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The Biopolitics of Contemporary Slavery in Brazil and the Bare Life of the Enslaved Worker

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Abstract

The article contributes to the analysis of cultural aspects involved in the contemporary slavery in Brazil, emphasizing two process that permeates the vulnerability of young male rural workers to the slave labor in the countryside, such as: the construction of masculinity of young rural workers and the social unrooting process with their families and places of origin. These processes contribute to deprive their lives of political value and social importance, making them bare lives susceptible to different forms of violence and degrading conditions in the workplace.

Keywords: Contemporary Slavery, Biopolitics, Vulnerability, Masculinity and Banality of Evil.

Introduction

The reflections presented in this article departs from data collected during research on the complexity of the contemporary slavery in Brazil and the institutional responses offered to tackle the problem by different institutions in the country.² The research was supported by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and it was based on the revision of specific literature,

¹This is an updated original English version of the article published in Portuguese in: Author, "A construção da masculinidade e a banalidade do mal: outros aspectos do trabalho escravo contemporâneo", *Cadernos Pagu*, Vol. 31, (Campinas-SP: Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu/Unicamp, 2008), 173-198.

² For the research strategy of the case study, see Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: design and methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994).

official documents, as well as, interviews with representatives of institutions (public, private and civil society) that deal with the subject in the country.³

The ethnography of Figueira⁴ on the slavery debt in the North and Northeast Regions is considered here as a key reference and a seminal study on contemporary slavery in Brazil. Almeida⁵, Martins⁶ and Esterci⁷ are other important references for the analysis of the structural and circumstantial causes of the Brazilian rural slavery as well as it describes different forms of violence that affect workers enslaved in the Brazilian countryside. Departing from this anthropological literature, this article presents an analysis of cultural aspects “not thought out yet” involved in the construction of the vulnerability of individuals and social groups to the Brazilian rural slave labor.

A situation of sexual violence, mentioned by Figueira, was emblematic of the high vulnerability that affects rural workers enslaved. It was perpetrated against a young male enslaved worker who was captured by an employee of the farm after an escape attempt. His punishment was to be forced to practice oral sex to the male employee in front of the other workers. The symbolic burden of such punitive act, that implies notions of honor (public image) and masculinity, raises questions regarding the moral factors that made possible such type of sexual abuse as a kind of punishment. This punishment constituted an effective form of social control imposed on the worker's body, promoting the internalization of a norm of conduct that establishes forms of behavior in the work environment that deprive workers from individual freedom of workers and enable their exploitation. This form of control and power notably exercised over bodies reveals the exercise of a biopolitics in the context of the Brazilian contemporary slavery.

³ For the English version of the case study, see Patrícia Costa, *Fighting Forced Labour: the example of Brazil* (Geneva: ILO, 2009), http://www.oit.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_116691/lang--en/index.htm. For more recent studies on the Brazilian public policies to tackle contemporary slavery, see Renan Kalil and Thiago Ribeiro, “Trabalho Escravo Contemporâneo e Proteção Social”, Vol. 1, 2015, *Revista Direitos, Trabalho e Política Social*, <http://periodicoscientificos.ufmt.br/ojs/index.php/rdtps/index>; Ricardo Figueira, et al, *Estudos sobre Formas Contemporâneas de Escravidão* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2018), 73-118. On actions developed by the Brazilian private sector, see Ricardo Figueira, et al, *Trabalho Escravo Contemporâneo: um debate transdisciplinar* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2011), 253-268. On actions carried out by the Brazilian civil society, see Fabricia Silva, Witemberg Zaparoli, *Trabalho Escravo Contemporâneo. Reflexões e Militância do Centro de Defesa da Vida e dos Direitos Humanos – Carmen Bascarán*, (Imperatriz-MA, Ethos, 2015); Xavier Plassat, “CPT: 30 anos de Denúncia e Combate ao Trabalho Escravo”, 2015, https://www.cptnacional.org.br/attachments/article/2634/30_anos_denuncia_fiscaliza_XP_dados_1985_2014_red.pdf.

⁴ Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2004).

⁵ Alfredo Almeida, “O trabalho como instrumento de escravidão”, *Humanidades*, Vol. 15, (Brasília: Universidade de Brasília, 1987), 42-49.

⁶ José de Souza Martins, “A reprodução do capital na frente pioneira e o renascimento da escravidão no Brasil.” *Tempo Social: Revista de Sociologia da USP*, Vol. 6, nº 1-2, 1994, <https://doi.org/10.1590/ts.v6i1/2.84955>, 1-25.

⁷ Neide Esterci, *Escravos da desigualdade. Estudo sobre o uso repressivo da força de trabalho hoje* (Rio de Janeiro: CEDI/Koinonia, 1994).

Proposed by Foucault⁸ in 1974, the notion of biopolitics refers to a way of knowing the population within its biological existence. It resides at the heart of the process of normalization and social control which, for Foucault, is not carried out only by consciousness or ideology, but is within the body and with the body. Biopolitics, in this way, becomes a governance strategy situated within the framework of born life, it is a tool of knowledge and power that forges visual and discursive norms⁹, enabling social control through its internalization in individuals whose bodies become targets and object of forms of subjugation and control that express political decisions about who can live and in which conditions. This decision can result in the creation of ways to promote life or to disallow it by controlling access to minimum conditions of survival and work. The offer of these conditions reflects decisions about who can live, while the impossibility of access to those conditions exposes who is socially disposable, politically irrelevant and, therefore, can have their existence eliminated.

The ability to dictate who can live and who must die constitutes the limit of sovereignty, as pointed out by Mbembe.¹⁰ This sovereignty can be situated in institutions empowered by the State or in supranational institutions. In the context of contemporary slavery, sovereign power is personified in the boss or the employer. It is he who promotes or disallows life in the workplace. It is he who can exercise the right to kill. This right can result in the subjugation of life to the power of death. Forms of social existence employed in the interest of maximum destruction of people is what Mbembe called necropolitics.

Contemporary forms of slavery can reveal social controls imprinted on the bodies of people whose vulnerability has led to exploitative, degrading work situations that restrict individual freedoms. These situations can impose a regime of humiliation, fear and surveillance in the workplace. The situation particularly analyzed in this article implied in a social control exercised since the body and in an elimination of life carried out in a gradual and indirect way, through the deprivation of liberty together with the withdrawal of the conditions of survival in the work environment. In this sense, the notion of biopolitics proposed by Foucault seems more adequate to the analysis proposed here.

To address these questions, it will be presented a discussion of two social processes involving the theme of rural contemporary slavery in Brazil, such as: the construction of masculinity that permeates the departure of young people and the social unrooting that gradually erase their ties with the family left behind and with their places of origin.

The first process makes viable the internal traffic of people that is leading vulnerable individuals to contemporary forms of slavery. The second process results from trafficking itself and contributes to the social devaluation of the enslaved workers, accentuating their

⁸ Michel Foucault. *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. (New York: Pantheon Books. Levi-Strauss, Claude, 1984)

⁹ Louise Blais. “Biopolitique”, *Anthropen. Le dictionnaire francophone d’anthropologie ancré dans le contemporaine* (Université Laval, 2020).

¹⁰ Achille Mbembe. “Necropolitics”, *Public Culture* 15(1) (Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 11-40.

vulnerability. On the one hand, poverty deprives them from their political importance and social value. On the other, slavery turn their lives totally “bare”, to use the Agamben’s term.¹¹ As it seems in the situation mentioned, the bare life is also noticed by those who enslave them. According to Agamben, as bare lives, individuals are turned into killable beings and subjected to all forms of violence, without provoking great moral embarrassment by those who exercise such violence. Following his interpretation, it suggests that the death of the workers and the sexual violence imposed on them become usual and unexceptional as intrinsic practices that add up to the productive activities of the farms.

Deconstructing these processes allows us to understand two important social actors involved in the Brazilian contemporary rural slave labor: the enslaved worker, analyzed in the figure of the young man who leaves his parents' house, and the perpetrator of the violence against the worker, in the figure of the farmer. It is intended, therefore, to analyze processes inherent to the rural contemporary slavery carried out in Brazil considering cultural aspects of some subjects involved into it. To this end, it will be presented the problem of the contemporary slave labor in Brazil considering the categories used in the Brazilian context for denominating the problem, the profile of the enslaved worker and the process of enticement of young people in the countryside, which implies intense trafficking in people, especially from the Northeast of Brazil to farms located in other parts of the country.

Some structural causes of contemporary slavery in Brazil will be presented to clarify the undervalued place of men and women in this context. Among these causes it will be highlighted as part of the social process that culminates in slavery, the process of building masculinity and acquiring maturity by young people who leave their parents' homes to escape from poverty situations, as well as, in search of adventure and money to become someday the provider of a family.

Getting entangled in the web of enticement, in turn, generates the social unrooting of these young people helping them to turn into non-citizens and, therefore, susceptible to violence and work situations deprived from the minimum conditions of security, survival and dignity. The banality of evil to which the enslaved workers are subjected seems to bear similarities with the logic, analyzed by Machado¹², behind the sexual violence exercised against women. Both cases seem to be part of a larger scenario marked by the politicization of life, common to all societies, in which a sovereign power, personified in the male figure, in the case of women, or of the boss, in the case of the enslaved workers, can decide with impunity which lives are no longer politically relevant and, therefore, subject to brutal violence and elimination.

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹² Lia Zanotta Machado. “Sexo, Estupro e Purificação”, *Série Antropologia*, Vol. 286, (Brasília: Departamento de Antropologia/Universidade de Brasília, 2000), pp.1-38.

Slave labor and conditions analogous to slavery

There are two categories used in Brazil to designate contemporary forms of slavery: *slave labor* and *conditions analogous to slavery*. *Slave labor* is the most used expression among groups and social actors organized to defend human rights in Brazil. It designates all kinds of non-free work, of exacerbated exploitation and inequality among men.¹³ Historians like Eduardo Paiva¹⁴ criticize the use of the expression “slave labor” considering it anachronistic, since it refers to a category, “slave”, legally eradicated from Brazil since 1888.

For Paiva, using this category would transform the exploited worker today into a slave. This would transfer to the worker characteristics attributed to the slave of the past, which would neglect his ability to act, while it victimizes men and women of the past and the present. The perception of Paiva, however, seems to disregard the ability of the enslaved person on the past to resist to slavery and to question the inequalities that characterizes their unequal and racialized social structure. This removed the agency of those who were legally enslaved in Brazil until 1888 and makes them exclusively victims of their historical context.

The capacity to act of those who were enslaved in the past was transmitted between generations through cultural manifestations, such as the *congadas*, that take place in different parts of Brazil. The colonial slavery is periodically remembered by the *congadas* in religious festivals emphasizing forms of resistance that were brought about collectively during the period of legalized slavery. This remembrance makes the slavery part of the semantic field of the *congada*'s practitioners, mostly rural workers, allowing them to question forms of exploitation currently experienced from this cultural frame.¹⁵

Criticism aside, the expression *slave labor* derived from social and political motivations that emerged from groups organized to defend human rights in Brazil, such as the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) that deals with the difficulty to designate the problem since the 1970's. This hindered to put in a legal frame situation that violated different aspects of human rights, leading to the creation of a term that has become a political category, part of a field of struggle for rights. *Condition analogous to slavery* is the legal category present in the Article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code. Elaborated in 1940 and reformulated in 2003 it characterizes and criminalizes the submission of workers to forced labor, to exhaustive work hours (by extension or intensity), to degrading conditions or to the restriction of freedom, whether due to debt, restrictions on use of transport, maintaining over surveillance or retaining documents or personal objects.¹⁶ It is

¹³Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2004), 42-44.

¹⁴ Eduardo França Paiva, “Travail contraint et esclavage. Utilisation et définitions aux différent époques”, *Cahier d'Études Africaines*, Vol. XLV (3-4), 2005, 1123-1141.

¹⁵ On the *congadas* see Patricia Costa, *As raízes da congada: a renovação do presente pelos Filhos do Rosário*, (Curitiba-PR: Appris, 2012). On the notion of cultural frame, see Wilson Trajano Filho, “Goffman en Afrique. Les cortèges des tabancas et les cadres de l'expérience”, *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 201, 2011, 193-236.

¹⁶ Ricardo Figueira, et al, *A universidade discute a escravidão contemporânea: práticas e reflexões* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2015), 441-451.

important to mention that to characterize the crime it is not necessary to combine all these factors. Only one trace is sufficient for that matter.¹⁷

The Brazilian law includes in its text the ILO Convention 29 by reference to “forced labor” as a practice analogous to slavery. In the ILO convention, forced labor is defined in the topics 29 and 105 not only in terms of low wages or poor working conditions, but and most importantly as the restriction of freedom.¹⁸ For the ILO, forced labor, which restricts freedom, and degrading work, present in the imposition of poor working conditions, are not necessarily combined in a single definition. Every form of forced labor is considered degrading, but not every form of degrading labor is considered forced labor. The difference between one concept and another is the restriction of freedom.¹⁹

The *conditions analogous to slavery* in Brazil are, therefore, a broad penal type referring to situations characterized by the lack of freedom in a strict sense, as well as by the work in degrading conditions that hurt the dignity of the worker.²⁰ It includes forced and degrading labor, describing in the text of the law some hypotheses for the occurrence of these practices in the national territory. However, the penalty for those who commit the crime is reduced and there is no reference to punishments in the workplace. These aspects are legal gaps that contribute to the continuity of the practice.

The rural slave labor in the contemporary Brazil

The “Observatory for the Eradication of the Slave Labor and Human Trafficking” reveals that in Brazil, between 2003 and 2018, 45.028 workers were rescued by the department of labor inspection. In general, these workers are male, non-white, young and have a low level of education. That profile was established since the contingent of 36.446 of the rescued workers in the period whose place of birth was determined. Among them, 94.6% are men, 42% are self-declared brown (*pardo*), 12% black and 18% yellow (Indigenous or Asian descendants). At the time of the rescue 44.6% were between 18 to 29 years old, 31% didn’t know how to read or

¹⁷ Luís Antônio Camargo Melo, “Atuação do Ministério Público do Trabalho no Combate ao Trabalho escravo - crimes contra a organização do trabalho e demais crimes conexos”, *Possibilidades Jurídicas de Combate à Escravidão Contemporânea*, 2007, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---ilo-brasilia/documents/publication/wcms_227539.pdf.

¹⁸ The ILO Convention 29, adopted in 1930 and put into effect since 1932, requires to the member states of the Organization its commitment to abolish the use of forced or compulsory labor, in all its forms, in the shortest possible time. In the text of the convention, forced or compulsory labor is defined as “any work or service required of a person under threat of sanction and for which he has not offered himself spontaneously.”

¹⁹ International Labor Organization, *Perfil dos Principais Atores Envolvidos no Trabalho Escravo Rural no Brasil*, 2011, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---ilo-brasilia/documents/publication/wcms_227533.pdf.

²⁰ Marco Túlio Viana, “Trabalho escravo e ‘lista suja’: um modo original de remover uma mancha”, In *Possibilidades Jurídicas de Combate à Escravidão Contemporânea*, 2007, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---ilo-brasilia/documents/publication/wcms_227539.pdf.

write, while 39% did it in a precarious way, having attended just until the 5th grade of the elementary school. 73% performed activities in the agricultural sector and the economic sectors most frequently involved are: cattle breeding (32%), rice cultivation (20%), alcohol production (11%), cane cultivation (8%) and sugar production (5%), according to the Observatory's data.²¹

Data from ILO²² revealed that most workers are from the Northeast Region, especially from the state of Maranhão. In search of work, they go, or are advised to go, to farms in the states of Pará and Mato Grosso, although they can also go to farms in other states, like Bahia and Goiás. Their predominant occupation has been temporary rural work without registration in the labor card, a document that formalizes the bond between the employer and the employee and assures its compliance with the Brazilian labor laws. Beside this, they are employed in non-specialized tasks such as clearing the native forest and cleaning the land for planting crops or installing pasture, sugar cane harvest, grain planting, charcoal production, among other activities.²³

Although the presence of women on these farms is rare, they constantly appear in the narratives of rescued workers, especially in the figure of mothers, grandmothers, godmothers, daughters and, more rarely, as wives, since most of them don't have a partner. All these women lived the afflictions of the slave labor due to the lack of news about those who left. In addition, they may appear as women who have established precarious alliances with the employees of the farms where the young people are taken, or even as the owners of pensions and brothels located in the towns where the workers can be coopted for the slave labor.²⁴

As the data shows, the enslaved worker is young, over 18 years old and was 31 years old when rescued. An average of more than 10 years of enslavement. He comes from rural areas and has poor small farmers as parents and relatives.²⁵ The precarious economic situation puts pressure on the family, which, unable to maintain all the family members, makes the search for work elsewhere an utmost necessity. Leaving does not solve the problem, but staying at home does not help either, because there is not enough job available, especially in rural areas in the Northeast Region, which is usually plagued by drought. When there is land, there are no conditions to produce and sell the production, like rural settlements created by the National

²¹ For more informations, see: smartlabbr.org/trabalhoescravo, accessed in 05/05/2020.

²² International Labor Organization, *Perfil dos Principais Atores Envolvidos no Trabalho Escravo Rural no Brasil*, 2011, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---ilo-brasil/documents/publication/wcms_227533.pdf.

²³The activity of cleaning a dense bush that grows in the area previously felled and formed in pasture can be named "juquira" by the rural workers. Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 17.

²⁴ Ibid, 84.

²⁵ José de Souza Martins, *Fronteira: A degradação do outro nos confins do humano*, (São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1997), 106.

Institute of Colonization and Land Reform (INCRA) at the end of the 1990s, which didn't have minimum operating conditions.²⁶

The worker leaves to search for a job opportunity in order to overcome a situation of poverty or hunger. However, he also leaves in the hope of getting rich, to escape from family conflicts, usually occurring with his father, to manifest his virility or companionship, for the dream of living an adventure in distant and exotic lands and following the will to become himself a home provider one day.

Driven by such ambitions, alone or in groups, young men are recruited and enticed by farmers or by a representative of the farmers, called "the cat" (*gato*). They are invited to work in regions far from their home, through deceptive promises of employment and wages, usually with an agreed price per hectare to be worked. Upon arriving at the farm, they realize that the work, in general, is much harder than anticipated. They also discover that they have contracted a debt with the "cat" regarding the travel tickets and expenses which are all the items used or consumed during the trip and the advance salary granted to the worker to leave his family supplied during his absence.

Once they arrive in the farms, they are submitted to continuous indebtedness. Every material consumed as food or used for housing must be bought at an overpriced value on the farms. This is called the "truck system".²⁷ Its practice increase the debt daily and turns it virtually unpayable. Therefore, the payment must be made through the earnings to be received by the worker, who will be "authorized" to leave the farm only when the debt is paid off. The geographic isolation of the farms, their distance from any type of transportation and the natural obstacles makes it difficult to escape by foot. In addition, in order to prevent escapes, workers may have their documents retained at the same time they are constantly monitored and threatened by armed employees, constituting a degrading work situation and with restrictions to workers' freedom. Food and housing conditions are also precarious. Many used to sleep closed and locked in shacks made of canvas and surrounded by straw, and, many times, without access to food and drinking water.

Enticement as internal trafficking

Human trafficking is part of the scenario of contemporary slave labor in Brazil. The migration is one of the most prevalent characteristic of the debt slavery in the country

²⁶ Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004.

²⁷ Luís Antônio Camargo Melo, "Atuação do Ministério Público do Trabalho no Combate ao Trabalho escravo - crimes contra a organização do trabalho e demais crimes conexos", *Possibilidades Jurídicas de Combate à Escravidão Contemporânea*, 2007, 68.

considering that 74% of the victims doesn't live in the municipality in which they were born and 40% lives in different states from their place of origin.²⁸

The enticement of workers is the catalyst for internal human trafficking that affects the Brazilian rural environment. In Brazil, human trafficking serves different purposes, including the slavery of workers. For this reason, the Palermo Protocol or "Trafficking Protocol" was ratified on March of 2004 by the Brazilian State.

The definition of trafficking of human beings, contained in the Protocol, has numerous similarities with the enticement of enslaved rural workers in the country.²⁹ In the Brazilian slave labor, human trafficking carried out through enticement occurs, especially, within the national territory. The tackle to the grooming in the national legislation is characterized and provided by the Article 206 of the Brazilian Penal Code, which punishes grooming for emigration purposes, and by the Article 207, which punishes grooming for purposes of internal migration, impacting immediately practices that lead to contemporary slave labor in the country. Thus, the Article 207 does not punish the peaceful transfer of workers, but the enticement made by others to get them from one point to another.

At the first time, the recruiter was punished only if the victim was transferred to a place far from his home. New conceptual discussions have led to the conclusion that it must not matter how distant are the places where the workers live and to where they go. It was also admitted that, in order to be punished, the enticement can be carried out by any means, without the use of fraud.

For that matter, the Article 207 was modified by the Law 9.777/98 to punish those who recruit workers outside their place of work, within the national territory, through fraud or demand of any amount from the worker. It also punishes those who recruit the worker in a different place where the service will be carried out, even without employing fraud or charging any amount, but which doesn't guarantee the return of the worker to his place of origin. This specification is fundamental to tackle slave labor since it is very common to leave the worker after the end of the service. The penalty for these crimes is imprisonment from one to three years and a fine.

The construction of masculinity

Information regarding the family of origin, dreams and ambitions of the young man who leaves to search for work reveals that the trip is part of a process of building masculinity, which

²⁸ International Labor Organization, *Perfil dos Principais Atores Envolvidos no Trabalho Escravo Rural no Brasil*, 2011, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---ilo-brasilia/documents/publication/wcms_227533.pdf.

²⁹The term "human trafficking" means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, accommodation or reception of people, using the threat or force and other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of authority to situation of vulnerability or to the delivery or acceptance of payment or benefits to obtain the consent of a person who has authority over another for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or slavery-like practice, bondage, or organ removal. INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, *A Global Alliance Against Forced Labor*, 2005, <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc93/pdf/rep-i-b.pdf>.

precede the departure and should be consolidated with the formation of a new family, either in the worker's place of origin, to which he can return, or in a new location.

Originated from rural areas, the young man shares a worldview based on a peasant logic that has in the cultural categories "land", "labor" and "family" the foundations for the construction of an ethics that guide his actions. Such logic, as interpreted by Woortmann³⁰, aims to ensure the physical and social reproduction of the domestic group.³¹ Ideally, this should be guaranteed by "free labor", that is, without a boss, in a fertile land that ensures the preservation of their ways of living.

The family is, therefore, the central aspect in the life of the rural worker. Labor is seen as a mission, it is through it that the family will be maintained. Working hard for yourself and on a wide land ensures better living conditions to the new generations, which, in the peasant logic, has no relation to standards of living, but with possibilities of working in the land cultivation.³² In this sense, land and labor, or rather, labor on the land, is the primary way for the preservation of the family according to this cultural logic.

These principles are shared by all members of the domestic group, men and women, adults and children, and they are particularly important for the men as householders. Being able to support a family working freely on their own land is an ideal of masculinity for the peasants. Developing such ability is part of the acquisition of maturity in which the boy becomes a man, head of the family.

Poverty and the lack of land make it difficult to realize the male social role attributed to young men in rural areas. If the labor reproduces the family, seeking a work is, to a large extent, ensuring its physical, social and cultural reproduction.

The worker who leaves alone in search for work, as well as the squatter who migrates with his wife and children in search of land, aims to guarantee the maintenance of their family and the preservation of a way of life without a master. For the worker who travels alone, this objective can be achieved after his return, when, with the money that he dreams to win, he will be able to buy a land and form his own family, becoming the father and the provider. In the case of the squatters, the purpose of the trip is to keep the family together and close, while he escapes from the lack of perspective in the place of origin, expressed in the absence of land or in the

³⁰ Klaas Woortmann, "Com Parente Não se Neguceia", *Anuário Antropológico/87*, (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Tempo Brasileiro, 1990).

³¹I can assume in this article that "domestic group" can be understood as a group formed by people living in the same house and from the labor at the same land. The "family" is formed by people linked through kinship and affinity links. It is possible to have different families in a same domestic group, but it is not usual that different domestic groups live in the same family.

³² José de Souza Martins, *Fronteira: A degradação do outro nos confins do humano*, (São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1997), 125.

impossibility of cultivation. In assuring a property, the father accomplishes his duty guaranteeing means to his children form their own family in the future.³³

In both cases the trip aims at preserving the family. For the squatter, it is part of accomplishing his role as a father. For the young man, it is an enterprise that led to a process of building masculinity. If there is an economic logic behind this enterprise, it is subordinated to the logic of the family.³⁴ The money to be obtained can become land, a true source of wealth, which will become the family's patrimony.

However, it is worth noting that the search for adventure, which also permeates the departure of the worker, seems to reveal evidence of the affirmation of the individualism among young people in rural areas beside the desire to open new horizons of life. Many young men aim at reaching large urban centers because of the strong appeal of the urbanization and the offers of the globalized world. In this way, the squatters analyzed by Martins may be migrating in search of land, but many young people may be looking for paid work in municipalities or in the big cities of the country.³⁵ Providing a family based on one's own work, whether obtained in the countryside or in the city, it is an ideal of masculinity shared by rural men. The search for land or the search for a salary are ideals searched by young people and interrupted by the contemporary slavery. The departure, which includes accepting the proposal of the “cat” to work in distant lands, constitutes a necessary means for the construction of a future family by the young man who doesn't see in the father's lands possibilities of work and, thus, is deprived of accomplishing the male role that was culturally assigned to him. The process of the construction of this role seems to start in the family conflicts between the young man and the paternal authority, which can be pointed out as “subjective reasons” for the departure.³⁶ The trip is the moment of rupture between parents and male children, in addition to being the beginning of a new family life and the means to carry out the process of building their masculinity since the courage to depart is a key value that form the decision. However, it is the possibilities of forming a family (in the city or in the countryside) that will complete this process.

Being entangled in the “cat's” debts and ending up imprisoned in the workplace interrupts the process of acquiring majority, threatening the continuity of the original domestic group and crystalizing an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Courage and honesty are equally important aspects and they are present in this process. First, they propel the departure, after they can intensify the imprisonment of the worker facing slavery conditions.

The virility of the young man who leaves is expressed in the courage to undertake an adventure towards the unknown. In the farm, virility manifests itself in different forms of

³³ José de Souza Martins, *Fronteira: A degradação do outro nos confins do humano*, (São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1997), 124-126.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mireya Suárez, oral communication, August of 2008.

³⁶ Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004, 113-116, 127-130.

resistance triggered by workers, as they don't passively accept the relation of exploitation. Thus, they try to reject what they consider abusive by trying to undermine the quality of the service or by trying to escape. Such attitudes, however, are accompanied by physical threats.³⁷

Despite these attempts, there are difficulties for workers to activate collective forms of resistance. This can be attributed to the lack of articulation among the enslaved workers, a result of them not knowing the farm, the region, nor the other groups of workers. In addition, most of them have no experience in articulated actions, as they normally didn't participate in unions, political parties, religious groups or other forms of association.³⁸ Another reason particularly significant in the imprisonment of the worker is his code of ethics, that has in honesty a central value.

Even if the debt is unjust and illegal, the moral code shared by the workers prescribes that all debt must be paid, which acts as a symbolic and effective form of domination and control. The moral concern in paying the debt imprisons the worker to himself (or to his code of ethics) and to others, because it justifies, to some extent, the slavery.

After months or years, the tasks for which workers have been recruited are finished, they remain unable to leave the farm or are abandoned in the nearest towns with no money. Many of them lose contact with their home and their families, preventing them from returning home. There are also those who don't return because they are ashamed of the economic failure and of the demoralization to which they were subjected.³⁹

Without money and disconnected from their bonds of friendship and kinship, workers go to small hostels where they take on new debts to survive. His accommodation and food expenses increase every day and once again a "cat" or a farmer will "pay" his debts. The vicious circle of indebtedness is maintained. They become *peões de trecho*⁴⁰ traded in the hostels that account their debts to sell them to recruiters.⁴¹ The cycle of contemporary slavery is established, in which workers remain without entering another option for survival.

The project to build masculinity, interrupted by the contemporary slavery, carries an important identity meaning, as it reinforces the feeling of belonging of the worker to the group that transmitted to him the values and roles that he seeks to accomplish through the trip. Beside stopping this project, the slave labor creates an emotional, economic and geographical isolation for the worker. Transformed into the *peão de trecho*, he is disconnected from the social ties that made him part of a whole that gives meaning to his actions. Captive of the network of progressive indebtedness, the *peão de trecho* personifies the social uprooting that increases the

³⁷Patricia Trindade Maranhão Costa, *Fighting Forced Labor: the example of Brazil*, (Geneva: International Labor Organization, 2009).

³⁸ Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The *peão de trecho* is the name attributed to the worker that realizes successive and sequenced workdays, usually, in slave labour conditions.

⁴¹Luís Antônio Camargo Melo, *Possibilidades Jurídicas de Combate à Escravidão Contemporânea*, 2007, 68.

vulnerability of the worker and makes him a non-citizen without social importance and political value.

The social unrooting

Social unrooting could initially be thought as a process that leads to the dehumanization of the enslaved worker, something like what occurred during the colonial slavery in Brazil, when the enslaved were legally and by custom perceived as commodity and heritage of his/her master. In debt slavery, nowadays, the worker becomes a commodity depending on local situations. He can, for example, be sold to other farmers on the pretext of being in debt. However, in most of cases, the debt is a way of ensuring his permanence in the workplace. This doesn't necessarily transform the worker into a commodity, as well as it does not constitute a mechanism for capital accumulation, as it was in the case with slaves brought from Africa to Brazil.⁴²

The colonial slavery, in this sense, deprived the enslaved of their human condition and this dehumanization was central to the relationship among slaves and masters, which appears quite frequently in the narrative of slave descendants from the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil, who remember such practices experienced by their ancestors.⁴³

Contemporary slavery, in turn, doesn't necessarily dehumanize the worker, but, in an equally problematic way, reduces him to a set of negative stereotypes shared among farmers. This set of prejudices, to a large extent, justifies the over-exploitation and the abusive mistreatment of the workers.

Dangerous, lazy, vindictive, liar, drunk and disrespectful of families are adjectives commonly used to disqualify the workers, as pointed out by Figueira⁴⁴, and that are usually associated to the figure of the stranger, the foreigner or the one who is an outsider. In other words, they are stigmas that accompany those who are disconnected from social ties recognized as positive traits within a given social environment. Due to the characteristics of enticement, the contemporary enslaved worker is a migrant, in its absolute majority, therefore, the prejudices that affect him seems to be inseparable aspects of the unrooting process that marks the trajectory of the enslaved workers, contributing to their vulnerability.

Like illegal foreign immigrants and because of this process, enslaved workers do not enjoy the same rights of other citizens. Before the departure of the young worker, the poverty

⁴² José de Souza Martins, *Fronteira: A degradação do outro nos confins do humano*, (São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1997), 103.

⁴³For more informations about different aspects of the colonial slavery present in the family memory shared by slave descendants of Minas Gerais, see Patricia Trindade Maranhão Costa, *As raízes da Congada: a renovação do presente pelos Filhos do Rosário*, (Curitiba-PR: Appris, 2012), 35-38.

⁴⁴ Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004, 268.

prevented him to fully access citizenship. After slavery, social unrooting seems to eliminate any chance of the enslaved to exercise his rights.⁴⁵

When the ties with the family and with the place of origin are lost, the worker has his social importance unrecognized. That would not happen if he were seen as part of a specific network of social relationships. As a result of the social unrooting, he begins to die symbolically or socially and this death precedes the physical one. From this process, the workers become liable to the “banality of evil”, a term elaborated by Hannah Arendt that addresses a dimension of evil that doesn't fit in the usual standards of the category, such as, for example, the agent's pathology or ideological conviction. The “banality of evil” speaks of the relationship between the problem of the evil and the faculty of thinking or the absence of that faculty because it is not based on reflection.⁴⁶ The banality of evil directed at enslaved workers reveals the exercise of biopolitics on bare lives considered politically worthless. Violence and control over their bodies take place with impunity from a moral economy that justifies these acts insofar as they are directed at those considered socially irrelevant and, therefore, disposable.

The “banality of evil”, in this sense, comes close to the idea of the superficiality. The attitudes resulting from this specific manifestation of the evil appear as trivial or banal, since they don't start from any specific stimulus, interest or volition of the perpetrator of evil, nor has roots in demonic forces of the same. The “banal evil”, therefore, is a superficial and extreme social phenomenon. Superficiality means that it has no roots in human nature or bad motives. For Hannah Arendt, Eichmann was the exact metaphor for the “banality of evil” and what impressed her was *the abyss between the monstrosity of the acts committed and the non-volitive and superficial root of the agent*.⁴⁷

In view of these reflections and returning to the abusive scene alluded in the beginning of the text, I ask: what allows the banality of evil by farmers or their employees in relation to workers? In other words, what allows physical and psychological violence, as well as the degrading work conditions to which workers are subjected, to be perceived, by the farmers or their representatives, as common aspects of the productive activity of the farms?

The banality of actions against Brazilian rural workers appears explicitly in the speeches of farmers expressed in the media. The reports don't reveal moral constraints when referring to these actions, as shown in the example below:

⁴⁵Before the trip in search of work, many workers had a deficient legal existence, because they didn't have identity documents, nor even a birth certificate. It becomes, therefore, an existence without rights that causes a series of social and psychological problems. Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004, 143.

⁴⁶Newtom Bignoto, Eduardo Jardim Moraes, et al, *Hannah Arendt: Diálogos, reflexões, memórias*. (Belo Horizonte: Editora da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2003), 144-145.

⁴⁷Newtom Bignoto, Eduardo Jardim Moraes, et al, *Hannah Arendt: Diálogos, reflexões, memórias*. (Belo Horizonte: Editora da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2003), 142. On the “banality of evil” see also Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

*J.A. (farmer), when received a journalist from Le Monde, guaranteed that he didn't use slave labor. 'He expressed surprise that the Catholic Church showed compassion for the workers and not for him, a 'pionner', who, with sweat, had built an expressive heritage. He felt wronged, as he benefited the poor by offering work. For him everything was simple: those who owe are obliged to pay, even working under physical coercion; until the debt is paid off, it must be retained on the farm.'*⁴⁸

At the same way, when their names are included in the "dirty list", a register that publishes names of employers (individuals or juridical entities such as companies) caught in the exploitation of the workers in conditions like slavery⁴⁹, the farmers present themselves to the Labor Court as productive individuals, altruists and pioneers whose enterprises seek the country's growth through the generation of jobs and the payment of taxes.

Regarding the slave labor practices and the mechanisms of control and coercion exercised against workers, they are referred to as common "labor irregularities". In this way, they trivialize the treatment received by the workers in their farm, as well as they can transfer the responsibility of the problem to their employees (farm managers, for example) or justify the practice by the need and by the regularity with which it occurs.⁵⁰

The "banality of evil", exemplified in these justifications, is not restricted to the hierarchical relationships that permeate the farms, specially between farmers or their employees and workers, but it seems to be part of a larger structure marked by the politicization of life, in which the body it is the new subject of the politics. This structure, fundamental to the constitution of the modernity, is called by Foucault as biopolitics. In it, the natural life of man is implicated in the mechanisms and calculations of power, which implies the decision, established in all society, about the lives that are no longer politically relevant. As irrelevant lives and, therefore, without value and social importance, they become bare and, for that matter, can be eliminated by a sovereign power with impunity.

Sovereign is the one who decides on the value or the devaluation of life, like pointed out Mbembe.⁵¹ Sovereign power, in this sense, can emanate from the Nation-State, but it can be personified by the farmer whose sovereignty, inside and outside the farm, can be built from different factors

To maintain the bondage system and guarantee the performance of the work, the internal organization of the farms is based on a hierarchy that varies according to the activity developed

⁴⁸ Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004, 317.

⁴⁹ On the "dirty list", see Marco Túlio Viana, "Trabalho escravo e 'lista suja': um modo original de remover uma mancha", In *Possibilidades Jurídicas de Combate à Escravidão Contemporânea*, 2007, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---ilo-brasilia/documents/publication/wcms_227539.pdf. Bales (2007) and Kevin Bales, *Ending Slavery. How we free today's slaves*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004,, 303, 3015.

⁵¹ Achille Mbembe. "Necropolitics", *Public Culture* 15(1) (Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 11-40.

in it (livestock, farming, charcoal etc.) and the size of the occupied area. This creates a chain of command to which the worker is subjected. Behind (or above) this hierarchical structure is the owner, the absolute owner of the power, as well as, at the end of this chain of command, are the victims of the enticement subjected to an intricate structure of coercion.⁵²

The farm owner can live in urban headquarters, outside of the property. When this occurs, he designates managers who manage their land and are responsible for the activities carried out there. In these cases, relations between farmers and workers are not frequent, which can make them oblivious to the conflicts and tensions that occur on their property. If the owners live on the farms, regular contact with workers is established. Often, farmers can be the agents of grooming.

Whether they reside or not on the farms, the owners agree with the working conditions and the coercion mechanisms exercised on their temporary workers, although the presence of intermediaries contributes to the alleged "ignorance" of the owner about the excesses committed against the workers.

In the larger farms, the number of fixed workers increases, being able to count on a sophisticated structure, which includes technology and specialized labor in several areas of knowledge, such as agronomists and veterinarians. The recruitment of temporary workers, in these cases, may be carried out by an employee called "contractor" (*empreiteiro*).

Although these farms are linked to the modern and efficient capitalism, connected to the international market, they have forms of production based on the devaluation of the lives of their workers, whose bodies are made available to the capital and agribusiness.

The hierarchy established inside the farms seems to be organized to ensure the control, care and enjoyment of the bare or worthless lives of the enslaved workers, showing the biopolitical structure behind the chain of command of these rural properties.

Outside the farms, the sovereignty of the farmers is recognized for their political strength. Many exercises power and influence in different instances of national politics, either directly, occupying, effectively, positions in City Halls, Municipal Legislative Chambers, State Governments and in the National Congress, or, indirectly, for having close ties with representatives of their interests in these positions. In addition, farmers can count with the connivance of the police, who can act as part of the instruments of repression used against workers. There are many cases in which local authorities, instead of registering reports of abuses suffered by fugitive workers, take the workers back to the "cats" who hired them.⁵³

Owners of surprising political and economic strength, farmers embody the sovereign power, which guarantees impunity and generates a recurrence in the crime of reducing people to conditions like slavery. The lives and bodies of the workers become the place, *par excellence*, of

⁵² Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004, 238.

⁵³ The success of the farmers who settled down in the state of Pará, for example, depended, to a large extent, on their ability to transform the military and civilian police into their allies. Private farmers' militias are frequently formed and maintained with the participation of the police officers. The main victims of the militias are rural workers, religious, environmentalists, activists in defense of human rights and leaders of the unions in the countryside. For more information, see Eric Nepomuceno, *O massacre: Eldorado dos Carajás: uma história de impunidade*, (São Paulo: Editora Planeta Brasil, 2007) and Ricardo Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra*, 2004.

their sovereign decision. Letting them die, ordering their execution or removing the minimum conditions of survival (drink water, food, accommodation, medical care) in the workplace, becomes “common practices” justified by the productive activities. In addition, these practices are also made possible by the process of unrooting workers, which, by disconnecting them from their social and moral references, contributes to the devaluation of their lives.

As mentioned, the *peões de trecho* are emblems of the social unrooting. Their trajectories become a kind of denial of life. Captured and captives in the network of the progressive indebtedness, with alcoholic problems, as well as, subject to affective, economic and geographic isolation, they enter in a life without perspective whose end can be tragic, as mentioned Figueira. This seems to transform them into individuals defined by Agamben as incurably lost whose lives are unworthy of being lived. For them, although there is no evident consent to death, it can often not run to a will to live.

The poverty and social exclusion that permeate the lives of young men workers before leaving their parents' homes, combined with the process of social unrooting and the context of modern biopolitics, make death and violence against them viable, without generating questions and moral constraints by those who exercise these actions, exemplifying the “banality of evil”.

For the owners of rural enterprises, their sovereign power authorizes the exercise of the banal evil. For the farm's employees, death and violence against the workers are attitudes covered by orders, therefore, justified by the fulfillment of duty and absolute loyalty to the farmer's sovereign power. Their actions don't seem to be motivated by personal reasons or interests clearly defined. The wickedness exercised, also among the employees, appears as a superficial attitude without reflection and roots, since it isn't based on causes or stimuli on the part of those who exercise it.

If the banality of evil is likely to be exercised when linked to lives devoid of political value and social importance, colonial slavery in Brazil seems to have established a cultural pattern of exploitation and usufruct of these lives. By instituting a mode of production that is based on the devaluation and, in that case, on the dehumanization of the other, a cultural pattern of behavior was created to guide hierarchical relationships based on this devaluation. This political and social devaluation of the life makes possible the subjection of the bodies of those considered worthless to degrading working conditions and any forms of violence.

In the colonial period, life without value and, therefore, the body to be made available belonged, especially, to the enslaved African brought to Brazil. Currently, the devaluation of the life doesn't seem to be confined to a specific social category. Social, skin color, regional and sex criteria can make the poor, the non-white, the Northeastern and the women the preferred targets of this devaluation, which is accentuated when their lives are perceived as part of that social unrooting process.

The sexual violence against the women also seems to show the banality of evil associated with the process of social unrooting. When analyzing rape from the point of view of raped

women and imprisoned rapists, Machado⁵⁴ reveals the deprivation of political value and the social importance of women victims of this violence, in the eyes of rapists. For them, rape was nothing more than a banal sexual act, without any exception, so they did not (or refused to) understand why they were in prison. The narratives analyzed, in general, spoke of the woman, the target of the rapists's action, as someone disconnected from social ties recognized and valued by them, which justified the action. Because she was not perceived as a wife, mother, daughter or sister of someone, preferably of some other man, her body could be made available to those who wanted to enjoy it.

Like the violence exercised against enslaved workers, which includes sexual violence, as mentioned, the devaluation of women analyzed by Machado also seems to be part of a larger scenario marked by the politicization of life. In it, a sovereign power personified in the figure of the rapist was able to decide which lives were no longer politically important and when they could be subjected to violence, without generating moral questions by those who exercised it.

Conclusion

The cited sexual violence against the worker reveals an important dimension of the contemporary slavery. Forcing fugitive workers to practice oral sex on a farm's employee as a form of punishment seems to run counter to a possible argument about the dehumanization of contemporary slaves by those who are hierarchically superior to them. If they had been considered commodities, the act, which clearly affects the notions of honor, masculinity and dignity of those involved, might not have been thought as an effective form of punishment.

The choice for this punishment seems to demonstrate that employees and enslaved workers share the same universe of values, beside the same human condition. Otherwise, it would be much more difficult to apply this type of sexual punishment to destroy the worker's manhood. Workers subjected to conditions like slavery may in the future be inserted into the productive system of the farms as employees. In addition, many employees, including "cats," may have the same social background of the enslaved workers.

In this sense, they know the masculinity building process that involves enslaved youth, because they also have experienced this process. Precisely because of this, they know what values are at stake in the lives of the young men when they were coopted for the work on the farm. Sharing these values ensured that a particularly effective form of punishment was chosen. The also symbolic violence present in the act and in the context of contemporary slavery affects the honor of the worker, who, submitted to a position of complete passivity, was deprived of the possibility of fulfilling his masculine role in several ways. Whether in the sexual sense, defined by an active way of exercising sexuality, or in the social and economic sense defined by their ability to provide a family through their own work. Shame, which accompanied the worker

⁵⁴ Lia Zanotta Machado. "Sexo, Estupro e Purificação", *Série Antropologia*, Vol. 286, (Brasília: Departamento de Antropologia/Universidade de Brasília, 2000), pp.1-38.

subjected to the abuse, can play an impressive role in controlling his actions, both on the farm and outside.

The effectiveness of this form of punishment was also because it was exemplary, since, symbolically, it could be extended to other workers who shared that masculinity complex. This made that form of punishment unique and different from other kinds of punishment, such as beatings of fugitive workers which are equally assisted by all. If beatings can reinforce the virility of the workers who suffer it, sexual violence in front of others can destroy one man's virility affecting his public image, inhibiting new attempts to escape.

Situations like this seem to reveal that in contemporary slavery, the politicization of life takes on characteristics because it is associated with two apparently inherent processes in the lives of these workers: the building masculinity and the social unrooting. The first one enables internal trafficking in persons by stimulating the departure of young people in search of the fulfillment of the male social role that was culturally defined for them. The second is the result of the trafficking and aims at the forced labor that disconnects young people from their ties with the family left behind and with their places of origin, gradually erasing their social and moral references, contributing to destitute their lives of value.

Understanding such processes contributes to tackle contemporary slavery in Brazil, revealing the need for preventive actions that focus on the young rural worker who, potentially, can migrate and end up subjected to debt slavery, not just the worker rescued from conditions like the slavery. It reveals cultural forms of control of enslaved workers, such as moral debt and shame, that results from the manipulation of values associated with honesty and honor.

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