

Slavery and Racism as Major Factor of Structural Inequalities in Brazil in the Long-run

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Inequality in the Portuguese-Speaking World: Its History, Politics and Culture, edited by Francisco Bethencourt and published in 2018, shows how inequality took different forms in different parts of the world. From literature to politics, from economics to gender, from culture to welfare, this volume highlights the diverse experiences of dealing with prejudice throughout the Lusophone world. Recently, Bethencourt has devoted his attention to understanding different kinds of inequality. Since the publication of *Racism and Ethnic Relations in the Portuguese-Speaking World* in 2012, edited with Adrian Pearce, and especially since the publication of his acclaimed book *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* in 2014, Bethencourt has courageously tackled the subjects of ethnic relations, race, and racism(s). For this volume, he has invited scholars to consider the problem of inequality, and the final product offers a broad picture of how inequality has been treated in different academic fields.

In studying inequality, it is critical to pay attention to both slavery and racism in the Western world. While racial prejudice also existed in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, the slavery and racism of the Western world moulded societies to the extent that these two factors became a foundational building block of these societies' social organization. This is an undeniable fact. I refer here to places like Angola and Mozambique, Cape Verde and the "Rivers of Guinea," where Portugal made its presence felt since the beginning of Portuguese overseas expansion. In these places (and many others not under Portuguese control, such as Dahomey), Portuguese merchants, in association with local elites, extracted wealth from the enslavement and forced transportation of millions of enslaved Africans to various parts of the Atlantic world. The removal of African labor to be exploited in the plantation economies of the Americas during the early-modern period and European imperialism starting in the 1870s are responsible for many of the social and economic problems that the African continent faces up to this day—as Walter Rodney pointed out many decades ago.

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But the impact of the Atlantic slave trade was also felt in societies on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, such as in Brazil. This is not surprising since Brazil was Portugal's major Atlantic colony from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. It is therefore understandable that five out of the volume's fourteen articles are dedicated to Brazilian case studies. As Bethencourt stresses in both the volume's introduction and his chapter, the very basis of inequality in Brazil in the colonial period was shaped by the division between free and enslaved people, between categories of whiteness and blackness (205). Indeed, the forced labor of enslaved Africans was responsible for the development of the Portuguese economy in the Americas. According to recent estimates from the *Slave Voyages* dataset, some 3.8 million enslaved Africans arrived in Brazil's main ports of Rio de Janeiro, Salvador da Bahia, and Recife between the early sixteenth century and the early 1820s. Even after Brazil gained independence from Portugal in 1822, its leaders elected to preserve slavery and the country's share in the transatlantic slave trade, thereby challenging Britain and its mission to end human trafficking. Brazilian authorities colluded with the imperial government to continue trafficking hundreds of thousands of African captives into Brazil, despite a decree prohibiting the slave trade after 1831. All this proves the dependence of Brazil's economy on enslaved labor, and the latter aspect is particularly important this year, when Brazil celebrates the bicentennial of its independence from Portugal. Moreover, it demonstrates how this new nation excluded the black population from its political project of emancipation, whether African or Brazilian-born, enslaved, freed (*libertos*), or free.

The role of slavery in the formation of Brazilian society and its impact on the present-day are treated in the chapters by Laura de Mello e Souza and Lilia Schwarcz. Mello e Souza, while recognizing that slavery was the "point of departure" through which to understand the "violence and inequality" in Brazilian society, draws attention to other forms of inequality in Brazil. She especially highlights the multitude of poor men and women who lived in the cities of colonial Brazil, particularly in the region of Minas Gerais. Most of these people were attracted to this region by the mining boom. Mello e Souza has written at length on the growing number of *desclassificados*—"the outcasts, or those who have been denied even a classification"—living in this region's colonial cities (184). Although the *desclassificados* abounded in Brazilian society, their exact numbers are unclear. By comparison, the number of blacks and mestizos exceeded seventy-five percent of the population of eighteenth-century Minas Gerais.

If Mello e Souza is right in emphasizing other forms of inequality in Brazilian society, perhaps we should look more closely at slavery because it also affected the participation of

this group of outcasts within local communities. For instance, the eighteenth-century Brazilian Gold Rush resulted in the transportation of a growing number of enslaved Africans from the coastal cities of Salvador da Bahia and Rio de Janeiro to the *sertões*—the hinterlands—of Portuguese America. Moreover, vagrants were mostly “mulattoes, mixed-race Indians, or freed slaves” according to eighteenth-century reports from regional Portuguese authorities (188). As Mello e Souza also shows, these authorities also sought to turn enslaved Africans into quasi-militiamen who would capture *quilombolas*—runaway slaves. Ultimately, what the author demonstrates is that although Brazilian society experienced other forms of inequality, slavery continued to play a leading role in the social and racial relations throughout the colony. Moreover, in focusing on Minas Gerais, Mello e Souza did not take the opportunity to analyze how poverty affected people in other Brazilian regions, particularly those regions where slavery was a central component of society.

Comprehensive knowledge of the organization of Brazilian slavery derives from a 1980s current now known as the New Historiography of Slavery. Scholars such as João José Reis, Silvia Lara, Robert Slenes, Hebe Mattos, Sidney Chalhoub, Mariza de Carvalho Soares, and more recently Flávio dos Santos Gomes, Beatriz Mamigonian, Jaime Rodrigues, and Wlamyra Albuquerque, among others, have examined the organization of the system of slavery throughout (Portuguese) Brazil and its history. Mello e Souza recognizes that the historiography of slavery in Brazil “has grown more sophisticated,” but that it has also become “increasingly fragmented and focused on empirical cases” (183). She disapproves of this approach, which in her opinion “seems to manifest certain perplexity, or at least indecision, about the possibility of arriving at general explanations” (183). In my opinion, however, historical research based on case studies—a characteristic of this historiographical school—seems more a methodological or political choice rather than some perplexity or indecision. In fact, scholars seem to have shifted the focus of their analyses from that of the slave system, a theory-driven approach to the study of slavery, towards the enslaved themselves—their strategies of resistance, the makeup of slave families, perspectives on freedom, and the religiosity and biographies of enslaved Africans. For decades, slavery studies in Brazil were dedicated to understanding how the system of slavery functioned from a structural point of view—the exploitation of the enslaved on sugar and coffee plantations, and the relationship between them and their masters (albeit from the perspective of the masters).

This is not to say that the scholars associated with the New Historiography of Slavery have ignored this issue. Luiz Felipe de Alencastro’s *O trato dos viventes*, for example, has

examined the links between Brazil and Angola in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Instead of using a biographical perspective, Alencastro demonstrates how the transatlantic slave trade resulted from the wish of the Portuguese crown to agriculturally develop the colony of Brazil. The idea that “without Negroes there is no Pernambuco, and without Angola there are no Negroes”, as argued by Father Antônio Vieira in the seventeenth century, captures the importance of the Southern Atlantic exchanges between West-Central Africa and Brazil in the formation of the latter. This topic was almost entirely ignored by scholarship before the 1980s.

In 2011, Sidney Chalhoub published “The Precariousness of Freedom in a Slave Society (Brazil in the Nineteenth Century),” an article about the perils of the re-enslavement of freed people in nineteenth-century Brazil. The possibility of being re-enslaved shows how pervasive slavery was in Brazilian society. In his 2012 book *A força da escravidão: ilegalidade e costume no Brasil oitocentista* (*The Force of Slavery: Illegality and Custom in Brazil in the Nineteenth Century*), Chalhoub discusses the enduring force of slavery, or the illicit continuation of the transatlantic slave trade in an era of abolition and emancipation. João José Reis, conversely, has researched those enslaved who were also slave masters—slave-owners, he calls them—in nineteenth-century Bahia. In analyzing manumission and baptismal records, Reis established that these slave-owners represented as much as nearly ten percent of all records between 1800 and 1850. As Reis argues in a 2021 working paper “Slaves who Owned Slaves in Nineteenth-Century Bahia,” “slaves who owned slaves did not challenge the system, of course; on the contrary, they abided by its rules and in a way reinforced them, even if their mere existence challenged, symbolically at least, the conventions—or a certain conventional model—of modern-era chattel slavery” (17). This underlines how slavery was embedded in Brazilian society in ways that historians are still in the process of discovering and uncovering.

As important as synthesis works may be, I argue that the Brazilian historiography of slavery became more relevant and sophisticated after historians abandoned structural analyses and dove deep into the sources. Slavery is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon, and as such, regional analyses have shown how it took different forms in different parts of Brazil.

Yet there are scholars who have gained much from structural analysis. Various historians have engaged with what is being referred to as the “Second Slavery,” or the transformation of nineteenth-century slavery under capitalism and industrialization. The relationship between capitalism and slavery has roots in the debate started by Eric Williams with his 1944 publication *Capitalism and Slavery*. This debate has intensified and become more

influential since the late 1980s. In Brazil, for instance, historians Rafael Marquese and Tâmis Parron, among others, have analyzed the development of slavery in the Vale do Paraíba. They were especially interested in the relationship between the rise of slavery in coffee growing regions, the transatlantic slave trade, and the production of tropical commodities for international markets.

Put differently, in the historiography of slavery, global and structural analyses have not been neglected. But this school has paid more attention to the living conditions of the enslaved and their strategies for survival—economically, socially, and culturally—in a society like Brazil's. This school also recognizes that the effects of slavery exist beyond abolition. After all, once slavery was abolished, the black population was confined to subalternity through limited labor market mobility and lower wages.

The racism resulting from over 350 years of slavery has affected the lives of Afro-descendants in present-day Brazil. As Schwarcz shows in her chapter, diverse social indicators reveal that the black population has been affected more severely by inequality than its white counterpart. This relates to the level of education, death rates, public health, employment, wages, etc. Even if not all problems of Brazilian society can be attributed to slavery and racism, Schwarcz's data shows that these two factors nevertheless played a significant role in creating the inequality of present-day Brazil. This statistical data leaves no room for doubt: racism is still a major problem in Brazilian society and affects the lives of as many as seventy percent of Afro-Brazilians. Some political campaigns from the 2000s sought to reduce inequality and close the gap between the black and white population through the introduction of a minimum wage, income redistribution, and the expansion of social security programs. In today's politics, however, these campaigns are under attack, as shown by Celia Lessa Kerstenetzky in her chapter. Even the policies and practices of affirmative action—such as a successful educational program aimed at increasing the number of enrolled Afro-Brazilians at Brazilian universities—are now under attack, which shows that earlier efforts to end racial inequality in Brazil are far from over.

In conclusion, *Inequality in the Portuguese-Speaking World* provides rich material for discussion about how slavery and racism shaped Brazilian society. The volume will certainly lead to much debate among scholars of different fields concerning global inequality. Its publication is very welcomed.

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Francisco Bethencourt (ed.), *Inequality in the Portuguese-Speaking World: Global and Historical Perspectives. Portuguese-Speaking World: Its History, Politics and Culture*. Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2018. ISBN-10: 1845198468, 282 pages.

Bionote/ Nota Biográfica

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