

Experiences in Common: Slavery and “Freedom” in the Process of Rio de Janeiro’s Working-Class Formation (1850–1910)*

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SUMMARY: The present article is based on research into the process of working-class formation in Rio de Janeiro in the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. It explores the significant shared experiences of workers subjected to slavery and “free” workers in the process of working-class formation, and aims to demonstrate that the history of that process in Brazil began while slavery still existed, and that through shared work and life experience in Rio de Janeiro, as in other Brazilian cities where slavery was strong during the nineteenth century, enslaved and “free” workers shared forms of organization and struggle, founding common values and expectations that were to have a central importance in later periods of class formation.

We are currently experiencing a very peculiar time, on an international scale, in the remaking of the working class.¹ Expropriation and exploitation are key words in acknowledging the historical process of mass proletarianization.² Following World War II, thirty years of rapid economic growth and access

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1. The concept of “remaking” is taken from Mike Savage and Andrew Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840–1940* (London, 1994). The expression was used in relation to recent times by Huw Beynon, “A destruição da classe operária inglesa”, *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 27 (1995), pp. 5–17.

2. The classic discussion of this point is in chapter 24 of Karl Marx’s, *Capital*, I, Ben Fowkes (transl.) (Harmondsworth, 1976). New and very enlightened approaches to these issues are presented in Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2001), and in

to a higher standard of consumption among the working classes in advanced industrial countries led many analysts to conclude that exploitation was in decline and the days of expropriation were part of a distant past.

Since the 1980s in western Europe and the United States, and from the 1990s in the southern hemisphere in particular, a very similar process has been under way, with such characteristics as the weakening of labour relations and breaches of labour laws, high unemployment, mounting informality, the return, if indeed it had ever been eliminated globally, of child labour, domestic labour, and even enslaved and indentured labour. All that, in addition to the most advanced technology and new forms of labour management in industrial plants, has resulted in declining numbers of industrial workers in many places, and greater fragmentation everywhere. Expropriation and exploitation, in that sense, continue to be key words in explaining the workings of capital.

The picture has been completed by a regression of the political weight and capacity for strategic formation of traditional working-class organizations – political parties and trade unions. The result is not only a significant change to the class framework, but also a clear retreat of identity constructs, political projects, and collective actions based on class logic.

Living through this class-remaking process, historians have perhaps adjusted their sensitivity in reviewing the first steps of the process of working-class formation: periods of intense expropriation and exploitation, but also of the construction of identities, projects, and actions from a class perspective, on a precarious, fragmented basis, and with values and traditions in which class identities were not present.

The present article is based on research into the process of working-class formation in Rio de Janeiro in the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, when Rio was the capital city of Brazil. Brazil was the last Latin American country to abolish slavery, which it did in 1888, and during the nineteenth century in some cities slaves made up almost half the total population. In 1849, in Rio de Janeiro, the most populous city, there were 110,602 slaves and 155,854 “free workers”, many of them former slaves.³ In this research – and this is the focus of the article – I was especially interested in significant shared experiences of workers subjected to slavery and “free” workers in the process of the formation of a working class.

Before discussing the article’s primary subject, however, I shall present a brief discussion of Brazilian labour historiography in order to help

Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley, CA, 2008).

3. Luiz Carlos Soares, *O povo de Cam na capital do Brasil: a escravidão urbana no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX* (Rio de Janeiro, 2007), p. 29.

foreign readers to understand the academic traditions within which this work is located.

BRIEF HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DISCUSSION

Academic studies of the Brazilian working class are relatively recent. In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, while urban–worker movements were increasing in number and political impact, sociologists, especially from São Paulo, which has been the largest industrial city in Brazil since the 1920s, were carrying out studies of the industrial workforce, labour organizations, strikes, and working-class-consciousness. The dominant interpretation emerging from those studies addressed the Brazilian working class by focusing on what it was not; that is to say, an assumption that working-class formation was a linear process starting with an unorganized, unconscious stage and progressing to a stage characterized by trade-union and class-based political party organization as the main indicators of a developed class-consciousness. In Brazil, at that time, the working class studied by social scientists appeared to be very different from that model; a model that they assumed had been the historical trajectory of western Europe’s working class.

Francisco Weffort provided the paradigmatic definition of the labour movement, called “populist trade unionism” by many authors:

In terms of orientation, it is subordinate to nationalist ideology and geared towards a policy of reforms and class collaboration; in terms of organization, it is characterized by a dual structure in which so-called “parallel organizations”, created by the left, begin to complement the official trade-union structure, inspired by fascist corporatism as an appendix of the state’s structure; in terms of politics, it is subordinate to the vicissitudes of the alliance between the left and Goulart and other politicians who remained faithful to the Vargas tradition.⁴

That negative characterization of class and trade unionism was shared by Leôncio Martins Rodrigues, for whom, in contrast to what he presumes to be the European model, the situation of Brazil’s working class could be defined as:

A decline in the influence of the proletariat in the country’s social life and the establishment of less obvious “class” behaviour. These points are immediately visible when one observes: a) the weakness of Brazilian trade unionism; b) the nonexistence of “political parties of the masses”; and c) the influence of populism on the working masses.⁵

4. Francisco Weffort, “Origens do sindicalismo populista no Brasil – a conjuntura do pós-guerra”, *Estudos Cebrap*, 4 (1973), pp. 66–105, 67.

5. Leôncio M. Rodrigues, “Classe operária e sindicalismo no Brasil”, in *idem* (ed.), *Sindicalismo e sociedade* (São Paulo, 1968), p. 341.

To explain that anomaly or absence of our working class, the early generation of academic works cited, as important reasons, the nature of the political system, which was generally defined as populist; the specifics of trade-union regulations linked closely to the state; or even the standard political conceptions of leading leftist workers' leaders, especially the Communist Party. However, the most frequent answer to questions about the working class's insufficiencies focused on the origins of workers at that time, during Brazil's industrial take-off. In early interpretations, the rural origins of most industrial workers erected a major obstacle between workers and the class-consciousness that researchers assumed they should have had.

Historians have been late arrivals to this academic tradition.⁶ In the 1970s, when the labour movement returned to the centre of the political stage, becoming a force in the struggle against Brazil's military dictatorship (1964–1985), historians started paying more attention to the working class as an academic subject. Their studies investigated the early decades of the twentieth century, which had not been studied much by social scientists. However, historians' perspectives of class trajectories were very similar. They looked to the past in search of a period without state regulation of trade unions and what the historic point of view supposes was vigorous class-consciousness. According to their studies – almost all about São Paulo – that was possible because, during the initial period, urban workers were mostly European immigrants who supposedly brought in the weight of their experience of trade unionism, socialist thinking, and, especially, anarchist ideas, which is to say, a well-formed class-consciousness. That perspective can be seen in many studies, including Boris Fausto's book about São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, where he states that: "In the case of anarchism, the role of importation was substantial: through immigrants, not only the intellectuals who arrived in the country bringing their ideology with them, but also masses of workers at least in some degree touched by it."⁷

The development of historical studies questioned some of those points of view, arguing, for example, that São Paulo could not be viewed as reflecting Brazil in general. In other regions, immigrants were not as plentiful as in São Paulo, but the labour movement was nonetheless as important as it was in that city.⁸ New studies demonstrated that, even

6. For a more developed analysis see Cláudio H.M. Batalha, "A historiografia da classe operária no Brasil: trajetórias e tendências", in Marcos César Freitas (ed.), *Historiografia brasileira em perspectiva* (São Paulo, 2001), pp. 145–158.

7. Boris Fausto, *Trabalho urbano e conflito social* (São Paulo, 1976), p. 63.

8. As demonstrated for Rio de Janeiro, where immigrants comprised about 30 per cent of the urban population at the beginning of the twentieth century; Eulália Lobo, *História do Rio de Janeiro: do capital comercial ao capital industrial e financeiro*, 2 vols (Rio de Janeiro, 1976), and Angela Gomes, *A invenção do trabalhismo* (Rio de Janeiro, 1987).

where European immigrants constituted a majority, as in São Paulo, their own origins were not urban. Most of them came from rural areas of Italy, Spain, and Portugal, bringing to Brazil no experience of labour organization or movement.⁹ New studies have been very fruitful in explaining national and regional contexts that help us understand the emergence of an organized and strong urban labour movement, in a country where 70 per cent of the labour force was concentrated in rural areas.

In the past twenty years, historians and social scientists in general have revised many other aspects of early investigations. Historical studies have advanced in their time delineations, reviewing the period from 1930–1964 and establishing new limits for understanding relations among the state, capitalists, and workers.

New studies have questioned the “populist trade unionism” paradigm, demonstrating using new sources such as trade-union newspapers and internal documents, oral history, and others that a strong dose of repression was necessary to control the labour movement in the 1930s, and that, in spite of limits imposed by the official trade-union structure, a strong labour movement had emerged between 1945 and 1964, with some representative trade unions in the main cities. Strikes increased in number; many illegal shopfloor organizations were established; labour leaderships were linked to the Communist Party, although they still remained relatively autonomous; and there was major potential for political intervention, especially at the start of the 1960s.¹⁰

In spite of these advances, until a few years ago one problem of the working-class formation process remained underexplored by labour historians in Brazil. Even when studies questioned the view of a dominant European-immigrant presence in the composition of the early working class, they paid very little attention to the specific trajectory of “national” workers, perhaps because they were still using a European model of working-class formation and looked only for artisans and other “free” workers undergoing the process of proletarianization. Because of that, labour history studies in Brazil begin only in 1888, the year of the law that finally put an end to slavery.

On the other hand, the historiography of slavery was completely unrelated to labour history, and the racial issue after 1888 was discussed, for a long time, in terms of “black people’s place in a society of classes”.¹¹

9. Michael Hall, “The Origins of Mass Immigration in Brazil, 1871–1914” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1969).

10. See, for example, among the many works published from the end of the 1990s onwards, those presented in Alexandre Fortes *et al.*, *Na luta por direitos* (Campinas, 1999); see too Marcelo Badaró Mattos, *Novos e velhos sindicalismos no Rio de Janeiro, 1955–1988* (Rio de Janeiro, 1998).

11. Florestan Fernandes, *A integração do negro na sociedade de classes* (São Paulo, 1965).

Historians of slavery often conceived their object as if it were conceptually distinct from the one analysed by labour historians – it was a matter of thinking in terms of orders or states, instead of social classes. In order to explain how slavery turned out to represent an obstacle to profit increase during the second half of the nineteenth century, when land-owners accepted a “capitalist rationality”, many researchers emphasized the “structural incompatibility between free workers and slaves”¹² rather than the everyday coexistence of both in the process of production and in urban life. When investigating beyond 1888, many researchers seemed to assume all the arguments of the period’s speech, which pointed to the incompatibility – because of incapacity or resistance – of slaves with waged work.

In some cities, such as Salvador in the northeast, which had been Brazil’s former capital, or in the south Pelotas, a city characterized by beef production, and Rio Grande, a port for exporting it, and especially in Rio de Janeiro, the capital and largest city until the early 1900s, enslaved labour accounted for more than 40 per cent of the urban population until the middle of the nineteenth century. That labour force worked in many sectors, from domestic service to early factories, including all kinds of informal services, and many of their jobs were done side by side with former slaves (freedmen) and other “free” workers.

Taking those situations into account, in recent years some slavery historians and other labour researchers have been more interested in discussing the repercussions of experience shared by both enslaved and “free” workers in the process of working-class formation.¹³

Examples abound of research conducted from that point of view, for instance Cruz’s study of Rio de Janeiro’s dockworkers. She discovered a strong link between the enslaved loader organization during the time of slavery and trade-union practices in the “free” sector, which was founded in the 1900s mainly by Africans and their descendants engaged in establishing control of the labour market.¹⁴ In her words, there was a “line of continuity between the slaves and freedmen of imperial times and the proletarians of the First Republic”. To sustain her conclusion she sets out several arguments, paying close attention to the combination of “mutual

12. Otávio Ianni, *Raças e classes sociais no Brasil* (São Paulo, 1987), p. 21.

13. A few suggestions on this point were made in an article by labour historian Antonio Luigi Negro, “Imperfeita ou rarefeita? O debate sobre o fazer-se da classe trabalhadora inglesa”, *Revista Brasileira de História*, 31/32 (1996), pp. 40–61. From slavery history, Silvia Hunold Lara too adduced similar questions in “Escravidão, cidadania e história do trabalho no Brasil”, *Projeto História*, 16 (1998), pp. 25–38. John French is another author who has defended the importance of this kind of research in “A história latino-americana do trabalho hoje: uma reflexão autocrítica”, *Revista História Unisinos*, 6 (2002), pp. 11–28.

14. Maria Cecília Velasco e Cruz, “Virando o jogo: estivadores e carregadores no Rio de Janeiro da Primeira República” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of São Paulo, 1998).

solidarity of dockworkers and loaders with the speed of workers in imposing trade unions on the employers". What is evident is that "the change of historical actors – with the entry of white immigrants and decline of blacks and mulattoes – did not occur in the city port system in the terms proposed by existing analyses of Brazil's working-class formation".¹⁵

Another contribution to this discussion came from Reis, who initially researched enslaved mid-nineteenth century street workers, generally service workers, primarily loaders and for the most part Africans from Salvador. Reis advanced his studies through to the final years of the slave system, a time when only a few street workers were enslaved and only half were Africans. From his pioneering study of the "black strike" of 1857 to the recent analysis of the same group in the 1880s, Reis has demonstrated that if at first African ethnic identity was the fundamental link in explaining the potential for organization and collective action, thereafter it was possible to "realize that class, race, and ethnicity were mixed in a complex game, as they always were but [...] the class side appears to be advanced in the game".¹⁶

In her research on the southern cities of Pelotas and Rio Grande, Beatriz Loner has also found important relationships between slave and "free"-worker experiences in class formation. From her study, the starting point of a fight for a positive image of the racial identity of former slaves and their descendants emerges, with the first steps taken by an active labour movement. In her analysis we can find black leadership that combines trade-union activism with the fight against racism, and markedly ethnic social spaces such as clubs, libraries, and musical societies that were of great importance to the construction of labour organizations. She says,

Black militants can be found at every stage of fighting and organization of various worker associations [...]. Their dual militancy in associations of race and class likely contributed, in a significant way, to the entry of new workers to the struggle [...]. In Pelotas, in particular, the organization of the labour movement mostly reflected this group's actions.¹⁷

Chalhoub studied black workers' associations in the 1860s and 1870s in Rio de Janeiro, in a process he called a "crucial chapter of working-class history in Brazil", because associative models that were strong between

15. *Idem*, "Tradições negras na formação de um sindicato: sociedade de resistência dos trabalhadores em trapiche e café, Rio de Janeiro, 1905–1930", *Afro-Ásia*, 24 (2000), pp. 243–290, 274.

16. João José Reis, "De olho no canto: trabalho de rua na Bahia na véspera da abolição", *Afro-Ásia*, 24 (2000), pp. 199–242, 240. The reference to the strike of 1857 can be found in *idem*, "A greve negra de 1857 na Bahia", *Revista da USP*, 18 (1993), pp. 8–30.

17. Beatriz Ana Loner, *Construção de classe: operários de Pelotas e Rio Grande, 1888–1930* (Pelotas, 2001).



Figure 1. A photograph of workers from Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the twentieth century, showing their diverse ethnic origins.

Photograph: Augusto Malta.

Museu da Imagem e do Som [Museum of Image and Sound], Rio de Janeiro. Used with permission.

“free” workers – mutuality associations – and blocked for enslaved workers, were operated by sectors of the city’s blacks, slaves included, with the goal of fighting for freedom. In such organizations, he found a:

[...] similarity between these black associations and nineteenth-century labour associations [...]. Here and there we find internal democracy, a great emphasis on member assembly in associative life, an equality of rights and duties, low monthly fees, an objective of attracting new members – “an unlimited number of members” – an attempt to dignify labour, to guarantee members’ good moral conduct, to provide several means of assistance [...].¹⁸

In short, nowadays a new line of investigation is increasing in Brazilian labour history, crossing the frontiers between slave studies and research on the working class. The research that this article summarizes is wholly derivative of that debate.¹⁹

18. Sidney Chalhoub, *Machado de Assis: historiador* (São Paulo, 2003), p. 248.

19. For a more detailed analysis of the points in this article see Marcelo Badaró Mattos, *Escravidão e livres: experiências comuns na formação da classe trabalhadora carioca* (Rio de Janeiro, 2008).

ONE HISTORY AND MANY QUESTIONS

I will start by summarizing one bakery worker's story, which unfolded between 1876 and 1912 and is told to us by one of the workers' leaders, João de Mattos. It was found in a manuscript confiscated by Rio de Janeiro's political police in the 1930s.²⁰ As far as we have been able to verify, it seems that the history of those workers had been brought to light due to the syndicate's urge to produce a historical report for a convocation of II Congresso Operário Brasileiro [The Brazilian Labour Congress], which took place in 1912. The coincident data between João de Mattos's manuscript, the first version of which dates from 1912, and the information stated in the report allows us to affirm that, at that point, the head of the organization was appealing to one of the older militants to help with missing information.²¹

The narrative begins in Santos, an important port city, in 1876, when João worked in a bakery and organized a "mutiny", which he explains as being "the same as current strikes". In reality, it was a work stoppage at all the bakeries in town, and during the stoppage all the enslaved workers in the shops fled with false letters of manumission. João was imprisoned for a few days, but without evidence against him he was released and went to São Paulo, the state capital, where he successfully organized another "mutiny" at eleven or twelve bakeries in that city in 1877. In 1878 he arrived in Rio de Janeiro, where he found many more bakeries. As a result, in order to prepare a "mutiny" similar to the previous two, João de Mattos and his companions had to create an organization, which they called the Bloco de Combate dos Empregados em Padarias [Combat Bloc of Bakery Employees].

The Bloc had a head office, by-laws, and a slogan – "For Bread and Freedom" – but had to operate clandestinely, under the cover of a dance course. In the words of João de Mattos, the members could not "operate in daylight, because it was a terrible crime to wage war against slave property".²² The Bloc brought together over 100 members, instigated a few partial "mutinies", and in 1880 another "general mutiny". The enslaved workers of Rio de Janeiro's bakeries fled to rural areas, but João de Mattos was again imprisoned. On that occasion, Saldanha Marinho, a famous abolitionist and Republican propagandist, defended him.

20. A facsimile of the manuscript is printed in Leila Duarte, *Pão e liberdade: uma história de padeiros escravos e livres na virada do século XIX* (Rio de Janeiro, 2002). João de Mattos appears in the credits of the newspaper *O panificador*, published by the Sociedade Cosmopolita Protetora dos Empregados em Padarias [Cosmopolitan Guardian Society of Bakery Employees] during the 1890s. Except for that contained in the manuscript, no further information about his life could be found.

21. Liga Federal dos Empregados em Padaria, "Relatório à Comissão Organizadora do 2º Congresso Operário Brasileiro", in *A Voz do Trabalhador* (Rio de Janeiro, 5 August 1914), p. 3.

22. Duarte, *Pão e liberdade*, p. 67.

In spite of slavery's abolition in 1888, João de Mattos's struggles and those of his companions were not considered finished. He explained: "in 1888 we achieved the biggest win of our unrelenting struggle, opening the way for the de facto enslaved, and we, the free enslaved, are still fighting".²³ In this new phase for bakery workers, João and his companions founded an association, in 1890, for the purpose of raising funds to buy bakeries for the workers, with the aim of their being free from employers. It was called the Sociedade Cooperativa dos Empregados em Padarias no Brasil [Cooperative Society of Bakery Employees] – whose slogan was "Work for Us". It had about 400 members, but failed because of an embezzlement scandal.

These troubles were not sufficient for them to give up the struggle, and in 1898 they organized the Sociedade Cosmopolita Protetora dos Empregados em Padarias [Cosmopolitan Guardian Society of Bakery Employees] – with the slogan "Work, Justice, and Freedom: without distinction of colour, creed, or nationality". The new organization was set up for insurance purposes, and included over 1,000 members. It published a newspaper, *O Panificador* [The Baker], and organized a library and an educational centre. It ended up assuming the traits of a trade union, fighting for a day off on Sundays and an eight-hour workday. Through their organization the members tried to convince the state authorities by means of petitions, but the strategy was unsuccessful because, as João de Mattos wrote, "appealing to the ruling society I have nothing, because they have one policy, and the masses have another".²⁴

After those struggles, at the beginning of the twentieth century bakery employers placed João de Mattos's name on a blacklist, and he left the sector. Employers tried to divide the labour movement by creating a subservient organization, the Liga Federal dos Empregados em Padarias [Federal League of Bakery Employees]. In spite of that effort, João de Mattos's lesson of struggle had many lasting effects, and in subsequent years the League was won over by combative leadership that united bakery workers, until with over 4,000 members they organized their first major strike, in 1912.

Why is João de Mattos's narrative so important for understanding the making of the Brazilian working class? According to classical definitions,²⁵ and the insights of contemporary social historians such as E.P. Thompson,²⁶ working-class formation can be understood only from

23. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

25. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, V (London, 1976), pp. 19–539; and Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963).

26. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963) and *idem*, "Alcune osservazioni su classe e 'falsa coscienza'", *Quaderni Storici*, 36 (1977), pp. 899–940.

objective conditions that would oppose direct producers, in the productive process, to the owners of the means production, who exploited those who had no property. In capitalism, that objective opposition of interests has a specific design, because those who sell their labour power for a wage, in their shared experience of exploitation, become conscious of the identity of their interests, which are opposed to those of their exploiters. Immersed in that conflict (class struggle) they construct their class-consciousness. However, the values, narratives, and cultural references that articulate such consciousness do not emerge from nothing.

That all means that in a society such as Brazil's, marked by almost four centuries of slavery, one cannot imagine the emergence of a wage-earning working class without taking seriously previous class struggles between slaves and their masters, and all their attendant values and references, especially in the final period of slavery's legal existence when the fight for freedom involved a large contingent of people.

EXPERIENCES

That is why João de Mattos's story is so significant. It reveals the links between the periods before and after 1888 in the process of working-class formation. After all, until the 1850s, slave work dominated not only agricultural-export activities, but also the country's main cities. In 1849, as we have pointed out, the municipality of Rio de Janeiro had a total population of 266,466 – 155,854 “free” (13,461 former slaves) and 110,602 enslaved. With the official ending of slave traffic from Africa in 1850, that number fell in subsequent decades. However, in 1872 enslaved workers still accounted for almost 20 per cent of the capital's 274,972 inhabitants. In 1890, the census recorded 522,651 inhabitants, 34 per cent of them identified as blacks or mulattoes. In 1906, 811,443 people were recorded as living in Rio.²⁷

Enslaved workers there were involved in almost every economic activity. Many were rented out by their masters; another group was formed by “money-earning slaves” (*escravos ao ganho*) – those who sold their labour on a day-to-day basis and gave most of their earnings to their masters. In the 1872 census, Soares found the following slave occupations: domestic workers, journeymen, sailors, industrial workers, seamstresses, artisans, and porters.²⁸ Looking through city licences for money-earning slaves in the nineteenth century, the same author discovered a long list of “professions”: dockworkers, porters, coachmen, barbers, who were almost always

27. *Recenseamento da população do Município Neutro de 1872* (Rio de Janeiro, 1872); *Recenseamento Geral da República dos Estados Unidos do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1890).

28. Luiz Carlos Soares, “Os escravos ao ganho no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX”, *Revista Brasileira de História*, 16 (1988), pp. 107–142, 110.

surgeons too, musicians, greengrocers, boatmen, fishermen, hunters, naturalists, and “tigers” – people who disposed of domestic excrement.²⁹

Enslaved workers could also be found in factories. In the 1850s, the biggest private plant in Rio de Janeiro was the Ponta d’Areia factory, with 600 workers, almost one-third of them enslaved. In a sample of 50 “factories” (at that time small workshops were included in that category), Lobo found 1,290 workers in 1857, 451 of them enslaved.³⁰

One consequence of the possibilities of urban-slavery exploitation was that many masters authorized their slaves to “live on their own”, which meant that those slaves, especially the money-earning ones, had to earn money for their services so they could live in tenement houses or other kinds of collective dwelling. Their situation gave rise to a major difficulty for masters and police authorities in distinguishing slaves from freedmen, and the enslaved workers used it to their advantage to transform Rio into a “hiding city”.³¹

Under those conditions, enslaved and “free” workers worked side by side in the streets, in stores, or in factories; living in the same places; and sharing the same areas. Workers – enslaved or “free” – shared values, habits, vocabulary, experiences, including organizing and fighting, although they had a different legal status, which created significant distance between them.

ASSOCIATIONS

We find that if enslaved and “free” workers have shared experiences of work and values, then they also have modified models and experiences of organization. For the slaves it was forbidden to create any type of association, and that was why societies such as the Combat Bloc, founded by João de Mattos, were clandestine. There was just one exception: the Catholic brotherhoods. That model of society grouped together laymen devotees of a Catholic saint and provided them with monetary assistance in situations such as the death of a relative, or illness. For slaves and ex-slaves there were specific brotherhoods – Lady of the Rosary and Saint Benedict, for example. Despite being created by the Church – which had justified slavery for centuries – in order to Christianize Africans and their descendants, during the final period of slavery some of the organizations acted as abolitionist societies.³²

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–126.

30. Lobo, *História do Rio de Janeiro*, I, p. 194.

31. Sidney Chalhoub, *Visões da liberdade: uma história das últimas décadas da escravidão na corte* (São Paulo, 1990).

32. For São Paulo’s case, Quintão shows how the Brotherhood of Remédios, Rosário, and Santa Efigênia were involved with the Luiz Gama abolitionist struggles as well as with the sector of the movement considered the most radical, the *caifazes*. The first of them sheltered the

Some of them were also the nuclei of Lisbon artisan guilds and remained so into the first decades of the nineteenth century in Brazil.³³ Because of their multiple origins, it is not surprising that the brotherhoods were numerous. Anderson Oliveira located 103 brotherhoods in Rio de Janeiro between 1840 and 1889,³⁴ and our research, using Oliveira's accounts and looking for brotherhood reports and "commitments" (their by-laws) in Brazil's National Library, unearthed over 200 documents from around 110 brotherhoods in Rio de Janeiro, dating from 1830 to 1890.

In Rio de Janeiro, during the nineteenth century many black brotherhoods, some secular, sustained significant groups of slaves and freedmen, Brazilian or African, united out of their solidarity, religious beliefs, and cultivation of traditions. Mary Karash found twelve churches that sheltered twenty-four black and mulatto brotherhoods.³⁵ In the Sacramento district alone, Anderson Oliveira found six black brotherhoods in that century.³⁶

During the nineteenth century "free" workers experienced another kind of organization forbidden to slaves: mutual societies. Founded without religious reference, their statutory purpose was to help members in general, in the event of illness, a relative's death, temporary unemployment, or disability. Many mutual societies were professional in nature, grouping workers from similar occupations or enterprises. Others were organized for workers of different occupations, and many others united immigrants by national origin. Among the mutual associations that organized many occupations, a very interesting example was the Liga Operária [Workers' League], founded in 1871. According to its by-laws, the League proposed a group of "all industrial workers and artisans, both foreign and domestic", and also presented the goal of representing members in a major way, acting "by all means within its reach, to improve the fortune of all working classes".³⁷

Investigating by-laws and registration processes, it is possible to locate hundreds of these associations. Stotz found 67 societies of a cosmopolitan nature and 48 professional ones in 1883.³⁸ Batalha, in his research, located

caifazes's newspaper – *A redenção* – and was involved in the acquisition of manumissions and in abolitionist acts; Maria Aparecida Quintão, *Irmandades negras: outro espaço de luta e resistência*. São Paulo, 1870–1890 (São Paulo, 2002), pp. 95 and 104.

33. Lobo, *História do Rio de Janeiro*, I, pp. 109–112. The most recent and comprehensive study of the subject is Mônica de Souza Martins, *Entre a cruz e o capital: as corporações de ofícios no Rio de Janeiro após a chegada da família real; 1808–1824* (Rio de Janeiro, 2008).

34. Anderson J. Machado de Oliveira, "Devoção e caridade. Irmandades religiosas no Rio de Janeiro imperial, 1840–1889" (M.A. dissertation, Federal University of Fluminense, 1995), pp. 64–65.

35. Mary Karash, *A vida dos escravos no Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1950* (São Paulo, 2000), pp. 134–135.

36. Oliveira, "Devoção e caridade", p. 157.

37. *Estatutos da Sociedade Beneficente Liga Operária*, (Rio de Janeiro, 1871), p. 3.

38. Eduardo Stotz, *A formação da classe operária: Rio de Janeiro, 1870–1890* (Niterói, 1984), p. 66.

signs of 47 associations created between 1835 and 1899.³⁹ In a study of the by-laws and reports found in the National Library and cases presented to the State Council in the records of the National Archives, I located over 180 mutual, charitable, and other similar societies existing between the 1850s and 1900s.

City-dwelling enslaved workers assimilated this type of experience, and we can find some records of attempts to create mutual associations of black workers, such as the Sociedade Beneficente da Nação Conga [Provident Society of the Congo Nation], created before 1861, or the Associação Beneficente Socorro Mútuo dos Homens de Cor [Provident Association of Mutual Help of Coloured Men], founded in 1874. In that same year, the State Council, the main administrative institution of Brazil's monarchy, considered a request to register the Sociedade Beneficente da Nação Conga "Amigos da Consciência" [Provident Society of the Congo Nation "Friends of Conscience"]. Its by-laws, like those of the two others, were very similar to those of any mutual society, but with the difference that it admitted member-candidates only from "the Congo Nation or any other African Nation".⁴⁰

Council members rejected all these requests, alleging procedural flaws. However, they also stated that the Congo nation was not a real nation like the European ones, but rather just a "barbarian horde". It is clear that the main reason for rejecting the requests, explicitly stated in the last case, was that "calling itself the Congo Nation, it admits members of other African provenance, and without stating whether they were free, it may deem itself to have the right to admit slaves, which is forbidden by law".⁴¹

By admitting enslaved workers as well, such associations could include in their by-laws ways of using funds to buy their members' manumission, or they might have unwritten aims, such as "supporting by all means" the abolitionist cause, which explains why members of the State Council, not satisfied with just forbidding the societies, also recommended repressive measures to the government, advising it "to let the police take confidential note of the individuals who promote them and the circumstances of their origins".⁴²

Although they were forbidden, the existence of these associations, or attempts to create them, indicates arrangements by former and current slaves for assuming the models of organization and collective solidarity of "free" workers, while state administrators deemed their efforts very

39. Cláudio Batalha, "Sociedades de trabalhadores no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX: algumas reflexões em torno da formação da classe operária", *Cadernos do AEL*, 11/12 (1999), pp. 41–69.

40. Sociedade de Beneficência da Nação Conga "Amiga da Consciência" (24 September 1874), Arquivo Nacional, Conselho de Estado, fl. 9.

41. *Ibid.*, fl. 2v.

42. Batalha, "Sociedades de trabalhadores".

dangerous. The associative experiences of slaves and former slaves had repercussions for the post-abolition process. An example is the organization of Rio de Janeiro's dockworkers. Under slavery, the various dock-related occupations were dominated by enslaved workers. Among the common characteristics of the dock-work regime was casual work – meaning that workers received a daily wage without any guarantee of employment every day – and the fact that most tasks were performed by groups of many workers, in general coordinated by a foreman, called the captain. The harshness of the work, the insecurity of wages, and the companionship in performing tasks resulted in strong solidarity among the enslaved workers, where it was common for them to create informal societies to buy their freedom, one by one.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the first trade unions were founded among dockworkers, such as the União dos Estivadores [Longshoremen's Union] and the Sociedade de Resistência dos Trabalhadores em Trapiches de Café [Coffee Warehouse Workers' Resistance Society], one finds considerable continuity from the slavery period. For example, the members of the Coffee Warehouse Workers' union, founded in 1905, were almost all Afro-Brazilians, and its first presidents were all black workers. Through numerous mobilizations and strikes, Rio de Janeiro's dockworkers acquired the right for the trade union to organize work in a closed-shop system.⁴³

Looking at the Longshoremen's Union, we are able to identify some of its founders, such as Joaquim Januário Nunes, a black man born in 1871, during the time of slavery, or João Evangelista Lapiet, who was born in 1819 and was eighty-four years old when he took part in the union's creation; or Cândido Manoel Rodrigues, a black man and founder of the Coffee Warehouse Workers' Resistance Society, who was born in 1869, as well as many others recorded in the society's membership ledger.⁴⁴ Some of them were surely slaves, perhaps even African. Even if they were not, they lived among many enslaved workers, some of them certainly African, for a relatively long time, which meant that former slaves and their descendants who worked on the docks in the second half of the nineteenth century not only continued working there, but also organized strong trade unions with other Brazilians and foreigners, on the basis of previous solidarity, to guarantee control over casual jobs in the city's unstable labour market.

Recall the slogan of the Cosmopolitan Guardian Society of Bakery Employees: "Work, Justice, and Freedom: without distinction of colour, creed, or nationality". When João de Mattos reported the story of bakery

43. Cruz, *Tradições negras na formação de um sindicato*.

44. Érika Bastos Arantes, "O porto negro: cultura e trabalho no Rio de Janeiro dos primeiros anos do século XX" (M.A. dissertation, University of Campinas, 2005).

workers, from the Combat Bloc – fighting against slavery – to the Federal League – which had trade-union objectives – he was not presenting an “exotic” narrative. His story opens a field of associative possibilities that crossed over fights against slavery and established important roots for the trade unions of the twentieth century. That is why the Coffee Warehouse Workers’ Resistance Society and the Federal League of Bakery Employees took part in the first and second Brazilian Workers Congress in 1906 and 1913 respectively, which defined trade unions as the model of organization to be adopted, and recommended a combative way of collective action to guarantee labour rights.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

Many of the records that mentioned the first strike in Brazil relate to the Rio de Janeiro newspaper typesetters’ strike in 1858. They went on strike to demand wage increases and their strike was well covered, because the strikers published their own newspaper, the *Jornal dos Tipógraphos* [The Typesetters’ News], sponsored by the Imperial Associação Tipográfica Fluminense [Imperial Typesetters’ Association of Rio de Janeiro]. In the pages of that newspaper we find a small professional group of around eighty workers on strike, who represented themselves as *artistas* (artists), skilled artisans, who had become poor as a result of the greed of newspaper owners who refused to pay them decent wages. The strike is also very interesting because of the role that the Typesetters’ Association played. It was set up as a mutual association, but at that time it took on a trade-union function in order to represent its members’ interests, negotiating with employers and the government.⁴⁵

By studying the typesetters’ movement of 1858 – its characteristic interests in representing wage labourers who were allied in a collective struggle, using the argument of defending their artisan dignity against what they defined as exploitation by their employers, whom they quite consciously defined as their class enemy – one could conclude that it was an episode in the process of class formation that was highly similar to classic cases, such as England’s. It was a fact and can be viewed as a fundamental element to be taken into consideration when analysing the making of the working class in Rio de Janeiro too. But for the largest Brazilian cities of the second half of the nineteenth century, focusing only on “free” workers when studying the class-formation process might be a mistake.

That strike was probably the first by wage-earners. Some of the same writers who defined the typesetters’ strike as the first, comment too about

45. The most important study of the typesetters is Artur José Renda Vitorino, *Máquinas e operários: mudança técnica e sindicalismo gráfico. São Paulo e Rio de Janeiro 1858–1912* (São Paulo, 2000).

another incident that had happened a year earlier,⁴⁶ when enslaved workers interrupted work at Ponta d’Areia, the biggest private industry in Brazil at the time, with over 600 employees – one-quarter of them enslaved. They were demanding an end to violence against colleagues; their strike was immediately stopped by the police.⁴⁷

In that same year, 1857, in Salvador, urban loaders, mostly African slaves, stopped work in protest at a new city law that imposed a tax and the use of a licence plate. Since they were organized into groups to work, they showed a strong capacity during the strike for articulation and resistance, resulting in a revision of the law partially acceding to their request.⁴⁸

Even strikes then, the typical instrument of wage-earners, were sometimes used by enslaved urban workers as a way of fighting for their demands, which demonstrated that shared experiences were of considerable effect.

As a result, we understand from João de Mattos when he says in writing of the main class struggle of the day – the fight against slavery – that abolitionists might have started their public campaign in 1879, but that the bakery workers were “the first anti-slavery fighters”, because since 1876 they had been “fighting de facto slavery”, that the abolitionists in parliamentary and press campaigns were not the main actors in the struggle for freedom, the protagonists in which were the enslaved workers themselves, with the support of “free” workers.

We find records of support networks for abolitionism – including more radical strategies, promoting mass escapes of slaves – built by “free” worker organizations in many places around the country. In Rio de Janeiro, the typesetters, for example, organized an abolitionist club with the official purpose of buying the freedom of slaves, but acting on many other fronts in the battle for freedom.⁴⁹

The abolitionist press reported many other examples of “free” worker associations involved in the abolitionist movement. For instance, in relation to the workers of the Navy Arsenal, the biggest manufacturer in the town at that time, the *O Abolicionista* [The Abolitionist] newspaper reported:

The foremen and workers of the foundry and iron workshops at the Navy Arsenal decided to open a monthly subscription for the abolition of slavery. Each of them would give as much as possible, and the total was to be given every month to the directors of the Emancipation Society for proper use. This procedure is worthy of imitation, and brings much honour to the artisan class that has promoted this worthy initiative.⁵⁰

46. See for example Hermínio Linhares, *Contribuição à história das lutas operárias no Brasil* (São Paulo, 1977), pp. 32–33.

47. *A Pátria* (Niterói, 26 November 1857).

48. Reis, “A greve negra de 1857”.

49. Vitorino, *Máquinas e operários*, p. 100.

50. *O Abolicionista*, 12 (Rio de Janeiro, 28 September 1881), p. 7.

In the accounts of André Rebouças, a famous abolitionist, one finds that “free” workers were represented actively during the final period of the struggle against slavery, with mass escapes supported and the establishment of “abolitionist *quilombos*”. Homes and offices were used as refuges for runaway slaves. As he says, “at abolitionist family homes, commercial offices, newspaper offices, hotels, bakeries, lodgings, type-setting offices, any place with an abolitionist soul, one could find safe refuge to hide the poor people”.⁵¹

Such evidence does not mean that no conflicts existed between enslaved and “free” (or freed) workers in the labour market or in other spheres. A case that has already been studied in the historiography refers to a conflict which occurred in Rio’s harbour, in May 1872. According to newspaper records, money-earning black men, most of them slaves who worked at unloading meat, went on strike demanding higher wages. The employers hired white workers as strike-breakers, causing conflict between black strikers and white strike-breakers.⁵² Another similar episode, though with subjects playing the opposite roles, occurred in Santos in 1891, shortly after abolition when ex-slaves, organized in the old Jabaquara Quilombo, broke a strike in the city’s harbour in an attempt to regain control of that working area, which had been occupied by white workers, mainly Portuguese immigrants.⁵³

Conflicts such as those definitely had an ethnic element, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, where the predominance in the retail market of traders of Portuguese origin resulted in a negative association between the Portuguese and the exploitation of the poor, which can be observed in the prices of goods.⁵⁴ Those were, however, above all, typical conflicts linked to a competitive situation in which workers found themselves caught up in a labour market progressively dominated by wage relations.

On the other hand, the records mentioned earlier show that a significant proportion of wage-earners sharing with enslaved workers the same spaces for work and urban life did construct organized collective movements for their freedom, demonstrating that solidarity in the struggle for freedom was an important component of the values of the new class in the process of its formation.

Recalling again the narrative of João de Mattos, he evaluated the abolition of slavery in 1888 as “the biggest win of our unrelenting struggle”,

51. Eduardo Silva, *As camélias do Leblon: uma investigação de história cultural* (São Paulo, 2003), p. 97.

52. This conflict is discussed in Cruz, “Virando o jogo”, p. 268, and in Arantes, “O porto negro”, pp. 104–105.

53. Silva, *As camélias do Leblon*, p. 12.

54. Gladys Sabina Ribeiro, *Mata-Galegos: os portugueses e os conflitos de trabalho na República Velha* (São Paulo, 1990).

but also asserted that the “free enslaved” were still fighting a new fight. Jumping ahead in time, strikes came to be the major means of struggle, and in the 1890s and subsequent decades they became a common occurrence in Rio de Janeiro. Using old studies and new information collected from newspapers, we found 37 strikes between 1890 and 1899. From 1900 to 1909 we counted 109 strikes.⁵⁵

So in 1903, when textile workers went on strike, followed by shoemakers, stonemasons, dockworkers, and many others in the first general strike in Rio de Janeiro, those prior experiences of strikes and other forms of struggle during slavery were certainly remembered.

CLASS-CONSCIOUSNESS

“Have we come by chance into the world to be worse than slaves, to produce only for a master? No!”⁵⁶ This question and answer, published in the newspaper of the Confederação Operária Brasileira [Brazilian Workers’ Confederation] at the beginning of the twentieth century, bring with them an analogy that was not original.

Marx had said that the system of wage-labour is a system of slavery, using a metaphor very common among social-emancipation militants of that time. However, in Brazil, after nearly four centuries of slavery and only two decades of abolition, that statement was more than a metaphor used rhetorically. For the working class in its formation, slavery was a very recent memory. For some workers, a memory recorded on their skin, because they had been enslaved. That is why, in order to investigate the path of so-called “free” workers, it is important, but not wholly sufficient, not only to study the labour process of the nineteenth century, but also to understand the formation of a working-class-consciousness.

One can see that in many sources. For labour-movement activists at the beginning of the twentieth century, the repressive nature of the factory-worker village model, for example, was compared to a slave plantation, with the agricultural area and *senzala* (slave houses) as integrated spaces under the master’s domain. That was the assessment of some activists who tried to give a lecture at the Bangu factory in Rio’s eponymous suburb in 1909. They were forbidden to speak by the company’s owners, but they noted how the dominance of the factory, the churches, and the master’s paternalist speech in local life had created a situation of complete deprivation of liberty. A situation distinguished by low wages, long journeys,

55. These numbers are substantial. For comparison’s sake, we can look at the data from 1950–1959, when there were many more urban workers and trade unions. In that decade another study found 153 strikes in Rio de Janeiro; Marcelo Badaró Mattos *et al.*, *Greves e repressão policial ao sindicalismo carioca: 1945–1964* (Rio de Janeiro, 2003).

56. *A Voz do Trabalhador*, 19 (Rio de Janeiro, 30 October 1909), p. 3.

and high rents for precarious houses, but accepted, in their view passively, by many workers. In an article entitled “Slavery in Bangu” they explained: “The situation at Bangu is the same as or worse than that at other factories. There was no liberty, but rather heavy psychological repression in order to make them forget or even glorify their bondage.”⁵⁷

That is why, in the narrative of João de Mattos that opened this discussion, when talking about enslaved workers (he never wrote “slaves” because they had not been born so; they were reduced to slave-like condition by others), he calls them “de facto enslaved”, in contrast to the “free enslaved”, not “free workers”. For him the fight for freedom would not be finished while wage-labourers had only “the right to choose between this master or that one”.⁵⁸

At the beginning of the twentieth century, that kind of thought was often found in the discourse of worker leaders in their efforts to mobilize, organize, and raise worker awareness. As one can see from an article about another bakery worker, published in 1908, in which he argues that “the 1888 law that abolished slavery in Brazil seems as if it has yet to reach bakery workers, more slaves than before because bakery owners are so greedy and exploitative”.⁵⁹

The same argument was used by a dockworker in an article published five years later in the same newspaper:

It is a fact that slavery ended on 13 May 1888, and a popular adage says that “there are no arguments against the facts”; but I say there are. There are, because in spite of slavery ending, it did not end in the minds of our employers, those for whom we shed even our last drop of sweat and who do not know how to repay us, and they will never know if we do not force them with our own hands. This class of people we call, in our worker language, bourgeois.⁶⁰

Significantly, the authors of the articles were a bakery worker and a dockworker, from two working groups that had suffered a considerable amount of slavery and had a long history of fighting against it. Their comparisons were not merely rhetorical.

In the light of what I have recorded above, I hope I have demonstrated that the history of the process of class formation in Brazil began while slavery still existed. That does not mean that the working class was formed in Brazil before its emergence from the twentieth century. Instead, what we have tried to identify is that through shared work and life experience in Rio de Janeiro, as in other Brazilian cities where slavery was strong during the nineteenth century, enslaved and “free” workers shared

57. *A Voz do Trabalhador*, 20 (Rio de Janeiro, 15 November 1909), p. 1.

58. Duarte, *Pão e liberdade*, p. 71.

59. *A Voz do Trabalhador* (Rio de Janeiro, 15 July 1908), p. 2.

60. *A Voz do Trabalhador* (Rio de Janeiro, 1 July 1913), p. 2.

forms of organization and struggle, founding common values and expectations that would have central importance in later periods of class formation.

The battle for freedom was the most important element of the class struggle during slavery, in which the protagonist role was taken by the slaves themselves with the support of other social groups, especially “free” workers and some of their societies. The values shaped in their fight were, from that point on, an element in the armoury of shared experience bequeathed to workers of later periods. And they would use it to evaluate subsequent experiences and fights.

In the decades that followed, when the number and diversity of urban workers – with new groups of European immigrants, older artisans, ex-slaves and rural migrants – had grown, the common experiences of enslaved and “free” workers during the second half of the nineteenth century indubitably left significant marks on the process of working-class formation.