: the people were only of interest *qua* a set of individuals resigned to their position in the social hierarchy, which rewarded each person as long as each person recognized the other who provides the reward as someone with authority over him or herself. The fear of collective action from the people, incited by alien elements (immigrants), is the functional equivalent of the fear of the slave rebellion. The slow modernization of Brazilian society at the start of the 20th century and its gradual corrosion of traditional structures of domination

failed to dilute this fear. Instead it acquired new forms and new meanings⁴³, among which anti-communism was perhaps the most important, as Motta suggests (Motta 2002).

Here it is worth mentioning briefly a final consequence of the longevity of slavery, which relates to workers' expectations for their quality of life. Antonio Candido was the first to draw attention to the social indifferenciation found in São Paulo rural communities at the start of the 20th century, the result of an incipient social division of labour and a general lack of resources, meaning that members of these communities kept themselves alive with no more than the 'bare minimum' (*mínimos vitais*) (Candido, 1964). This situation led Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco to develop an ingenious argument to explain the violent nature of the sociability among free men under the slavery regime. She proposes that the need for supplementary relations between people living in poverty under equal terms in rural localities with a high nomadic fluidity – a context where the 'ancient and unbreakable reciprocal obligations were not consolidated' (Franco, 1976: p. 31), nor principles of authority constructed on the basis of a hierarchy of functions – led to a simplification of inter-human adjustment mechanisms founded on bravery and the banalization of violence. The author continues in a lengthy but crucial passage:

Without ties, simple, [the rural groups] belonged nowhere and blended in everywhere. It was also this same marginalization that kept the social system simple, ordaining basic functions beyond the confines of the group. Here it is worth us recalling that the soldier, priest and public authority were always associated with institutions alien to the rural world. The staggering poverty of the culture derives from the same source. It suffices to point

⁴³ Cf., among others, Fausto (1977); Pinheiro (1991); Negro (2004).

out how 'colonial' production favoured the enormous wastage of the workforce, a characteristic of these groups. This was the context in which the 'lazy' rural worker was born, placed in the happy situation of almost 'not needing to work', with the social organization and culture adapting to ensure him ample time for leisure, but who simultaneously suffered the miserable situation of only being able to produce the bare minimum necessary to ensure survival (Franco, 1976: pp. 32-33).

Two aspects of this argument interest me. Firstly the idea that sociability during the slavocratic regime was astonishingly fluid, in the sense that the free rural population was largely removed from local ties of domination and lived constantly in search of precarious means of survival across Brazil's vast territory. In this sense, slavery generated a paradox: the social hierarchy was pronounced and extremely rigid at its higher levels but fairly malleable at its base where poverty made everyone equal⁴⁴. Secondly and more importantly the slave-based society made the free person a pariah in an ample sense, including his/her expectations for standard of life. These were the same for everyone, with people's expectations for the future defined by the existence of slave labour. The free person (white or not) was distinguished from the slave only by the fact that he or she was no one else's property: otherwise he or she was very similar to the slave in terms of diet, clothing, residence, life expectancy at birth, and so on⁴⁵. In this context, people's expectations were limited to the bare minimum needed to live as established by the contemporary standard of measurement for the entire system: the exploitation of the slave workforce. This partly explains why the free workers were not easily expropriated or forced into

⁴⁴ On the Campinas region, see Moura (1998); on the Bahian Recôncavo, see Schwartz (1995); Fraga Filho (2006).

⁴⁵ As Costa (1982 [1966]), long before Franco.

exhausting labour, since they had an alternative to submitting to the kind of work degraded by slavery. Although this alternative remained at the most basic subsistence level, it was accepted as natural given the overall poverty of the society.

In the case of São Paulo, this situation was fatally wounded by the first fluxes of immigrants. The local population was placed in the awkward situation of being treated as a contingent of second-class citizens compared to the Italian immigrants, who arrived with ‘privileges’ such as access to a plot of land for their own cultivation. But this did not happen in the other provinces of the Empire, where the socioeconomic conditions remained much the same over a long period, passing on to future generations the low levels of aspiration, confronted each step of the way by scarcity and poverty, which severely restricted the horizon of possibilities of the entire social order. Men and women were not slaves insofar as they were no longer someone else’s property, but they continued to be ‘slaves to necessity’, which also comprised the cultural horizon in which their life aspirations and projects were determined⁴⁶. The end of slavery failed to change this framework: amid the generalized poverty in the rural world and the inaccessibility of higher social positions, barred by the rigid social hierarchy, expectations for improving the quality of life remained quashed for several decades, only growing with the intensification of industrialization in the second half of the 20th century.

* * *

By way of conclusion we can propose, therefore, that this framework of structural inertia shaped the environment in

⁴⁶ For a dense analysis of the construction of the taste and aspirations of workers, shaped by living in close proximity with necessity, see Bourdieu (1979).

which capitalist sociability developed in Brazil. This means that the revolutionary nature of capitalism had to converge with a social order that was highly rigid in terms of its practices and its symbolic imagery – much more rigid than the traditional literature on the subject was willing to recognize. This rigidity was manifested in the disqualification of the black and national population as workers capable of undertaking capitalist work; in the perception of manual labour as a degrading activity, conceivable only for degraded beings; in the fortification of the economic elite in their positions of power, fearful of the dispossessed (and unarmed) majority, seen as potential enemies and treated with excessive violence whenever they asserted themselves in public; in the persistence of a structure of domination that reduced to the bare minimum the financial expectations of the poorest in a context where generalized poverty was the parameter for everyone. In sum, capitalist sociability had to engage with a profoundly anti-liberal order in terms of its practices and worldviews⁴⁷ and with an ethic of devaluing work that for a long time prevented recognition of workers as subjects with rights – that is, as citizens⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ As Schwarz (1981: pp.16-18) suggested, liberalism was an ‘idea out of place’, since favours and personal dependence, not the market, mediated social relations.

⁴⁸ Getúlio Vargas constructed the myth of the ‘father of the poor’ against this background. The propagandists of the Estado Novo attributed to Vargas (and to the ‘gift’ of the labour rights) the de facto end of slavery, forty years after its legal abolition. See Gomes (2006). In Chapter II I will analyse this in depth.