

Repression and changes in slave-like labor in Brazil: in the present time and uses of the past

Repressão e mudanças no trabalho análogo a de escravo no Brasil: tempo presente e usos do passado

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RESUMO

O objetivo do artigo é analisar um fenômeno recente da história social do trabalho no Brasil, designado como trabalho análogo a de escravo, caracterizado como crime pelo Código Penal, desde 1940. Fenômeno que atinge todos os continentes, é encontrado em países com níveis de desenvolvimento muito distintos. O trabalho escravo contemporâneo, como é conhecido, tem sido alvo de combate pela OIT e gerado a criação de políticas públicas para procurar extingui-lo. No Brasil, a ação dos Grupos de Inspeção Móvel, do Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego, e a Igreja católica, através da Comissão Pastoral da Terra, têm se destacado nas denúncias e repressão à sua utilização. Mas a despeito das imensas dificuldades encontradas nesse combate, as ações do Estado brasileiro têm conseguido resultados positivos, entre os quais uma maior conscientização dos trabalhadores ‘escravizados’ sobre suas próprias condições de vida e trabalho e, assim, sobre seus direitos. Palavras-chave: trabalho escravo; memória; políticas públicas.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to study a recent phenomenon in Brazilian labor history, called slave-like labor, defined as a crime since the 1940 penal code. Since it is a phenomenon that afflicts all continents, it is found in countries with distinct levels of development. Contemporary slave labor, as it is also known, has been targeted by the ILO and has resulted in the design of public policy to extinguish it. In Brazil the work carried out by the Mobile Labor Inspection Groups from the Ministry of Labor and Employment, and the Catholic Church, through the Pastoral Commission of Land, have been most important in making accusations related to this phenomenon and to its repression. In spite of the immense difficulties involved, the Brazilian state has achieved positive results, including an increased awareness among workers subjected to this practice about their own lives and working conditions and, thus, about their rights. Keywords: slave labor; memory; public policies.

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WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT

The final three decades of the twentieth century witnessed the global rise of a phenomenon identified as the dissemination of practices of ‘forced labor,’ according to the terminology of the International Labor Organization (OIT). This designation, consecrated by conventions which date from the 1920s, has been substituted in some concrete cases, such as that of Brazil, by ‘slave-like labor’ or ‘contemporary slave labor.’ The reasons which explain this new *boom* in the super-exploitation of workers have been highlighted in an already vast bibliography: on the one hand, are the processes of globalization and economic modernization, especially in relation to agricultural activities, associated with the increase in migration within countries and between them; and on the other, the advance of neo-liberal macro-economic orientations, which have resulted, amongst other consequences, in the state withdrawing from the labor market.

Approaching the question of slave-like labor in the recent history of Brazil involves facing the most dramatic side of social processes, such as the precariousness of legal rules for protecting labor, and internal migration to cities or regions on the agricultural frontier, amongst others. The ‘constitution’ of this form of compulsory labor in Brazilian society and the establishment of a designation to name it – events only analytically distinct, since empirically they have an indissoluble connection – can thus be understood as a strategy to discuss key problems in the contemporary world of work. Therefore, if this is a question which, from the quantitative point of view affects not some numerous specific sectors of labor, it has an exemplary and injunctive nature for the perception of everything related to labor market regulation in Brazil – and not only Brazil.

The characteristics of these contingents of workers are well known and discussed in the literature that has deals with the theme.¹ It involves people dislocated from their regions of origin, with low or no qualifications or education, living in miserable conditions and for this reason willing to ‘adventure’ in search of a work opportunity, considered non-existent where they are currently living. As various studies have highlighted, what marks this type of super-exploitation is the fact that it is led by large private companies (and no longer by states), which establish mechanisms of worker subjection. The latter may or may not be geographically isolated; may or may not be ‘foreigners;’ but are always controlled by physical violent and/or symbolic (indebtment), living in degrading and humiliating conditions for any human being. The question of the loss of liberty, in other words being the property of someone, a central

point in modern slavery (from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries), is no longer considered the touch stone for the conceptualization of this practice in the contemporary world. As a result, the hypothesis and guiding line of this reflection is that contemporary slave labor is a paradigmatic case of the 'end' of citizenship rights, and not just social rights of labor. For this reason its centrality as a historic event is not in the number of workers it affects, but in the inhumane and radical manner that it impacts them. Precisely for this reason the fight against contemporary slave is a precious indicator of how the rights of labor can function as the spearhead for the defense of human rights in a society which wants to be democratic.

The growth and spread of this phenomenon in societies and economies at the end of the twentieth century were accompanied by the growth of the attention given to it both by the ILO and numerous non-governmental organizations, academics from various disciplines, churches and clerics, who work with the 'poor,' as well as governmental authorities from various countries, who have developed policies to fight and prevent it. In order to have some quantitative idea of what we are talking about, according to 2005 ILO data, around 12.3 million people around the world are in this situation, of whom approximately 10 million were in Asia (notably China and India), 1.3 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, 700,000 in Africa and around 400,000 in countries identified as industrialized. According to Kevin Bales the figure is much higher, reaching approximately 27 million people, of whom almost 20 million are concentrated in countries in the Indian subcontinent; China has 250-300,000; the United States has 100-150,000 and Brazil, of particular interest to us, has around 100-200,000 people in this situation.²

Evidentially, producing all these numbers involves an enormous effort, taking into account the difficulties in locating and quantifying the occurrence of this practice. Precisely for this reason it is worth to use the data released by the Brazilian Ministry of Labor and Employment (*Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego* – MTE) about its inspection actions, which demonstrates both the continuity of the phenomenon in the country, despite its repression, and the persistence of the Brazilian state in sustaining it, notwithstanding the slow and partial results obtained. Between 1995 – when the Ministry of Labor created the Mobile Inspection Groups – and 2007 23,405 workers were rescued, with those responsible having been served 15,888 indictments, resulting in compensation worth 30 million *reais*.³ In 2008, according to official records, 4717 workers were rescued, concentrated in the North, Northeast and Central-West

regions; in 2009, 3572 workers were found, principally in the Southeast region, the most industrialized and richest part of Brazil.⁴

These are impressive numbers, especially if we consider that they are much more effective indicators for understanding how repression has become much more present, than evaluating if the number of people submitted to this type of exploitation has actually risen or fallen. However, even if the quantity of workers exploited has not been reduced, the hypothesis of this text is that after 15 years of actions combating it on the part of the state, with media coverage and campaigns, transformations must have occurred in the recruitment processes and use of this labor, as there have come to be growing risks in carrying out this activity. Transformations which are the result of ‘adaptations’ to a new reality, which recognizes the presence of the state, albeit in an asystematic manner and produces changes in the forms of self-recognition and mutual recognition of all involved in this perverse network of relations, whether they are ranchers/employers, intermediaries – called *gatos* (cats) in the current vocabulary –, or the workers themselves – the *peões*.

To understand this dynamic better, this text focuses on two questions, prioritizing, as a source, a set of interviews carried out in the 2000s.⁵ The first question is that of the establishment, based on the reports of the participants in this network, of a periodization of their experiences, which sought to give meaning to the passage of time, identifying the facts responsible for the alterations they felt. The second seeks to discover in this context the changes that have occurred in the profile of the figures of the worker and the so-called *gato*, who is the intermediary in this process. In other words, the *gato* is the one charged with recruiting workers, and is seen as a strategic element for understand the structuring of this type of economic practice, with its very deep cultural and political roots.

We use very few of statements or textual documents produced by the *gatos* and workers themselves, since access to them is very difficult for different reasons, although fear is always involved. As a result, as is usual, we seek these characters in the discourse of others, with whom they have direct contact, especially during actions of repression. Included here are some members of the Ministry of Labor and Employment, notably the Mobile Inspection Group, and members of the judiciary, notably the prosecutors of the Labor Prosecution Service (*Ministério Público do Trabalho* – MPT) and the magistrates from the Labor Courts, sometimes also participants in inspections. Finally, we will also use statements from Catholic clergy who are connected with the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra* – CPT), widely acknowledged to be

the first body to have denounced and organized itself to combat the practice of slave-like labor in Brazil, as well as the documentation of the Prelacy Archive of São Félix do Araguaia.⁶

DRYING ICE

The image of ‘drying ice’ is paradigmatic in describing the animus and the feelings of some of those involved in the repression of contemporary slave labor in Brazil, but I believe that it can be extended to other places in the world. What this image dramatically conveys is the idea of the uselessness of fighting a practice that the international community recognizes as criminal, but which defies the efforts of those who want to eradicate it, due to the complexity of its causes. The trajectory of the doctor and auditor/inspector of the Ministry of Labor, João Oliveira, from the Rio Grande do Norte Regional Bureau, is exemplary of this.⁷ A public servant for decades, he was involved in 1995 in the creation of the Mobile Inspection Groups, participating in the first actions carried out by them, due to his experience with rural workers in the Northeast. In a summarized, but precise, manner, he told us of his initial satisfaction with participating in the actions of these groups, ‘freeing’ workers found, in his words, in situations so repugnant that it was unimaginable, even for those used to dealing with the horrible conditions of rural work in the Northeast of Brazil. Dr. João also stated that the situation of the workers was worse than that of pigs, because the latter received food for fattening before being slaughtered.

The comparison of the situation of these workers with that of animals was constant in the description of the authorities from the Executive and Judiciary, which constitutes a rhetorical resource that is understandable due to the efficiency with which it captures and transmits the degradation to which these human beings are being subjected. As well as pigs, cattle are also referred to, since these workers are often used to clean the pasture for cattle rearing, which are well cared for and sold at high prices. The reports of the various inspectors and prosecutors from MPT, describing what they found in the actions carried out in these ‘first times’ are valuable but in a dual sense. On the one hand, they shape a type of standard of living and working conditions of those subjected to slave labor; on the other, they spoke to us of the ‘satisfaction,’ not in finding this situation – as they sought to emphasize straight away in the interviews –, but in being able to ‘liberate’ workers and punish, in the most efficient manner possible, those responsible. Added to this was a feeling of surprise and shock, since even being used to the disrespecting of labor legislation, the conditions

which they faced still shocked them, and overcame, in terms of cruelty and contempt for the human person, what they could have imagined.

The national secretary for the Labor Inspections in MTE, Ruth Vilela, creator of the Mobile Groups, stated that if we consulted the first few dozen lawsuits taken in 'these first times,' we would find a type of model, particularly when the labor was found on the large plantations of sugarcane or soybean, or on cattle ranches in the North, Center-West, and Northeast regions.⁸ The 'allotment' consisted of shacks covered by leaves or by black plastic, there were no bathrooms, kitchens, or suitable places to obtain water to drink or cook with. Workers slept in hammocks or on the ground, on straw mats, without receiving any protection equipment, not even shoes to walk in the forest, where they cut down trees and pulled up roots, a very heavy and dangerous task. Accidents and illnesses – especially malaria, typical of the Amazon region – were common, and medical care or medicines almost non-existent. Workers were brought from very distant areas, usually in the Northeast and the South, through intermediaries – the *gatos* who promised them good salaries and even an easy way to get rich. These workers were kept in their work places through a perverse process of indebtedness, which began even before leaving the place of origin, allied to open violence. They never received what they had been promised and often received nothing. A report about occurrences in the second half of the 1990s, could have been written in the 1970s, a moment when this type of practice commenced and spread in Brazil. This is what is proven by the declaration of Raimundo Dias Lima, dated 2 April 1972, in São Félix, Mato Grosso State, archived in the Prelacy of São Félix do Araguaia. Raimundo was a *gato*, since he says he worked as a 'contractor' for Agro Pecuária Roncador S.A., in Jaú plantation. He says:

I decided to ask to leave the plantation due to the lack of medical care, of payment, and the working conditions to which all plantation employees are subjected, as they are forced to work even when sick, and they can only leave the plantation when they are not able to do anything else. To maintain order the current foreman has two truncheons behind the doors, having received from the manager the order that he can kill *peões*, and that his liberty is guaranteed.⁹

In other words, what can be understood from the convergence of these statements, distant in time and made by people in diametrically opposed positions, is that violence and the basic characteristics of this practice are long established. Precisely for this reason we can identify in all the different reports

we read some forms of demarcating the passage of time, constructing a periodization which instigates reflections on its elements of continuity and discontinuity. In all of them, the 1970s were identified as a common starting point when the foundations of a network for its development were created. Brazil was living in a civil and military dictatorship, which implemented a land occupation policy for frontier lands in which it financed large and modern – in technological terms – agricultural enterprises. This triggered violent conflicts between the people already settled in these locations, generally as squatters (*posseiros*), who had to be evicted, and the new legal owners, whose most visible face was that of the managers sent to occupy the lands and resorting to any means to do this.

It also signified the need to mobilize a large contingent of labor which could not be found in the region, or it was of no interest to recruit workers there, for a series of very heavy tasks which could be carried out by unskilled workers, and who could thus be intensely exploited. The two points of this experience which initially impacted the North and Center-West of Brazil – in other words, the violence against those already living there and against the migrants brought by the large landholders – was primarily perceived and denounced by Church authorities, especially the CPT (Pastoral Land Commission). It is they who, even when severely threatened, denounced what had been occurring since the beginning of the 1970s. This was how the first reports reached newspapers in Brazil and the world, aided by the prestige of Bishop d. Pedro Casaldáliga. These soon became part of a greater struggle, namely the end of authoritarianism in the country, most especially from the end of the 1980s onwards.

The association between land occupation policies, understood as ‘national security,’ and the outbreak and consolidation of a specific form of worker exploitation, which would be called contemporary slave labor, thus became a fact of the history of the present time in Brazil. It was certainly for this reason that at the beginning only sectors of the Catholic Church could confront it, with there being no evidence of governmental concern, not even a greater awareness on the part of wider society. The inspectors interviewed recognized that they only became aware of these events in the context of re-constitution-alization at the end of the 1980s. However, as became clear, the return of democracy to Brazil was not at all translated into a change in the way this question was treated, which instead of cooling, gained intensity. For this reason, in accordance with the reports of the inspectors, prosecutors, magistrates, and those linked to the CPT, the first moment seen as involving a change in

how the question was dealt with is during the Itamar Franco administration [1992-1994], after the impeachment of Fernando Collor de Mello. According to the statements of Ruth Vilela, Joélho Oliveira and other inspectors, 1995 (the date of the creation of the Mobile Groups) to 2002 was a period of, at the same time, the initial repression and the learning of what was being fought.

As has been seen, familiarity with the terrible working conditions existing in the country for decades did not prevent a surprise with what was found at the eve of the twenty-first century. This was the time for some of 'sewing seeds' and reflecting on the new phenomenon, and for others of a rapid disenchantment with the effectiveness of inspection. The indicator seen as responsible for this disenchantment was the reoccurrence of cases which the inspectors began to face. In other words, previously liberated workers were found again in the same situation in other places, which makes evident the limits of repressive action and highlights the profound causes of this phenomenon: the great misery in which the population who are the target of his type of recruitment exist and the absence of government policies which can minimize this situation. To these facts was added what can be described as the problems of administration of Justice, which was not prepared for the punishment of this infractions. It did not matter who judged these crimes, whether it was the state or federal courts, as the penalties, when there was a condemnation, were very bland. This is an enormous problem which at the same time, explains the reoccurrence of the practice, despite the systematic inspection, and shows the clear limits faced by those involved in fighting it.

The so-called labor costs to be paid, for example, in practically all cases, were 'compensatory.' In other words, despite being fined and accused of a crime, and paying what was demanded, the businessmen caught made a profit from the radical exploitation of these workers, who received almost nothing and cost nothing, despite carrying out extremely hard tasks. This is a point reaffirmed by inspectors, prosecutors, and magistrates who 'learned' that only with the penalties from labor courts would it be very difficult to wage a good fight, and thus it was necessary to resort to other forms of punishment to expose those responsible financially and politically, in order to cause them damage in their pockets and public images. In addition, because the complexity of the causes which led these workers 'accept' to submit to such degrading conditions also led them back, sometimes more than once, to this condition. In other words, during 15 years of struggle against this practice, magistrates, prosecutors and inspectors saw various workers 'liberated' by Inspection Groups, and who had received their labor rights, being found again in the same situation

in another place. Undoubtedly this was fundamentally due to the impossibility, testified various times, of finding other employment, and/or due to shame of returning to their places of origin in the conditions they were in.

As Dr. Joélho summarized well, slave-like labor in Brazil could not be eradicated only with inspection/punishment, which was not even very effective. In other words, inspection ended up being much more a form of the state 'giving satisfaction' to Brazilian society and to the world, than an effective manner of fighting the phenomenon. For this reason he took the radical decision to leave the Mobile Groups. However, this did not occur with other inspectors and prosecutors, who demarcated 2003 with another periodization in the confrontation of this practice. That year article 149 of the Penal Code was revised, which had defined and punished the crime of slave-like labor since 1940.¹⁰ The result of pressure from a set of actors involved in this combat, the revision of the article did not increase the penalties, but expanded the description of the crime, which in addition to covering practices of restricting liberty by force and/or indebtedment, came to include the subjection of workers to exhaustive working days and degrading and humiliating living conditions.

Despite seeming small to the uninitiated, this judicial alteration signified a new politico-cultural interpretation of the phenomenon, since what was intended, in addition to demarcating the breaching of labor and civil rights (such as the deprivation of liberty), was to show it was also a crime against the rights of the human person. Fighting thereby gained distinct aspects, giving greater power to governmental agents. Powers that would be expanded in 2006, when the Superior Federal Court, judging a case that had been underway since 2003, established that federal courts were responsible for judging these crimes and not the state courts which, since they were more exposed to local interests, could have been the target of cooption or complicity. In short, what it is intended to highlight here in this article is the construction/layout of a periodization, full of meanings, which shaped a type of new time of existence of this phenomenon in Brazil. In this case it is important to report that during this combat, two fronts connected: repression and information, the actions of repression and those of information, aimed at clarifying workers and their families, both where they left from, as well where they arrived.

ÁGUA MOLE EM PEDRA DURA... (WATER DRIPPING DAY BY DAY...)

Looked at from another point of view, we can state that, even 'drying ice,' the presence of the state in regions where it was previously totally absent has

had impacts. The statement of Fr. Antônio Canuto, who arrived in the region of São Félix do Araguaia in the 1970s to help d. Pedro, is precious. He was one of the first to write denunciation letters to the Federal Police, reporting cases of slave labor, based on the reports of those who had fled and asked him for help. Speaking in 2008,¹¹ he recognizes that the recruitment of these workers has not changed much, principally because there are many miserable people in Brazil who, due to the need to work, still take the risk, despite knowing that there is a high chance that they are being deceived with false promises. However, he does identify changes, taking the case of São Félix as something to be considered. According to him the watershed between what existed in the 'past' and the 'present' is what he calls the 'greater awareness on the part of the *peões*,' as these workers are known. This awareness has been acquired in various forms: in the media, in newspaper and radio reports; through education ("there are now in São Félix schools and trained teachers"); and principally through the inspections of the Mobile Groups. According to Fr. Canuto, because the local *peões* have seen inspections, because they have been liberated, sometimes more than once, they have learned that they have rights, even in the horrible situations in which they find themselves: "the subject is already aware that he has to be respected... that he has the minimum security to do his work."

This learning, found to have been so fundamental, was a sophisticated and systematic enterprise carried out by various authors involved in the process of combating slave-like labor in contemporary Brazil. The CPT, standing out once again, in addition to helping workers who have escaped and who are in need of support, protection and legal advice, produces a set of informational material, alerting workers about this practice. The set includes posters, short stories and films, which for example alert workers about the dangers of being recruited by a *gato* and basically about the rights that all workers have. Participating in this initiative, concerned not just with combating but also preventing the problem, is the National Commission for Eradicating Slave labor (Conatrae),¹² which, alongside the National Mobile Inspection Groups from the Ministry of Labor and Employment, also produces material to alert workers assisted by the National Association of Labor Magistrates (Anamatra). The latter, especially through its Ombudsman's Office, has sought to establish an approximation with society in general, and with rural workers in particular. For this it has been carrying out campaigns aimed at describing the way recruiters operate and alerting preferential targets about their actions, as well as warning their families. In reality the majority of denunciations which the labor

courts receive are sent to the Labor Prosecution Service (MPT), which has also organized actions to clarify the rights of workers.

Some examples illustrate very well the contents of the communications it is intended to establish with the workers who are the target of this practice, as well as the importance of becoming, along with their families, agents in this struggle. CPT, MPT, MTE and Anamatra have all sought to act in this direction, which has undoubtedly has strengthened Fr. Canuto's diagnosis and highlights the importance of connections between the mechanisms of repression and prevention, by 'raising the awareness' of those subjected to slave-like labor. A good example of these efforts can be found on a CPT leaflet used to alert and guide these workers.

Workers, help to fight slave labor:

keep your eyes open to avoid becoming one.

If you get a job, on this leaflet write the name
of whoever hired you and the name of the plantation
also leave these information with your family
and the rural workers' union.

Liberty has no price.

As will be seen, all these agents sought to use as information material against slave-like labor, image and texts with language close to the population most affected by *gatos*. Among these the language of the *cordel* is used in a recurrent and apparently efficient manner to reach workers, largely from the North and Northeast, and to raise their awareness about the problem. Generally speaking, as can be seen in the two posters reproduced here (Figure 1) – examples of a large series with good circulation, used by CPT as well as Conatrae – workers are asked to say no to slave labor, to refuse offers and denouncing those who make them. Shown here are woodcuts from a well-know *cordel* artist, José Francisco Borges, who has received a Unesco prize in the Educational/Cultural Category, which gives the informational work even greater force.

All this shows that, even within many limits, the experiences of these workers have changed. While governmental authorities have learned to better define and repress slave-like labor,¹³ the *peões* have learned what inspection is, as well as what 'someone from the courts' is. A fact that is also found in the statements of MPT prosecutors and magistrates from the labor courts, is that courts in the countryside are identified by workers who managed to escape as a place to make accusations and to organize rescues, because they continue to

Cuidado com as propostas de trabalho que você recebe,
 Obtegar você a trabalhar por dívida é crime, é trabalho escravo.

Trabalho ESCRAVO. TEM GATO QUERENDO FAZER VOCÊ DE RATO. Diga não!



Pede atenção da pobreza
 que precisa trabalhar
 quando alguém lhe oferece
 vantagens pra melhorar
 tenha cuidado que sempre
 é pra lhe escravizar.

No Maranhão e Piauí
 Tocantins e no Pará
 em Goiás e Mato Grosso
 Pernambuco e Ceará
 Bahia e Minas Gerais
 também vão mistos pra lá.

Se alguém lhe convidar
 para desflorestamento
 prometendo boa casa
 bom salário e alimento
 tenha cuidado que talvez
 aumente seu sofrimento.

Eles quando lhe convidam
 não mostram nenhuma agrava
 mas todos que vão pra lá
 tornam-se deles escravos
 trabalham muito e não comem
 e não ganham nenhum centavo.

Muitos deixam a família
 a sustentar e seus filhos
 deixam sua região
 e seguem em outros caminhos
 para se tornarem escravos
 de um bando de mosquitos.

Cuidado com as propostas de trabalho que você recebe,
 Obtegar você a trabalhar por dívida é crime, é trabalho escravo.



CONTRA O TRABALHO ESCRAVO, chame os Federais.

Os mosquitos são os gatos
 que fazem dos pobres presas
 fáceis de se lidar
 por serem gente indefesa
 sem moradia e sem comida
 na lamangal da pobreza.

É longe se torna escravo
 de sol a sol trabalhando
 e a família faminta
 fica em casa esperando
 e quando se desengana
 fica com fome e chorando.

Se criam os filhos riquinhos
 sem terem o que comer
 e mãe se acaba logo
 vindo os filhos pedissem
 e o pai morre sozinho escravo
 pra o bandido esquicocer.

É assim o trabalho escravo
 conta dia a dia
 em São Paulo e Rio de Janeiro
 dentro dos casarais
 todos derramam suor
 vindos de Minas Gerais.

Há diferentes formas
 que usam os recrutadores
 mas a maior preferência
 é pelos trabalhadores
 que entendem bem dialeto
 dos estranhos ilustiores.

Mas também esperança
 que logo vai acabar
 o Ministério do Trabalho
 resolveu enfrentar
 e mandou fiscais ao campo
 pra o povo se libertar.

Figure 1 – Warning posters against slave labor using J. Borges woodcuts.

be afraid of the police. In these cases of accusations, judges have noted that it almost never involves a worker who was liberated. Generally those who flee are advised by someone who has had this experience. It is not uncommon for inspection teams to arrive at the indicated place and find people who had already been rescued, but who said that they had accepted the service because “they knew that, if it was too bad, they would be released by the Mobile Group.” In other words, many of these *peões* already include in their calculations the possibility of being rescued by the state, which on the one hand ‘facilitates’ the reoccurrence of cases and, on the other, shows how the question has changed, indicating how these men maneuver the few resources they have to alter an extremely adverse situation.

An episode that occurred in 1972 in the Prelacy of São Félix do Araguaia, is absolutely exemplary of what Michel de Certeau’s theory¹⁴ calls breaches of the social system, warning historians about how historic subjects use in a creative manner the actual mechanisms which oppress them to forge margins of liberty, sometimes decisive to their survival. This is the case of Pedro Alves dos Santos, who was found in conditions of slave-like labor on a plantation in the region and managed to leave freely, with a ‘document,’ which actually proved his situation as an enslaved worker.¹⁵ More specifically, this was an authorization from the *gato* Francisco Fernandes Silva which acknowledged that he had paid all his ‘debts’ and could pass by the guards who kept watch over the land without being ‘bothered.’ Evidentially, documents such as this, as very rare, as well as the notebooks in which the *gatos* record the values paid by the workers in exchange for food, water, labor instruments, cigarettes, etc. This is because they are destroyed quickly in the event of an inspection, although some of them exist in the lawsuits arising from MTE inspections, due to the action of the Mobile Groups, and are important proof for characterizing the crime. However, Pedro’s case is dually instructive. First, because he managed to leave with the ‘document,’ afterwards presenting it to the ‘authorities.’ For this reason it is currently in the archives of the Prelacy of São Félix do Araguaia (Figure 2). Second, because in conversations with Pedro, a while after his arrival, it became clear that this ‘document’ was made by Pedro himself; in other words, it was a false ‘document.’ Knowing that this type of ‘note’ signed by the *gato* was necessary to leave the plantation, Pedro produced it entirely, presented it and kept it, with the result that the mechanism of control and imprisonment became the instrument of his liberty and the accusation of the conditions in which the other workers lived.

1922
Autorização
Autoriza a chefia deicha isto
partador, Pedro Alves dos Santos
a sair e se já ascuteu seus Debitos
com amigo.
gato
Francisco Fernandes Silva
20/4/22
ARQUIVO
R. 3.8.3.10
FELIX

Fonte: Arquivo da Prelazia de São Félix do Araguaia

Figure 2 – Authorization for the release of a worker (forged by him).

Source: Archive of the Prelacy of São Félix do Araguaia

Looked at from the perspective of workers, an initial observation is that they do not see themselves as ‘slaves,’ identifying themselves instead as *peões*, a type of rural worker who does the heaviest work in the countryside. The evident face of this is that it is the work with the lowest skills, and which pays least, so it is only done by those without any alternative. The other side, often maneuvered by the *gato*, is that due to the strength need to do it, this work is for ‘real men,’ a type of praise and valorization of masculinity, which is shared and repeated by the *peões*. However, in this ‘second period’ of existence of slave-like labor in Brazil, the discourse of the *peões* demonstrates the multiple ambiguities and operations of identification being carried out by them.

A second observation is that while the *peões* do not see themselves as ‘slave workers,’ knowing of the existence and of more recent possibilities of the use of this designation, they have come to refer to it subtly in their discourse. Antônio José dos Santos, from Maranhão, evaluated that “work clearing *juquira* vegetation is really heavy. I only go there if there is no other way... People say that it is slave labor; I do not know if it is slave labor, but it must be, because it is so bad.”¹⁶ After more than a decade of fighting the practice and of publicizing the mechanisms involved, the *peões* know that the conditions to which they are subjected ‘are not very correct,’ especially when they are convinced they

will receive very little or even nothing due to the debts they have incurred in the 'contract,' seen as impossible to be fulfilled and therefore unjust. In the experience of these workers there was a moment/time when these labor conditions were completely naturalized, being understood as 'normal' and even 'deserved' due to their lack of professional skill. However, this perception has begun to change, in a form that is ever more rapid and acute, learning that their good faith is being fooled/exploited, that they have 'rights' – such as to receive money and not vouchers as pay –, which encourages flight and in some cases resistance to the enlistment, with various results unforeseen by the recruiters of this labor.

The statement of Cícero Romão Braga, a man who worked enlisting Northeastern workers for Mato Grosso,¹⁷ and who evidentially does not accept the designation of *gato*, is quite clarifying. He explains that 'before working in this' – and principally 'before the inspection' – there were many outrages and much violence, with workers not being paid, or not getting any protection equipment, not being provided with sufficient food, etc. According to him this has changed, though he recognizes that in the allotments food and medical care are bad and that in general what is paid is much less than is promised, for which reason he abandoned the activity.

In an interview full of tension and ambiguities, it could be perceived how transformations have occurred in this practice, fundamentally thanks to governmental inspection. Among these are transport, no longer carried out in trucks at night, but rather in buses during the day, frequently disguised as tourists to fool the Highway Police, who have also become involved in the repression. Many allotments are now made from bricks and have bathrooms, no matter how precarious they might be. Furthermore – and this was corroborated in the interviews with Fr. Canuto and the inspectors –, 'services' have to be carried out much more quickly, in order to both not give time to the *peões* (whether new or experienced) to recognize the situation in which they find themselves – called 'slave labor' –, and also to prevent the inspection group from being advised or appearing. In summary, although the hardcore of the enlistment of workers remains the 'trust and fidelity' they have in the *gato* – a man considered to be 'good and successful,' and who often knows the location –, it has been necessary to alter the dynamics of recruitment and even the working conditions, since one of the variables of the 'business' is the possibility of real repression, although with little real cost. In other words, nothing yet has substantially altered this situation called slave-like labor, however, the perception that *peões* and *gatos* have of themselves has changed. Something which, we hope, can suggest what the popular saying orders:

água mole em pedra dura, tanto bate até que fura (literally, water dripping day by day, wears the hardest rock away).

NOTES

¹ We are working with some pieces of research from an important set, those we consider fundamental to study this phenomenon. The following will be used and their conclusions incorporated during the text: STERCI, Neide. *Escravos da desigualdade: um estudo sobre o uso repressivo da força de trabalho hoje*. Rio de Janeiro: Cedi, 1994; MARTINS, José de Souza. *A sociabilidade do homem simples*. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2000; FIGUEIRA, Ricardo Rezende. *Pisando fora da própria sombra: a escravidão por dívida no Brasil contemporâneo*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2004; GUIMARÃES NETO, Regina Beatriz. *A lenda do ouro verde: política de colonização no Brasil contemporâneo*. Cuiabá: Unicen, 2002; GUILLEN, Isabel C. M. O trabalho de sísifo: escravidão por dívida na indústria extrativa da erva mate (Mato Grosso 1890-1945). *Vária História*, v.23, n.38, jul.-dez. 2007, p.615-636; BARROZO, João Carlos (Org.). *Mato Grosso: do sonho à utopia da terra*. Cuiabá: Ed. UFMT, 2008; CERQUEIRA, Gelba C.; FIGUEIRA, Ricardo R.; PARDO, Adônia A.; COSTA, Célia L. (Org.). *Trabalho escravo contemporâneo no Brasil: contribuições críticas para sua análise e denúncia*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. UFRJ, 2008.

² ILO and Bales' data cited by QUIRK, Joel. *Unfinished business: a comparative survey of historical and contemporary slavery*. Hull (UK): University of Hull Press, 2008. p.45-47.

³ *O Globo*, Rio de Janeiro, 22 set. 2007, p.12.

⁴ *O Globo*, Rio de Janeiro, 26 jan. 2010, p.10.

⁵ The interviews with the magistrates and prosecutors were carried out as part of the Pronex project "Rights and citizenship," based in CPDOC/FGV, by Elina da Fonte Pessanha and Regina de Moraes Moral, between 2004 and 2007, as part of research into the "History of Rights and Labor Court in Brazil," with a total of seventy hours recording. The other project coordinated by me and carried out in CPDOC/FGV between 2005 and 2007, was the "History of the Ministry of Labor and Employment," resulting in 45 hours recording with inspectors and other MTE employees, with the participation of Marcelo Thimóteo da Costa. I would like to thank all the interviewers and all my colleagues who workers are interviewers in both projects.

⁶ I would like to thank Maria Aparecida Martins Souza who worked as a research assistant, and who not only carried out a documentary survey in the archive of the Prelacy of São Félix do Araguaia, but also took the responsibility of carrying out some oral history interviews. Without the knowledge and trust the interviewees had of her, these interviews would have been impossible. I would also like to clarify that this article is part of more wide-ranging research on slave-like labor in Brazil, carried out with Prof. Regina Beatriz Guimarães, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE).

⁷ Interview with João Ferreira Oliveira in GOMES, Ângela de Castro (Coord.). *Ministério do Trabalho: uma história vivida e contada*, Rio de Janeiro: CPDOC, 2007. p.277-290.

⁸ Interview with Ruth Vilela, op. cit., p.211-234.

⁹ Arquivo da Prelazia de São Félix do Araguaia, MT, r. 3.8.3.8.

¹⁰ On 11 December 2003, Law 10.803 altered the text of Article 149 of the Penal Code, establishing that: “Reducing someone to a condition analogous to slavery, whether submitting them to forced labor or exhaustive work days, subjecting them to degrading working conditions, or restricting by any means their movements due to a debt with the employer or agent. Punishment – imprisonment of two to eight years, fine, as well as the punishment corresponding to the violence.”

¹¹ Interview with Antônio Canuto by Maria Aparecida Martins Souza, São Félix do Araguaia, 2009.

¹² The Commission was created by Presidential Decree dated 31 July 2003, and was a space composed of representatives from the government, workers, employers, and civil society. Its widely publicized aim was to coordinate the implementation of the actions included in the National Plan for the Eradication of Slave Labor, as well as monitoring the passage of bills in the National Congress.

¹³ During the 2000s other forms of repression were created. In 2004 the ‘dirty list’ was created, a register of employers who used slave labor. However the most important initiative was Constitutional Amendment Proposal 438, in 2001, which allowed for the expropriation of the lands of individuals and companies caught practicing this crime.

¹⁴ CERTEAU, Michel de. *A invenção do cotidiano: artes de fazer*. Petrópolis (RJ): Vozes, 1994.

¹⁵ This document is presented and commented on in SOUZA, Maria Aparecida Martins. *Retalhos de vida: escravidão contemporânea nas agropecuárias do Araguaia*. Masters’ Thesis in History – UFMT. Cuiabá, 2009.

¹⁶ MOURA, Flávia de Almeida. *A escravidão contemporânea na visão dos trabalhadores resgatados em ações da DRT do Maranhão*. Encontro Anual da Anpocs, Caxambu (MG), 2006, p.11, mimeogr. Maranhão and Piauí were the states with the highest recruitment of *peões* in Brazil until 2009.

¹⁷ Interview of Cícero Romão Dias Braga by Maria Aparecida Martins Souza, São Félix do Araguaia, 2009.

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