

Antislavery and epidemic: Mathieu François Maxime Audouard's "*The Negro slave trade considered as the cause of yellow fever*" and the city of Rio de Janeiro in 1850

Kaori Kodama

Visiting researcher at the Casa de Oswaldo Cruz, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation
Av. Brasil, 4036/403
21040-361 Rio de Janeiro
RJ –Brazil
kaori@coc.fiocruz.br

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Abstract

The article "The Negro slave trade considered as the cause of yellow fever" (in Port.), by French physician Mathieu François Maxime Audouard (1776-1856), was published in 1850 in the newspaper *O Philantropo*, an organ of anti-slave trade propaganda that circulated in Rio de Janeiro from 1849 to 1852, with a number of physicians as members. Translated from the original and published during the yellow fever epidemic that hit Rio de Janeiro, the text affords an opportunity to reflect on the positions about slavery that were held by Brazilian physicians at the time the law against the slave trade was promulgated in Brazil.

Keywords: antislavery; yellow fever; medical thought; Imperial Brazil; history.

The 1850s was a landmark period in the history of Imperial Brazil as far as government initiatives to change the country's labor and land property structures. It can be argued that both the Eusébio de Queirós Law (1850), which banned slave traffic, and the Land Law (1850), which regulated land holdings, signaled the introduction of free labor in Brazil, although many hurdles would still need to be overcome before changes were made in the slavery structure. Projects to establish free labor and eradicate slavery would only come to fruition at the close of the imperial period, in 1888, following decades of serious economic, political, and ideological roadblocks, according to Costa (1998), Carvalho (1996), and others.

Although slavery continued throughout the Empire, with even greater numbers of slaves entering the country in the 1840s, and although the eradication of slavery had been a topic of debate since Brazilian Independence (Alencastro, Renaux, 1997), it can be maintained that in 1850 greater space was devoted to discussions about ending the slave trade, reinforced by an emphasis on the question of 'foreign colonization', especially of European origin. One of the forums for antislavery activism was the newspaper *O Philantropo*, which published the text presented as part of the present article.

The periodical first came out on April 6, 1849¹, when the country was debating the eradication of the slave trade and promulgation of the Eusébio de Queirós Law. Founded by José Antonio Vale Caldre Fião, *O Philantropo* took shape in Rio de Janeiro as a propaganda organ against the slave trade and its agents, i.e., slave traders. Comprising men committed to the idea of colonizing Brazil, the whole of the editorial board weighed in on the 1850s political debates about ending the transatlantic slave trade. The weekly newspaper was in fact so tightly linked to the context of the abolition law that its circulation life – every Friday, from 1849 to 1852 – was restricted to the conjunctural moment that spawned discussions about the Eusébio de Queirós Law, promulgated on September 4, 1850. In its Humanitarian, Scientific, and Literary sections, the law addressed the various evils of slavery.²

From the very beginning, the newspaper received contributions from liberal anti-slave trade activists, like Frederico Leopoldo César Burlamarque and Leopoldo Augusto da Câmara Lima,³ and it came to include politically influential men among its subscribers. Shortly after the periodical entered circulation, its founders created the Society Against the Slave Trade and for the Civilizing of Indigenous Peoples (*Sociedade Contra o Tráfico e Promotora da Civilização dos Indígenas*); according to the *Almanaque Laemmert*, which was published through 1858 and headed by Nicolau Rodrigues França e Leite, the Society came into being on September 7, 1850. From that date on, *O Philantropo* was known as the organ of the Society Against the Slave Trade.⁴ This particular date was chosen for inaugurating the Society as a way of commemorating Brazil's independence and thus leaving it clear that the Society included among its goals the national concern of foreign colonization.

According to the newspaper's editorials, the society advocated ending the slave traffic, expatriating Africans, formulating ways of soliciting European labor, enforcing a policy of "civilizing Indians," and creating agricultural schools. With this nationally focused program in mind, the newspaper and Society intended to remain above party interests. According to the *Almanaque Laemmert*, it had more than 300 members.

Aside from its large number of members and the plural nature of this membership, another quite interesting fact is that two of the newspaper's editors were physicians educated

at Rio de Janeiro's Faculdade de Medicina. The first, Antonio José do Vale Caldre e Fião, served from 1849 to 1851 and was still a medical student when he took the position. Caldre e Fião had begun working at an apothecary shop when still a child and had become an assistant apothecary at the Santa Casa de Misericórdia hospital in Rio Grande do Sul. In 1838, he moved to Rio de Janeiro, where he embraced the teachings of homeopathy and in fact wrote a manual for use at Rio de Janeiro's Homeopathic School. Caldre e Fião completed his medical training by defending a thesis at the Faculdade de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro in 1851, in which he wrote on three points: water quality, spontaneous evolution, and heterogeneity. His activities at institutions like the Sociedade Auxiliadora da Indústria Nacional, founded in 1827 to foster the development of Brazilian industry, and his publication of texts that defended the substitution of slave labor with free labor were part of his anti-slavery militancy. He eventually returned to the province of Rio Grande do Sul, where he spent the remaining years of his life in the colony of São Leopoldo, founded by German immigrants. Saturnino de Souza e Oliveira was the second editor of *O Philantropo*, heading the paper from 1851 to 1852; he also received his medical diploma from the Faculdade de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro, in 1847. Souza e Oliveira published "Memoria sobre os meios de abolir a escravidão no Imperio do Brasil" (Memoir on how to abolish slavery in the Brazilian Empire) in the pages of the periodical. Both editors combined their practice of medicine with a concern for slaves and the poor.

In addition to these two editors, the list of members included other names from the medical profession, like Francisco de Paula Cândido, Emílio Joaquim da Silva Maia, Manoel Maria de Moraes e Vale, and Ezequiel Correia dos Santos. Although these men may have endorsed different perspectives in their professional and public practices, it is interesting to note that they all lent active support to an organ of anti-slave trade propaganda. What is more revealing about their participation is that their criticisms of the slave trade were directly tied to public health issues. As part of the arguments against slavery and the slave trade, some articles put forward that the population faced risks because of a disease of alleged African origin. The document transcribed in these pages addresses the question of the yellow fever epidemic.

The newspaper's circulation life coincided with the major yellow fever epidemic that hit various points of Brazil, especially the capital of the Empire. Five articles on the epidemic in Rio de Janeiro were printed in 1850.⁵ The first articles appeared in March, height of the epidemic and the month when around 80.9 people per day were stricken by the fever, according to an assessment by João Vicente Torres Homem (1885), later ratified by Franco (1969). According to the official history of the epidemic in Rio de Janeiro, the disease arrived through the port of Salvador in November 1849 aboard the US ship Navarre, whose crew comprised nine men. This information can be found in the records of Avé-Lallemant, who detected the first cases of yellow fever in the city, which included the Navarre sailors, all lodged at a public-house run by an American called Frank.⁶ In February 1850, the Imperial Academy of Medicine officially recognized the existence of the sickness in Rio de Janeiro. In the midst of these discussions, *O Philantropo* then began a series of articles on the matter, such as "A epidemia reinante" (The raging epidemic, Mar. 15, 1850)

and “A epidemia reinante ou a febre africana” (The raging epidemic or African fever, Mar. 22, 1850), which highlighted the relation between the “raging epidemic” and slave traffic.

The article entitled “Os contrabandistas de carne humana e a epidemia reinante” (Smugglers of human flesh and the raging epidemic, Mar. 29, 1850) identified the African slave trade as the main cause of the disease in Rio de Janeiro, described as “a fever from Africa, strongly characterized by black vomit.” This article, as well as the previous one, persisted in calling the illness ‘African fever’. In another text, published on May 31, 1850 – “O exemplo do caráter infectante da febre amarela da Costa da África” (The example of the infective character of yellow fever from the Coast of Africa) – the newspaper warned about the case of a British warship that in 1846 was supposedly infected by an “evil, contagious” fever, after having been on the African coast; the insinuation was that this contagious disease was yellow fever. Like the crew on the British steamer that had contracted the fever, the sailors on the slave ships that made port in Bahia in late 1849 supposedly caught the disease; from there the sickness, carried by slave vessels, allegedly spread to Rio de Janeiro, which previously had been immune to this exogenous evil. This contention reinforced the already commonplace representation of Brazil’s climate as a benevolent one while also blaming the epidemic on the slave trade.

In the newspaper, the reasons for the disease spreading in Rio de Janeiro were sometimes traced to the idea of an “evil” that was seen as divine punishment for the sin committed by “traders of human flesh”; other times, it was viewed in terms of re-interpretations of medical theses that laid blame for yellow fever on the slave trade. The latter opinion was held by French military physician Mathieu François Maxime Audouard, who had observed the disease in Barcelona in 1821. Audouard was born in Castres, southern France, in 1776, and after graduating in Montpellier in 1801, he had followed a medical career. He served in Italy for years and there wrote a number of papers on intermittent fevers, a topic of interest to him. His stance on yellow fever became known among nineteenth-century physicians because of his thesis about contagion as the means by which the disease propagated, although he believed that it originated from an infection.

As stated in the article transcribed in these pages, Dr. Audouard believed that yellow fever originated on slave ships. He argued that it did not derive from any particular climate, although heat could intensify it. He further held that the illness was an ‘infection’, whose cause was a very specific environment. According to him, in Barcelona it had appeared on Spanish slave ships, due to the atrocious hygiene that allowed the captives’ dejecta to permeate the vessel’s wood for long periods. This identification of slave ships as the disease’s site of origin meshed well with the problems under broad debate in 1850 and served as one more argument in efforts to press for the end of the slave trade.

Despite constant disagreements among members of the Central Public Hygiene Board (Junta Central de Higiene Pública) about how the epidemic spread – by infection or contagion – the contagionist explanation seemed to be gaining more and more adherents, given the idea that yellow fever had come from outside (Chalhoub, 1996, p.73). Yet until the epidemic actually hit, the theory of infection was the most accepted in Brazil.

Although his argument was distinct from the one put forward by Brazilian physicians prior to the epidemic, Maxime Audouard defended the idea that the cause of the fever was

the “putrid emanations” on slave ships, aided by the warm climate. The difference between one outlook and the other lie precisely in the originating cause of the disease. Furthermore, physicians in Brazil had reservations about the French doctor’s mixing this with the idea of contagion.

As pointed out by Chalhoub (1996), Audouard was already known among Brazilian doctors, since the Brazilian medical community had rebutted his theses in the 1830s. The *Revista Médica Fluminense*, journal of the Imperial Academy of Medicine (1835 [a que se refere este ano?]), had published “O comércio de escravos, considerado como causa da febre amarela” (The slave trade considered as a cause of yellow fever), which was an evaluation of Audouard’s survey investigating the correlation between yellow fever cases and the slave trade.⁷ The French physician had asked his colleagues from countries on the American continent to report on the appearance of disease cases following the arrival of slave ships. In May 1839, the journal’s editor contested Audouard’s position, since no cases of the disease had been registered along the Brazilian coast despite the steady arrival of slave vessels. In 1850, however, circumstances changed, and previous concepts about the disease and its means of propagation were revised, not only because of the epidemic but also because of the prevailing mood, which condemned slave traders and their practice.

Even though Audouard’s thesis was not accepted by most of Brazil’s key physicians, it should be emphasized that some of his ideas touched on the latter’s concerns when it came to slavery and the image of the country. One of his arguments that would certainly be embraced by the members of the Society Against the Slave Trade was his assertion that the disease had not originated in America because it had only been recorded there in 1694, in Martinique, where it was called “mal de Siam.” In affirming that the disease originated from the slave trade because it arose from ships that he called “foci of a special infection,” Audouard endorsed the positions defended in *O Philantropo*, both by blaming the slave trade for spreading the disease and by preserving a benign image of Brazil’s climate. The latter was essential to recruiting immigrants and to restoring the country’s reputation, often times painted unfavorably abroad by the press and by immigration companies.

NOTES

¹ *O Philantropo* was published by Leopoldo Augusto da Câmara Lima’s Typografia Philantropica. According to the records of the Municipal Chambers, dated Feb. 8, 1849, it was located at Rua do Lavradio, 44, Rio de Janeiro. A new entry, dated Mar. 21, 1850, states that it moved to number 27 on the same street (Berger, 1984).

² I would like to thank Vivian Zampa for her help researching *O Philantropo*.

³ According to David Eltis (1987, p. 115), Câmara Lima was on the British secret service’s list to receive financial aid to help maintain the newspaper.

⁴ Starting on Sept. 27, 1850, the periodical’s title began to include the name of the Society against the Slave Trade and for the Civilizing of Indigenous Peoples.

⁵ These five articles are in addition to the text by François Maxime Audouard, published twice: in the Sep. 27, 1850, and Jan. 24, 1851, editions. It is interesting to note that the second publication took place in 1851, after promulgation of the law banning the slave trade in Brazil. The relation between the slave trade and the epidemic was evidently still the object of debate.

⁶ Robert Avé-Lallemant (1851), however, disagreed with the idea that the epidemic had been imported. He adhered instead to the theory of infection as a means of propagating the disease and thus believed that the causes lay in the city's environment, which that year especially had had no rainfall that would dissipate the morbidic agents in the air.

⁷ It is possible that this evaluation of Audouard's thesis was written by Emílio Joaquim da Silva Maia, then the magazine's editor. I would like to thank Prof. Ana Maria Oda, of Unicamp's School of Medical Sciences, for this suggestion.

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