Black and White Workers: São Paulo, Brazil, 1888–1928

GEORGE REID ANDREWS*

One hundred years after abolition, Brazil remains a country of marked racial inequality.1 Brazilians themselves often attribute this to the legacy of slavery, arguing that the experience of bondage so crippled Afro-Brazilians as a social group that they proved unable, in the century after emancipation, to compete effectively against whites for jobs, education, housing, and other social goods.2 Such an argument has the virtue of linking contemporary

*Research for this article was supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the Fulbright-Hays Program. The author thanks members of the Pittsburgh Center for Social History’s working group on labor history for their comments on the initial version of this essay.


problems to their historical roots. But, in so doing, it focuses our attention on a past which is assumed to weigh like a dead hand on the present, and draws us away from careful examination of conditions and circumstances which came into play after emancipation. Slavery was a traumatic experience for every society which experienced it; but when it came to an end, it was replaced by new social, political, and economic arrangements that transformed racial hierarchy while simultaneously preserving it. Any effort to explore the roots of contemporary racial problems in Brazil, or any other postslavery society, must pay as much attention to these new conditions as to those previously in effect.

This essay examines conditions in the state of São Paulo, where rapidly expanding coffee cultivation had by 1888 concentrated the third largest slave population in Brazil (after neighboring Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais). It will focus specifically on labor market competition between blacks and whites in the years after emancipation, seeking to explain the outcomes of that competition in the interactions between, on the one hand, state policies and, on the other, institutions and organized groups in civil society. Several core questions will be addressed. What were the rules of the competition? Was the labor market a genuinely “free” one, or was it defined and structured in certain ways by the state, employers, workers acting through unions, or some combination of factors? If the latter, what were the consequences of a given labor market structure for the workers competing in that market, and for employers bidding for their services? In other words, how did the rules of the competition affect the outcome? And finally, what did black and white workers bring to the competition in terms of their skills, abilities, experience, and attitudes? And what sorts of bargains—among themselves, and with their employers and the state—were they willing to strike?

———. *Escravidão e racismo* (São Paulo, 1978); and their jointly authored book, *Cor e mobilidade social em Florianópolis* (São Paulo, 1980).

3. This article will use an essentially dichotomous, black/white conception of race relations, in which pretos (people of more or less pure African ancestry) and pardos (people of mixed racial ancestry; mulattos) will be treated as a single “black” racial category. This contradicts traditional Brazilian categorization, which recognizes pardos as an intermediate category between blacks and whites. My decision to adopt a different approach is based on recent research which demonstrates that, in relation to a number of social and economic indicators, the black and mulatto racial groups resemble each other so closely that they essentially form a single racial group clearly demarcated from whites. The results of this research, much of it carried out by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazil’s national statistical service), have led IBGE to now publish Brazilian racial data in dichotomous form, grouping pretos and pardos into a single negro category. See the first two items cited in n. 1; the work by economist Nelson Valle do Silva, particularly his essay in Fontaine’s *Race, Class, and Power* and his “Black-White Income Differentials: Brazil, 1960” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1978); and Sam C. Adamo, “The Broken Promise: Race, Health, and Justice in Rio de Janeiro, 1890–1940” (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1983).
Structuring the Labor Market: The Planter State

São Paulo’s labor market exhibited none of the rigid, state-imposed racial controls used, for example, in segregationist South Africa or the U.S. South during this same period. Nevertheless, it was powerfully affected by direct state intervention intended to produce results fraught with racial implications: the inundation of the local labor market with a flood of European immigrants.

Paulista coffee planters had been debating the desirability of European immigrant labor since the 1850s, when several planters, responding to the recent abolition of the African slave trade, first experimented with European colonos (contract plantation laborers). In 1871 and 1872, the provincial assembly set aside funds to underwrite costs incurred by planters wishing to bring immigrants from Europe to work on their plantations, and in 1884 it moved to create a private but state-funded Society for the Promotion of Immigration. Responsible for informing European workers of employment opportunities available in São Paulo, paying their passage, overseeing their arrival in Brazil, and dispatching them to the coffee groves, the society carried out these functions until 1895, when they were taken over by the State Department of Agriculture (the new federal constitution of 1891 having transformed São Paulo from a province into a state.)

European immigration to São Paulo did increase in response to these incentives, but not initially to levels sufficient to replace the slave labor force. Indeed, from the immigrants’ point of view, this was precisely the problem: until the slave labor force was replaced, and free European workers no longer had to compete against coerced Africans and Afro-Brazilians, the immigrants were not inclined to come to Brazil, especially when they had the more attractive options of going to the United States or Argentina. To paraphrase Finley Peter Dunne, their fear was that employers who made slaves of white folks would make slaves of white folks too. And such fears were amply supported by widely publicized consular reports from European officials in São Paulo, who described working conditions for immigrants on São Paulo plantations as little better than slavery.


slaves from the plantations foreshadowed the imminent demise of slavery, that annual European immigration into the province first broke the 10,000 mark. When it did, it jumped promptly to 32,000, more than the previous five years combined. Formal abolition in 1888 almost tripled that number, to 92,000—coincidentally, just slightly less than the number of slaves freed in the province that year by emancipation. Between 1890 and 1914, another 1.5 million Europeans would cross the Atlantic to São Paulo, the majority with their passages paid by the state government.6

From the planters’ point of view, any benefits which these programs brought to the immigrants were purely incidental. Ever since the first discussions of subsidized immigration, the goal had been clear: to flood the labor market with workers, thus keeping the cost of labor low. The sponsor of the 1870 proposal to subsidize European immigration argued the desirability of creating a market situation in which “workers must search for landowners rather than landowners search for workers.” Another supporter of the proposal noted the importance of “bringing in foreign workers, so that the cost of labor can go down. . . .” By the time the 1884 law was being debated, a growing number of fazendeiros understood that “it is impossible to have low salaries, without violence, if there are few workers and many people who wish to employ them.” And by 1888, it was said that “it is evident that we need laborers . . . in order to increase the competition among them and in that way salaries will be lowered by means of the law of supply and demand.” Supply and demand would now replace the violence and coercion of slavery as a means of organizing production, argued Antônio Prado, one of the province’s most prominent planters. “Does the honorable opposition intend that the government should present to the legislature coercive means to force the libertos [freed slaves] back to work? What might those means be? Might it not be that freedom is the most effective guarantee that the economic law of supply and demand will conveniently regulate conditions of labor?” And if the law of supply and demand did not work entirely to the planters’ advantage, then a little market intervention, in the form of transportation subsidies to the immigrants, was perfectly permissible. After all, as Antônio Prado’s

6. An Italian immigrant whose parents brought him to São Paulo in 1890, when he was one year old, recalls that they came specifically in response to abolition, “which opened possibilities for workers from other countries” which had not existed under slavery. “O velho Scaramuzza lembra as origens do Bexiga,” Folha de S. Paulo (São Paulo), May 14, 1985, p. 19. During this same period (1890–1914), 681,000 immigrants left the state (and, presumably, Brazil), according to official statistics; for the 1888–1928 period overall, 2,078,000 immigrants entered São Paulo, and 949,000 left. Holloway, Immigrants on the Land, 34, 179. Lúcio Kowarick, “The Subjugation of Labour: The Constitution of Capitalism in Brazil” (unpublished ms., 1985), 92, notes the coincidence between the 92,000 immigrants entering the state in 1888 and the estimated 107,000 slaves freed.
brother Martinho cogently observed, “immigrants with money are of no use to us.”

São Paulo’s labor market in the years immediately following abolition was one shaped by an unusual (in the context of the economic liberalism dominant in the turn-of-the-century Atlantic world) degree of state direction and intervention. This was intervention seemingly devoid of any racial content, but in fact, by choosing to invest funds in European workers and refusing to make comparable investments in Brazilians, the province’s planters, and the state apparatus which they controlled, had made their ethnic and racial preferences in workers crystal clear. In so doing, they were motivated in equal part by the international currents of scientific racism and Social Darwinism running strong at that time, and by their own autochthonous ideologia da vadiagem, a firm and unshakable belief in the innate laziness and irresponsibility of the black and racially mixed Brazilian masses. Visiting French naturalist Louis Couty nicely captured the essence of the ideologia in his famous declaration that “o Brasil não tem povo”: “Brazil does not have people, or rather, the people that it was given by race mixture and by the freeing of the slaves do not play an active and useful role” in the country’s growth and development. The most rapid and efficient way to overcome this situation, argued the São Paulo planters was, as one of them put it, “a transfusion of better blood,” or, in Antônio Prado’s formulation, “immigration on a grand scale, on the grandest scale possible.”

As emancipation drew closer, São Paulo’s leading abolitionist newspaper, A Redempção, denounced the planters’ apparent desire to “open


8. An 1885 proposal to extend the same privileges to Brazilian migrants as those enjoyed by Europeans—paid maritime passages and lodging at state expense at the immigrant hostel in São Paulo city—was rejected by the provincial assembly. Proposals by abolitionist leaders that state funds should be expended on education and training to help the libertos compete in the labor market never even made it to the floor for debate. Azevedo, “O negro livre,” 281–284.

9. On the influence of scientific racism in Brazil at this time, see Thomas Skidmore, Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought (New York, 1974), 52–63. The concept and label of an ideologia da vadiagem is used by Laura de Mello e Souza in her Desclassificados do ouro: A pobreza mineira no século XVIII (Rio de Janeiro, 1982), 64–72, 215–222; Kowarick’s “Subjugation of Labour,” passim, discusses the evolution of the ideology during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the quotations, see Louis Couty, O Brasil em 1884: Esboços sociológicos (Rio de Janeiro, 1984); Azevedo, “O negro livre,” 250; Fernandes, Integração do negro, I, 36–37.
the doors to the immigrants” and deny the libertos “the work that they [the planters] infamously extorted from the slaves.” By 1888, it indeed appeared that this was to be the meaning and result of abolition. The Europeans were being transported to São Paulo to compete with the libertos, and it was assumed at the outset that this would be a contest which the latter would lose. On the day after abolition, São Paulo’s Diário Popular reflected that the event was “a great good, not because of how it will benefit the black race, which, because of its backwardness, will continue to suffer almost as much as before. . . .” Rather, the beneficiaries will be those “appropriately educated and prepared to deal with the challenges posed by the new order of things. The right man in the right place, as the Americans say,” and that man clearly was not going to be black.  

Even more ominous was an article written a year after emancipation, entitled “The Segregation of the Liberto,” which announced the virtual conclusion of the labor market competition and the definitive victory of the immigrants. Ignoring the substance of the earlier legislative debates, the article argued that no such competition had been intended or anticipated. “Nobody was thinking about a contest between the old laborers and the new. There was room for everyone.” But the libertos’ flight from the plantations, and their refusal to continue in their old positions, left the planters no choice but to turn to the immigrants. “The Brazilian worker abandoned the position he had conquered, he made the immigrant replace him, he forced the landowner to opt for the latter.” And now, “the gap left by the former laborer has been filled forever. . . . The liberto is segregated, rendered useless, lost to the productive life.”

One is startled by the rapidity with which the contest had run its course—it had been only a year since abolition, and the vast majority of those Europeans who would enter São Paulo had not yet set foot on Brazilian shores—and by the rigid finality of its conclusion: not just defeat and displacement for the libertos, but segregation and exile, forever, from “the productive life.” One is struck as well by the placement of blame for this tragic situation: it lies squarely on the shoulders of the former slaves themselves.

These articles, and others like them, should be read not as empirical descriptions of what was happening in São Paulo at the time, but rather as expressions of what the state’s elites hoped and indeed expected would come to pass: the displacement of black labor by white. White labor had

been granted a privileged position over black, and was expected to take full advantage of it. But precisely how far would those privileges extend in practice? Would white workers in Brazil exploit their preferred position to create a racially exclusionary union movement and a racially exclusionary labor market, as their peers in the United States and South Africa were doing at the same time?

*Structuring the Labor Market: Organized Labor*

Between 1900 and 1920 São Paulo’s immigrants forged a labor movement led by, and comprised largely of, Europeans. Precise statistics on membership are not available, but a study of 106 labor leaders from this period discovered that fewer than one-third of them were native born; of that third, most were concentrated in Rio de Janeiro rather than São Paulo.12 The immigrants’ domination of the labor movement, their insecurity in the face of the government’s immigration policies and the resulting oversupply of labor, and the marginalization of black and mulatto workers in São Paulo might easily have led to outcomes like those in the United States and South Africa, where white workers demanded, and received, institutionalized barriers against black competition.13

Such was not the case in São Paulo, however. In searching for strategies with which to improve their position and confront their employers and the state, São Paulo’s workers seem never to have even considered the possibility of the racial exclusion and segregation being pursued elsewhere. If anything, their approach was exactly the opposite. Acutely aware of the tactical opportunities which an ethnically and racially divided working class offered to employers and the state, and inspired by the egalitarian

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13. Not all labor organizations in either the United States or South Africa made such demands. Several industrial unions, such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the United Mine Workers, took an early stand against racial discrimination and played an important role in pressuring the Congress of Industrial Organizations to extend such policies to all its member unions. But before the creation of the CIO in 1936, the American Federation of Labor took little effective action to combat racial exclusion in its affiliates, and such exclusion tended to be the norm. On the racial policies of organized labor in the United States and South Africa during this period, see Stanley Greenberg, *Race and State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives* (New Haven, 1980), 273–356; William J. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions,* 2d ed. (Chicago, 1980), 42–87; and William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers since the Civil War* (New York, 1982).
doctrines of socialism, anarchism, and anarcho-syndicalism, labor organi-
izers repeatedly invoked the goal of eliminating such divisions.

O Amigo do Povo spoke for the labor press as a whole when it de-
nounced what it described as the government policy of “dividing in order
to rule” by “pitting the foreign worker against the national worker. . . .”
Organizers recognized that, by dividing the labor force into immigrant
workers and Brazilians, and granting preference to the former, employers
had produced a state of “latent warfare in the very heart of the working
class” which could be fanned into flame at any time. A “heterogeneous
population . . . separated by hatreds” was peculiarly vulnerable to such a
strategy, and those hatreds were further exacerbated by the discontent and
resentment of Brazilians locked out of the labor market. Urging its readers
to renounce “false prejudices and false pride of race,” the Italian-language
paper Acanti! concluded that ethnic and national cleavages within the
working class formed the single most important obstacle to the success of
São Paulo’s labor movement.¹⁴

Such a conclusion was the product of bitter experience. The tactic
of exploiting racial divisions within the labor force was first used in São
Paulo just three years after abolition, in the 1891 dockworker strike in
Santos. The Docas de Santos Company brought in unemployed libertos
who had fled to Santos during 1887 and 1888 and then remained, and used
them as strikebreakers to defeat the predominantly immigrant strikers.
The same weapon was employed again in 1908, this time using the black
laborers who worked in the company’s gravel quarries, fazendas, and road-
building crews. After the 1908 strike, the paper of the dockworkers’ union
devoted several articles to the company’s campaign to promote “discord
and racial struggle among the workers of Santos,” and a recent study of
these strikes concludes that the company was indeed “successful in
presenting the conflict between strikers and strikebreakers as the result of
‘color prejudice’ among immigrant workers.”¹⁵

Efforts to promote ethnic and racial antagonism within the labor force
were particularly evident during the 1917–20 period, years of unusually
active labor agitation in São Paulo. The successful general strike of 1917,
an unprecedented event in Brazilian labor relations, provoked a wave of
repression by employers and the state during the years that followed, and

¹⁴. Initial quotation from “Os acontecimentos do Rio e do Ceará,” O Amigo do Povo
(São Paulo), Jan. 17, 1904, p. 1. The rest, from O Amigo do Povo, Dec. 6, 1903; Il Pungulo,
May 1, 1909; and Acanti! (São Paulo), July 25 and Nov. 28, 1914, are taken from Hall,
“Immigration and the Early São Paulo Working Class,” Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat,
Wirtschaft, und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas, 12 (1975), 397–399.

¹⁵. Maria Lúcia Caira Gaithay, “Os trabalhadores do porto de Santos, 1889–1910” (tese
repeated attacks by public officials and the establishment press against subversive, traitorous foreign radicals. Newspapers which had rejoiced at the immigrants’ arrival several years earlier now turned on them as importers of the alien, anti-Brazilian doctrines of anarchism and socialism, and employers who had welcomed the immigrants into their factories and plantations now denounced them as disloyal ingrates and proclaimed the simple virtues of the loyal, hardworking Brazilians.16

Seeking to overcome these xenophobic appeals and forge a genuinely unified labor movement, São Paulo’s unions promoted the principle of ethnic, national, and racial equality among all workers, and devoted particular attention to organizing and mobilizing the Brazilian population. A 1903 article attacked the practice of conducting meetings and public speeches in Italian, and urged that organizers do more of their proselytizing in Portuguese. The first issue of the Jornal Operário announced that it had come into existence to fill the need for a Portuguese-language workers’ paper to speak directly to Brazilian workers.17

As they spoke to their immigrant and Brazilian readers, the labor papers hammered home the message of equality: “We’re not in the time of slavery any more—every individual, white or black, ugly or handsome, Brazilian or foreign, according to the laws of this country is a citizen, and as such can take part in the affairs of the state and demand accounts from his oppressors.” A more pessimistic approach was that black and white workers were equal not in their rights, but in their common degradation, since all workers, regardless of race, remained enslaved and oppressed by capitalism. “Wages are the modern form of slavery”; “slavery died in name but not in fact.” This implicit equalizing of blacks and whites occasionally became explicit, as in an article denouncing the twentieth anniversary of abolition as “lies, hypocrisy. Jesuitisms, we say. . . . Between the black slaves who worked in their masters’ fields, and the white slaves who labor in the factory . . . between the blacks from the Congo employed on the fazendas prior to 1888 and the white workers from the most civilized countries of Europe who work today to enrich a gang of parasites, there is, and there cannot be, any difference whatsoever.”18

16. On the antiforeigner campaigns of the late 1910s, see Maram, Anarquistas, imigrantes, 60–89 and Fausto, Trabalho urbano, 233–243.
18. “1 de maio,” O Grito do Povo (São Paulo), May 1, 1900; “13 de maio,” A Luta Proletária (São Paulo), May 16, 1908; “O salariado é a forma moderna da escravidão,” O Amigo do Povo, Aug. 14, 1903; “Entre operários,” O Amigo do Povo, June 21, 1902. Terra Livre (São Paulo), May 16, 1916, noted the similarities between immigration and the slave trade, and the importance of the state in promoting the former. “It used to be that private enterprise, the slave trader, took charge of going to hunt or buy the blacks. . . . Today the
The labor movement made explicit appeals to an Afro-Brazilian constituency. A 1908 article denounced as an outrage the practice among Catholic churches in Campinas of dividing white and black women into separate organizations and sisterhoods. A 1911 article on São Paulo’s peasant population made clear that it was discussing Afro-Brazilians (it described their singing sambas and cantigas de desafio, the Brazilian answer-back song, in black dialect), and pointedly contrasted their innocent rural virtue with the corruption and viciousness of the urban bourgeoisie. The article went so far as to hold up this peasant idyll as a model for the future anarchist society: “the delicate sentiments of those good people are like the affectionate embrace that will someday unite free men on a free earth.” And a 1919 article in the newspaper of the construction workers’ union, written during the heat of the anti-foreigner campaign in São Paulo, noted that the government’s denunciations of immigrant agitators might make it look as though Brazilians were not involved in the labor movement. Nothing could be farther from the truth, the author argued. Despite the fact that “we are descendants from a slave race, that our fathers died in the stocks or under the lash, while our mothers—as a foreigner put it—still have the marks of the master’s whip on their buttocks,” Brazilians are as active in the struggle as any European.19

These efforts to promote interracial solidarity notwithstanding, one must agree with Sheldon Maram’s judgment that the early labor movement was not very successful in achieving its goal of creating a racially and ethically unified working class. The immigrant response to the labor movement was far from overwhelming, and the Brazilian response weaker still. One reason for that weak response is hinted at in the laconic “as a foreigner put it” in the quotation immediately above. Despite their appeals for racial equality and working-class solidarity, many immigrant labor leaders could not break completely free of feelings of ethnic and racial superiority over their Brazilian colleagues. A 1903 article in O Amigo do Povo expressed despair at the idea of ever organizing the Brazilian povo, which lies vegetating in ignorance, sunk in poverty and lethargy. To make the revolution, the paper argued, will require “wills and characters that are stronger, physically and morally, than those possessed by the Brazilians, who are the product of a debilitated nation. . . .” Articles in the labor press some-

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times took on explicitly racial overtones. A 1917 article criticizing recent repression of strikes argued that police had completely overstepped the bounds of Brazilian law and behaved like savages. Contrasting Brazil with the kingdom of Senegambia, “a vast region of blacks on the black continent,” the paper argued that “this republic is not a Liberia, it’s not a republic of blacks, of barely clad savages and primitive laws.” No, Brazil is a cultured country, with the sole exception of its police. “The police are not, and never have been, Brazilian; the police are from Senegambia, they follow Senegambian laws, and their officers are Senegambians.” A satirical play published in an anarchist monthly in 1905 presented a symbolic social scale running from nobleman to dog. A black butler ranks just above the dog and below a beggar, who expresses his humiliation at being removed from the mansion “by a well-fed black.” This effort was at least satirical; not so a 1918 article on the origin of black people, which recounted various racist folktales about how God had happened to give black people broad noses, kinky hair, and light-colored palms. The editor of the paper, which served the workers of the Sorocabana Railway Company (many of whom were black), described these legends “as most clever and well done.”

It was probably inevitable that the racial attitudes and tensions which characterized the society at large would emerge in the labor unions. But adding to the generalized racism of the time was the fact that the exclusion of black workers from industrial employment created a classic “reserve” labor force—an army of unemployed who could be called up at any time to break strikes, undermine efforts to unionize, and keep wages low. So limited were opportunities for black workers elsewhere in the economy that sufficient numbers could always be found to respond to employers’ appeals for furagreves. One black paper noted that strikebreaking had been the means by which black men had finally penetrated the ranks of conductors and drivers for the São Paulo Light, Power, and Tramway Company, which before the strike of 1917 had restricted black men to laying track.

Many labor leaders understood how difficult it would be for unemployed workers to refuse opportunities like these, but this did not stop them from voicing irritation with black workers who did so, and particularly with those who signed on as thugs and hoodlums hired by employers to break up strikes and demonstrations. “[W]hat hurts and embitters is to see the sons of yesterday’s slaves today replacing the old capitães do mato [hunters of runaway slaves] in the disgraceful mission of filling the ranks


21. Getulino (Campinas), Dec. 9, 1923. For a reply which argues that Afro-Brazilians should make common cause with white workers rather than undermine them, see the short essay by Moacyr Marques, Getulino, Mar. 30, 1924.
of those who beat up workers who are in search of their economic liberty and the improvement of their class by the only means at their disposal—the strike.”

It is important to note that the strikebreakers of this period were by no means exclusively black. A 1905 article argued that a disproportionate number of strikebreakers were “yokels” from Sicily and Venice—though, significantly, the piece was entitled “Slaves and Savages from Europe,” implicitly equating strikebreaking with blackness. A 1904 article on the desperate condition of Portuguese immigrants in São Paulo noted that their situation was so bad that many of them, “in order that their families not die of hunger,” had been driven to the ultimate betrayal of their fellow workers: enlisting in the police force. Despite their preferred position, European workers proved no less vulnerable to the pressures of the labor market than their Afro-Brazilian peers—which explains, in part, the collapse of this first phase of the Brazilian labor movement during the early 1920s.

The anarchists and socialists had sought to bridge the gap between Brazilian and European workers, and had failed. Or rather, the degree to which they succeeded was not sufficient to produce a labor movement which could prevail against the forces of the Republican state. Nor did it make any progress in introducing racial equality into the workplace. In the absence of such intervention, and as shaped by the immigration policies of the planter state, what were the outcomes of the labor market competition between São Paulo’s black and white workers?

The Struggle for Jobs: Outcomes

In analyzing the results of black/white labor market competition, it is helpful to divide the discussion into rural and urban spheres. In the countryside, white workers, who were almost exclusively immigrants, quickly became concentrated in the most prosperous regions of the state, and in the most desirable jobs in those regions. Black and caboclo workers either retreated to more depressed parts of the state or held the

24. Caboclo is defined as “a civilized Brazilian Indian of pure blood” or “a Brazilian half-breed (of white and Indian).” Novo Michaelis diccionário ilustrado, 2 vols. (São Paulo, 1961), II, 200; see also Holloway, Immigrants on the Land, 106. In practice, in São Paulo, caboclo seems to have meant a dark-skinned ruralite of indeterminate race, usually engaged in subsistence agriculture or day labor on the plantations, and forming part of the rural caipira (peasant) culture. On caipira culture in the nineteenth century, see Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco, Homens livres na ordem escravocrata (São Paulo, 1969); on the twentieth century, see Antônio Cândido Mello e Souza, Os parceiros do Rio Bonito, 2d ed. (São Paulo, 1979).
least desirable jobs on the more profitable plantations. Planters in the badly eroded Paraíba Valley, for example, in the northeast section of the state, were unable to provide competitive salaries and working conditions. For these planters, as well as for those in the neighboring coffee-growing areas of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, as a contemporary observer put it, “white labor was a luxury which they could not maintain.” As a result, by 1905 only 4 percent of the labor force in the Paraíba region was European.25

In the booming central-western region of the state, by contrast, the agricultural labor force was two-thirds European by the same date. Within that labor force, a clear system of racial preference prevailed. Warren Dean finds that “immigrants were generally preferred for colono contracts, undoubtedly the best positions on the plantation.” Thomas Holloway agrees that “when the Paulistas decided to go to Europe for their workers, the Brazilian peasantry, including many ex-slaves and the native mixed-blood backwoodsmen, was relegated to a marginal position in the regional economy. . . . By the early twentieth century the die was cast, and work in the coffee fields of the west was universally identified with immigrants.” When black and racially mixed Brazilians were hired at all, it was to perform “the seasonal, precarious jobs that were not sufficiently well paid to be attractive to the immigrants. They became camaradas, general laborers, who were paid by the month. When there was a local excess of immigrants, the freedmen might be further demoted to day laborer.” Observing this situation, political scientist Paula Beiguelman describes it as a two-tier, racially segmented labor market, with an upper level of “foreign wage-earners, who worked toward the eventual accumulation of cash savings; and a second, Brazilian, for the painful and difficult tasks rejected by the first.”26

In the cities immigrants enjoyed the same preference in hiring that they experienced in the countryside. The 1893 census of São Paulo city showed that 72 percent of employees in commerce, 79 percent of factory workers, 81 percent of transport workers, and 86 percent of artisans were foreign born. A 1902 source estimated the industrial labor force in the capital as more than 90 percent immigrant; in 1913 the Correio Paulistano estimated that 80 percent of the capital’s construction workers were Italian; and a 1912 survey of the labor force in 33 textile factories in the


26. Dean, Rio Claro, 172; Holloway, Immigrants on the Land, 63; Beiguelman, Formação do povo, 108.
state found that 80 percent were foreign born, the great majority of them Italian.\textsuperscript{27}

The 1920 census, while providing no information on race, suggests at first glance that native Brazilian workers had recovered some lost ground. They now accounted for 49 percent of the capital’s 96,000 factory workers, 38 percent of transport workers, and 38 percent of employees in commerce. When one factors into these figures, however, the fact that the capital’s foreign-born population had fallen from 50 percent of the city’s inhabitants to 35 percent, one still finds a situation of clear labor-market preference in all categories save domestic service (where the preference is weak), and actually strengthened preference (in relation to 1893) in the areas of transport and commerce (see Table I). Scattered evidence further suggests that many of the Brazilians employed in urban occupations in 1920 were themselves the second-generation offspring of immigrants who had arrived in the 1890s and early 1900s; by 1920, therefore, descendants of native-born Brazilian families were probably worse off in the labor market competition than they were in 1893.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{28} Figures from Recenseamento do Brasil, 1920, vol. IV, 1st part, tomo I, 170–173. On Brazilian-born offspring of immigrant parents, see Hall, "Immigration," 394–395 and Fernandes, Integração do negro, I, 139. Inspectors from the State Department of Labor reported visiting a textile factory in 1912 which employed 20 adults, 151 foreign-born minors, and 112 Brazilian minors. Of this last group, 106 were children of Italian parents. "Condições de trabalho na indústria textil," 60. While carrying out research in the personnel files of the Jafet textile factory in São Paulo, I found numerous Italian-surnamed Brazilian-born minors and young adults working in the factory in the 1910s and ’20s, many of them related to older Italian-born employees. Unfortunately, I failed to count these second-generation Italian-Brazilians as a separate category of employee, and thus cannot offer firm figures on this score.
Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes argues that this was indeed the case, and that the disadvantages which affected Brazilian participants in the labor market were particularly pronounced for Afro-Brazilians. By 1920, he argues, their position in the urban economy was even worse than it had been 20 or 30 years earlier, despite the phenomenal growth in industry, construction, and commerce that had taken place in the meantime. Blacks were almost completely barred from factory work, and black artisans had virtually disappeared from the city. Poor and working-class black people found their job opportunities restricted to domestic service and what today would be termed the “informal sector.” Two Afro-Brazilians who lived through that period recall the conditions under which they worked.

There were almost as many blacks as Italians in those days, in São Paulo, [but] they lived in a state of total disintegration. . . . The immigrants were in the factories and in commerce. The only work left for the blacks was to clean houses and offices, cart wood, and other chores. We were all underemployed. You always used to see blacks pushing carts through the city and lining up in Quintino Bocaiuva Street, with their buckets and brushes, waiting for the call to clean a house here, scrub a floor there.

The blacks had to hustle, as they say today. They had to create various sources of work, as porters, gardeners, domestic servants, sweeping the sidewalks, washing cars. . . . All those jobs that didn’t exist before, the blacks created—shoeshine boys, newspaper vendors, day laborers, all those jobs they created for their subsistence, because the fazendeiros wouldn’t hire blacks. . . .

Some black men were able to find regular work laying track for the railroads or for the São Paulo Light, Power, and Tramway Company, which was building the city’s tramway and electric systems at the time. And the exclusion of black workers from factory employment was not absolute, since there was occasional mention of factory workers in the social columns of the black press, as well as in employment records. Such opportunities


30. On São Paulo Light, see “Frente negra brasileira,” anexo 2. For factory workers in the black press, see, for example, A Rua (São Paulo), Feb. 24, 1916, p. 3, which mentions “certain young women from the Trapani factory” and “certain young women from the silk factory”; or the obituary of Deodato de Moraes, employed at “the hat factory in Villa Prudente. . . . Workers from various factories attended his funeral,” O Alfredo, Sept. 22, 1918, p. 2. My own 20-percent sample of workers hired at the Jafet textile plant between 1903 and 1930 showed that, of those Brazilian-born workers of known race, 10.9 percent were Afro-Brazilian. However, the first Afro-Brazilian worker does not appear on the company’s rolls
were clearly limited, however, and the great majority of black people found themselves forced into domestic service or the irregular, poorly paying jobs described above.

Why did this happen? Why was the state’s Afro-Brazilian population so consistently marginalized and pushed aside in the labor market competition? Certainly that contest had been structured by state policy in such a way as to make it exceptionally rigorous; but did this mean that black people inevitably had to lose?

**Explaining the Outcomes: The Fernandes Thesis**

According to Florestan Fernandes’s pathbreaking book, *A integração do negro na sociedade de classes* (1965), there was no way that blacks could have fared better than they did. Based on research undertaken during the 1940s and ’50s as part of a UNESCO-sponsored project on race relations in Brazil, Fernandes’s writings, and those of his students, have become the most widely accepted and influential explanation of why black people were not integrated into Paulista society (and into Brazilian society more generally) on terms of equality with white people. Fernandes focused on the heritage of slavery, which he saw operating in two ways.

First, it left a strong inheritance of racism which made whites unwilling to accept blacks as equal and to grant them equality of treatment and opportunity after emancipation. Even if such opportunities had been offered, however, Fernandes argues that the great majority of black people would have been unable to take advantage of them because of the second aspect of the slave heritage: the ways in which slavery had crippled its victims intellectually, morally, socially, and economically. Slaves learned no marketable skills under slavery; quite the contrary, slavery had taught them to avoid work wherever and whenever possible. Slavery had not built up the black family; rather, it had undermined and destroyed it. And slavery had done nothing to instill a sense of community and self-worth into slaves; for reasons of security, it had sought to root out and destroy whatever instruments of solidarity and mutual support the slaves may have brought with them from Africa or tried to construct in the New World.

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Therefore, when the Europeans arrived in São Paulo and began to compete with black people in the rural and urban labor markets, there simply was no competition, reasoned Fernandes. Black people were “automatically” pushed aside by Europeans who were more highly skilled, more imbued with a capitalist work ethic, and more effectively supported by family and community structures of solidarity. The “isolation” and marginalization of São Paulo’s black population was “a ‘natural product’ of their inability to feel, think, and act socially as free men.” São Paulo did not reject the Afro-Brazilians, he argues; rather, by their failure to assume the new, “modern” roles of citizen, employee, wage earner, etc., the Afro-Brazilians in effect rejected the modernizing, capitalist society of twentieth-century São Paulo.

Fernandes’s book was a courageous, and at times brilliant, effort to unmask the reality of Brazilian race relations, and to give the lie to the notion of Brazil as a land of racial equality and “racial democracy.” Nevertheless, a close examination of his arguments concerning the first decades after abolition, and the process of labor market exclusion which took place at that time, suggests some problems. Fernandes bases much of his explanation for the marginalization of the black population on a set of characteristics attributed to each racial group: dynamic competitiveness and a relatively high level of professional skills on the part of the immigrants; anomie, apathy, and ignorance on the part of the Afro-Brazilians. Are these assertions supported by the evidence available?

The first problem with the Fernandes thesis is that, as early as 1872, the majority of São Paulo’s black and mulatto population was not slave, but free. Well before the abolition of slavery, and increasingly so in the years leading up to 1888, most of the province’s Afro-Brazilians had escaped the devastating effects of slavery, and were at liberty to construct lives and careers of their own choosing. Far from floundering helplessly in the labor market, as Fernandes’s argument would lead us to expect, many of these free blacks and mulattos succeeded in establishing themselves as artisans and merchants, in São Paulo as throughout Brazil. It was only when the immigrants came, he notes, that these black craftsmen and entrepreneurs started to disappear from the urban scene.


33. Fernandes, Integração do negro, 1, 64–66; Roberto J. Haddock Lobo and Irene Aloisi, O negro na vida social brasileira (São Paulo, 1941), 29. On free black urban workers and artisans in Brazil more generally, see Herbert Klein, “Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” in Neither Slave Nor Free, David W. Cohen and Jack P. Greene, eds. (Baltimore, 1972), 325–330.
They simply didn’t have the skills to face the Europeans, he argues—in either skilled labor, commerce, or factory work. But the evidence is far from convincing. Fernandes’s own informants recall that the “quality of the blacks’ work was no worse than the whites.” And while Fernandes asserts that the Europeans were better educated and had more extensive experience with urban industrial work than did the Brazilians, either black or white, a number of historians take issue with him. Michael Hall argues that “most of those who came to the capital [São Paulo] appear, by all accounts, to have had no prior industrial or urban experience. While some artisans and other urban workers undoubtedly went to São Paulo, such immigration was not encouraged and it seems fairly clear that the overwhelming majority of the labor force was composed of men and women from the rural areas of Southern Europe.” Looking specifically at Italian immigration, which accounted for almost half of the immigrants arriving in São Paulo, and studying it at its point of origin rather than its destination, Rudolph Bell found that between 1880 and 1910 “persons with skills useful in an urban or industrial setting tended to move to northern Europe, particularly Germany and Belgium,” lured by higher salaries and low transportation costs; “they clearly failed to take advantage of any opportunities in North and South America.”

Since most factory workers in turn-of-the-century São Paulo learned their skills on the job, the question of previously acquired industrial skills may not even be relevant. This was particularly the case with minors, who comprised almost one-third of the workers (3,152 out of 10,204) in the 33 textile factories surveyed by the State Department of Labor in 1912. Brazilians, Africans, and Europeans all seem to have been equally capable of mastering the basic operations of factory work. Nineteenth-century slaveowners had experimented successfully with slave labor in a variety of industries; after abolition, Brazilians, among them sizable numbers of Afro-Brazilians, would form the majority of industrial laborers in Rio de Janeiro and other states which could not afford São Paulo’s program of subsidized immigration.

34. Fernandes, Integração do negro, 1, 74; Hall, “Immigration,” 395; Rudolph M. Bell, Fate and Honor, Family and Village: Demographic and Cultural Change in Rural Italy since 1800 (Chicago, 1979). Further supporting these findings is Virginia Yans-McLaughlin’s book on Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880–1930 (Ithaca, 1971), which finds that the overwhelming majority of immigrants were agricultural workers. “Those few immigrants who had engaged in manufacturing did not compose an industrial proletariat” (p. 27). See also Beiguelman, Formação do povo, 122.

35. “Condições do trabalho na indústria textil.” 38–39. For discussions of the use of slave labor in industry, see Beiguelman, Formação do povo, 122; Viotti da Costa, Da senzala à colônia, 21; Douglas Cole Libby, Trabalho escravo e capital estrangeiro no Brasil: O caso do Morro Velho (Belo Horizonte, 1984); and Jorge Siqueira, “Contribuição ao estudo da transição do escravismo colonial para o capitalismo urbano-industrial no Rio de Janeiro:
We may concur then with Lúcio Kowarick’s judgment that “the use of foreigners in São Paulo’s industry was not due to better qualifications on the part of immigrants; indeed, they very rarely brought any previous industrial experience with them from their countries of origin.”36 This was even more so in the countryside, on the coffee plantations. I could find no instance of any planter ever arguing that former slaves lacked the necessary skills to carry out plantation labor. Such an argument would have been patently absurd, given that Afro-Brazilians and Africans had formed virtually the entire labor force in the coffee economy ever since the export boom began, in the early 1800s. Working with plantation records from the first decade of the century, Warren Dean concludes that there was no significant difference in productivity between Brazilian and immigrant plantation workers. Thus, the preferred position granted the latter “was partly founded upon discrimination against the national [Brazilian] workers, especially the blacks. Had they been paid equally on the basis of productivity without making distinctions of whiteness, the Italians might not have come at all.”37

The reasons for the displacement of black labor, therefore, are not to be found in different levels of skill. Rather, the state’s planters and industrialists argued, it was a question of attitude. And it is on precisely this point that Fernandes is most emphatic. Black people did not succeed in São Paulo’s labor market because of their failure to don the mental armor of disciplined, motivated competitors in the marketplace. Their attitudes were “precapitalist,” even “anticapitalist,” he argues. They actually preferred poorly paid, irregular employment to the grinding discipline of the factory and the plantation. Lacking the “courage” and either the “material or moral” preparation to compete with the immigrants, the Afro-Brazilians retreated into “a self-condemnation to ostracism, dependence, and destruction” which “can be seen as a silent protest or as a suicidal effect of a complex of social disillusionment.”38

38. Fernandes, Integração do negro, 1, 17, 20, 51–58, emphasis in original.
These unfortunate attitudes were, in turn, part of a greater problem, that of the anomic social milieu which the black population created for itself. Disorganized family structure, alcoholism, crime, and obsession with sex all combined to lock the black community into a state of anomie and social pathology which, when added to the low skill levels and aversion to work which were their inheritance from slavery, eliminated whatever hope the Afro-Brazilians might have had of competing successfully for jobs and opportunities in São Paulo’s expanding economy.  

Certainly São Paulo’s turn-of-the-century planter and urban elites would have recognized their black population in Fernandes’s writings, since the anomic, irresponsible, shiftless black people pictured there are perfectly in keeping with the elites’ vision of the Afro-Brazilians. Recent research on Afro-Brazilian criminality and family structure during this period, however, has suggested that Fernandes overstates both the degree of social pathology and “disorganization” within the black community, and the effect which that “disorganization” had on black people’s participation in the labor force. Perhaps even more importantly, the Fernandes thesis fails to acknowledge the degree to which similar conditions prevailed among the immigrant population.

The black newspapers of the period offer clear evidence of the community’s concern over the social problems facing it. Articles appeared regularly urging readers to adopt “modern” morality: to abandon alcohol, gambling, and other vices; to maintain public decorum; to refrain from adultery and loose living; and to educate their children in a respectable trade or profession. “At every step we see black men living from vice, a large number of women lewd and unkempt, vagabond children roaming

40. On the black family, see Robert Slernes, “Escravidão e família; Padrões de casamento e estabilidade numa comunidade escrava (Campinas, século XIX)” (unpublished ms., no date); Moema de Poli Teixeira Pacheco, “‘Aguentando a barra’: A questão da família negra” (unpublished ms., 1982). Fernandes recognizes the existence of family solidarity among the black population and the importance of the family as a means of support for members experiencing economic difficulties. But since such a large proportion of family members was likely to be unemployed at any given time, he argues, such family solidarity actually became an obstacle to the advancement of its members. While immigrant families “used domestic solidarity to defeat economic adversity and ‘to move upward,’ among the blacks exactly the opposite occurred: domestic solidarity absorbed the best fruits of labor and of daily sacrifice, lowering the standard of living, savings, etc., and enforcing equality from below.” If this was indeed the case, clearly it was a function of differential economic opportunities rather than family “pathology,” which seems to have worked similarly in the two communities. Nevertheless, Fernandes concludes that this “domestic solidarity” among the Afro-Brazilians was “anachronistic manifestation of tribal solidarity” and that “even the Italian ‘disorganized family,’ for example, possessed decided advantages over the ‘black family.’” Fernandes, Integração do negro, I, 162–163, 198, 216. On black criminality in São Paulo during this period, see Boris Fausto, Crime e cotidiano: A criminalidade em São Paulo, 1880–1924 (São Paulo, 1984), 13–14, 51–57, 119, 167–172.
the streets. . . .” Clearly the community was suffering from at least some of the anomie which Fernandes attributes to it. 41

That anomie does not seem to have been the exclusive property of the black population, however. It is striking to find, when one turns to the labor or neighborhood newspapers aimed at the immigrants, perfect mirror images of those articles, bemoaning the same kind of “moral decay” that was affecting the blacks. 42 In fact, one of the earliest such papers, the Spanish-language El Grito del Pueblo, while noting clear disparities in employment patterns between Afro-Brazilians and immigrants, found no appreciable differences in their respective levels of “anomie.” The paper noted that Brazilian workers are always ready to turn out for the labor movement’s parades or rallies, where they “applaud the orators, and cheer deliriously for Social Revolution. The next day, however, some go off to serve as fodder for the factories, others to the kitchen, others to clean the gardens and palaces of the bosses,” and nothing changes. Why is this? Because “the Brazilian worker was only recently plucked from slavery, or he is the son or grandson of slaves. Because of this, his sense of civic responsibility is scarce, and he retains the meekness and brutishness instilled in him by the horrible torments of slavery.” But the immigrants are no better. “[O]wing to their sufferings in Europe, they are content with little salary, and settle into tenement slums and huts, housed like beasts, eating black bread and bananas. They live worse than pigs.” The paper concluded that “these unhappy people differ little from the ex-slaves of Brazil. If the latter were prostituted by the lash of slavery, the former were overcome by the misery of their wages.” 43

The immigrant and labor press tended to concur in viewing modern industrial life, rather than slavery, as the cause of the social ills which afflicted the entire working class, white as well as black. “Modern industry, calling women to the factory, ruins the life of the family and the home. Children run in the streets, unprotected, uneducated save by an environment corrupted by poverty, and the father takes refuge in looking the other way.” As for the father, “factory labor turns him into a brute

41. “Grave erro!,” O Bandeirante (São Paulo), Sept. 1918.
42. Clearly such articles reveal as much about the moralizing, middle-class outlook of the editors of these papers as they do about the black and immigrant workers being described. What is important to note is that observers of the black and immigrant communities who held such values found as much to criticize among the immigrants as among the blacks. On the editorship and readership of the black and labor presses, see, respectively, Bastide, “A imprensa negra do Estado de São Paulo,” in his Estudos afro-brasileiros (São Paulo, 1973); Miriam Nicolau Ferrara, “A imprensa negra paulista (1915–1963)” (dissertação de mestrado, University of São Paulo, 1981); and Maria Nazareth Ferreira, A imprensa operária no Brasil, 1880–1920 (Petrópolis, 1978).
lured into pointless gossip, to the bars, to alcohol, to gambling, to cursing.” Another labor paper replied to charges that workers only use their holidays to get drunk, gamble, dissipate themselves, and commit crimes. There may be some truth to this, the paper confessed, but if so it is the fault of the factory system, which brutalizes its victims, and forces children to work before they are old enough to get a decent education.44

The black and labor presses displayed striking agreement in their judgment of the moral challenges which their respective communities faced. Alcohol, which was no respecter of race or ethnicity, was clearly the worst. Closely tied to alcohol abuse were the dance halls and annual carnival celebrations in which “men, women and children, all in the senseless insanity of a disgusting libertinism, reveal a state of moral degeneracy that almost provokes nausea.” The black press worried, too, about the excesses of these popular celebrations, but saw the excesses as just as likely to come from white celebrants as from black. The black paper O Alfinete warned its readers against a number of particularly notorious dance halls, where “most of the dancers are white women, and our black women also take part, to our shame, and our race’s moral corruption.”45

While illegitimate births and the absence of male providers was clearly a concern in the black community, it was perceived as a problem among the immigrants as well. One paper ran a story urging its readers to stop giving charity to unmarried women who bear child after child. Interestingly, the specific case it cites is not a black woman but a young white one, “her face as white as a lily. . . .” The labor and black newspapers both recognized that domestic service posed one of the gravest risks to a young woman’s honor (and, if she became pregnant, her future livelihood), and both published articles urging parents to send their daughters into any other occupation. Prostitution also received the attention of the labor press, which analyzed it not as the result of social anomie or exaggerated sexuality, but rather in purely economic terms. “It is in order to earn her living that a woman, today, becomes a prostitute. As evidence for this observation, simply note that the immense majority of residents of brothels had a humble origin and, before their fall, suffered the most


atrocious poverty. It is the enormous working class that keeps the whore-houses supplied.” 46

There is certainly evidence to indicate that, in the decades immediately following abolition, São Paulo’s black community did suffer from the crime, poverty, and “social disorganization” described by Fernandes, though perhaps not to the degree which he suggests. But crime, poverty, and anomie were by no means confined to black people. To the degree that the Fernandes thesis conforms to the previously mentioned *ideologia da vadiagem*—and at times it is difficult to detect much difference between the two—it would apply to poor whites and immigrants as well as to blacks. In fact, it would apply to virtually every inhabitant of São Paulo, argued one of the labor newspapers, in response to elite assertions that if there were any people suffering from poverty in the state, it was because they were *vadios* (bums) who didn’t want to work. If that is so, responded the anarchist paper *A Plebe*, then 90 percent of the state must be *vadios*, because 90 percent of the state is poor. 47

In the absence of evidence documenting that the immigrants possessed clear-cut advantages in work skills and social integratedness over black people, the Fernandes thesis in its present form is impossible to sustain. One large chunk of it, however, is salvageable: its emphasis on the expectations, attitudes, and demands which the immigrants and Afro-Brazilians brought with them to the labor market.

*Bargaining: Libertos, Immigrants, and Employers*

As free wage labor replaced slave labor in the countryside and in the city, an unprecedented process of bargaining and negotiation took place between São Paulo’s workers and employers. As Antônio Prado had predicted, supply and demand were replacing violence and coercion as the means of allocating labor, and the planters were by no means certain that they liked the change. What will happen, asked the *Província de S. Paulo*, “when the *libertos*, with this education [of freedom] behind them, organize to impose salary conditions, hours of work, protection for their children?” Such fears were by no means unfounded: the former slaves were not slow to perceive the possibilities opened by this new system, and had already begun to exploit them even before abolition. German visitor Maurice Lomberg, who traveled through the province in 1887, observed that

the passivity and sullen obedience which had characterized their behavior as slaves were starting to disappear. "They raised their heads and began to speak aggressively to their masters; they imposed the conditions under which they wanted to continue to work, and at the smallest offense they threatened to leave."  

What were the demands that former slaves presented to their erstwhile employers? In comparison with the United States, where postemancipation bargaining is richly documented in plantation records, the archives of government agencies, and testimony by former slaves themselves, the historical record of such bargaining in Brazil is sparse and patchy. Nevertheless, those features of the negotiations that emerge in contemporary accounts offer clear similarities to the tug-of-war which took place in other slave societies following abolition.

While undeniably important, wages appear to have been almost a secondary consideration, and one pushed aside by the more pressing issue of working conditions. The libertos’ overriding concern was to place as much distance as possible between themselves and their former status as slaves, and to ensure that their new conditions of employment bore as little resemblance as possible to servitude. For most freedmen and women, this meant not accepting employment on plantations where they had been slaves. As one liberta declared in explaining why she was leaving the plantation where she had been born and raised, “I’m a slave and if I stay here, I’ll remain a slave.” “The idea of remaining in the house where he was a slave is repugnant to the liberto,” one contemporary observer noted, with the result that the mass flights from the plantations which had provoked abolition continued even after emancipation.

Still, libertos trained in agricultural work and seeking employment in an overwhelmingly agrarian society had few alternative opportunities open to them. While some migrated to the cities, most remained in the countryside and sought plantation work, though under conditions which they insisted be quite different from those which had characterized slavery. Foremen and overseers were to carry whips no longer, and the locks were to be removed from the barracks in which the slaves had lived. Most

48. “Tiram as consequências,” A Província de S. Paulo, Nov. 15, 1889; Mauricio Lombard, O Brasil (Rio de Janeiro, 1896), 342. My sincere thanks to Thomas Holloway for providing me with the latter citation and several subsequent ones.


50. Stein, Vassouras, 257; Francisco de Paula Lázaro Gonçalves, Relatório apresentado à Associação Promotora de Imigração em Minas (Juiz de Fora, 1898), 10–12.
former slaves preferred to leave the barracks entirely and live in individual huts or shacks located far from the main house and free of direct supervision by the employer. On plantations where these demands were met, the libertos were willing to accept employment. After all, as Lomberg had noted, these were the conditions under which they wanted to continue to work.\(^{51}\)

The libertos’ demands on these scores contrasted sharply with the initial willingness of the European immigrants, particularly the Italians, to work under conditions harsh in the extreme and, according to some observers, not far removed from those of slavery.\(^{52}\) Such willingness was a function partly of the motives which had brought the immigrants to Brazil, and partly of the structure of the immigration program. One historian of Italian emigration notes that, at the turn of the century, “all of Italy’s rural folk desired the fruits of economic progress. [But in regions] where aspirations for material betterment were expressed in broad associative behavior [such as cooperatives, political mobilization, etc.] there was little emigration. Where economic aspirations were integrated only with the welfare of the individual’s nuclear family, emigration rates were high.” Migrants were much more likely than nonmigrants to pursue goals of individual and family-based upward mobility at whatever cost, particularly since migration itself was often viewed as a short-term expedient to earn

51. Lomberg, *O Brasil*, 342–344; Pierre Denis, *Brazil*, 317–320. Denis reports on conditions in the neighboring state of Minas Gerais, where an absence of European immigration had forced planters to make what he considers to be excessive concessions to the libertos.

[T]he negroes lived scattered over the estate, far from the master’s eyes, and assemble when they please at the fazenda, where the master waits for them, often in vain, to commence the day’s work. . . . [T]he negro is indolent; work inspires him with a profound horror; he will allow himself to be driven to it only by hunger or by thirst; when all other resources fail him, only then he presents himself at the morning roll-call and offers his services. . . . One must have visited a few of the Minas plantations before one can realize precisely what advantage the São Paulo planters have derived from the free immigration of European laborers (318–320).

It is interesting to read a Brazilian anthropologist’s account of his research during the late 1970s on an isolated rural black community in São Paulo, many of whose inhabitants refuse to this day to submit to plantation labor. One of the village’s elders denounces modern plantation work as “the return of slavery. You won’t believe it, but a long time ago the old people in the village used to tell us about how slavery used to be obligatory. But not today. The people are being enslaved again, but not everybody—just those who give themselves over to it,” i.e., those who accept wage employment on local fazendas. Renato Queiroz, *Caipiras negros no vale do Ribeira* (São Paulo, 1983), 81. On the relaxed rhythm of agricultural work in the village, see 58–62.

52. Holloway reports a 1912 incident in which a black servant on a Campinas plantation, after being given an order which she considered beneath her station, retorted, “what do you take me for, an Italian?” Holloway, *Immigrants on the Land*, 105. On working and living conditions for immigrants on São Paulo fazendas, see Hall, “Origins of Mass Immigration,” 121–140 and Holloway, *70–110.*
money and return home with capital. As Avanti! observed in 1914, “the immense majority of the Italian immigrants here seek only to earn a living as best they can and put aside a nest egg which will allow them to return home or to venture into commerce and industry here in order to secure a higher social position.” And since most of the immigrants “brought into the country little of capital or of personal accomplishment,” the only way to build such a nest egg was through brute physical labor, paid at whatever wage was available.53

As previously mentioned, the immigration program played a central role in ensuring that immigrants would arrive in Brazil with “little of capital or of personal accomplishment.” Emigrants with job skills and, more importantly, personal savings sufficient to pay their transatlantic fares were more likely to migrate to northwestern Europe, the United States, or Argentina. São Paulo’s subsidies attracted the poorest of Europe’s emigrants, who bargained with their new employers from a correspondingly weak position (as Martinho Prado had foreseen when he expressed his uninterest in “immigrants with money”).54

Further adding to their vulnerability was a second aspect of the immigration program: its emphasis on families. Besides bringing in the poorest of Europe’s emigrants, it brought them over in family units, seeking at all times, as a contemporary observer noted, “to reduce to a minimum the proportion of single men among those introduced at the public expense.” Eighty percent of the people who passed through the immigrant hostel in São Paulo city came as families, averaging roughly five people per unit. Immigrants who sought work, therefore, had to worry not just about their own livelihood and their survival but about their spouses and children as well. When added to the immigrants’ poverty, this produced a labor force which, during the early years of immigration, offered little resistance to employer demands.55

Besides weakening the immigrants’ bargaining position, the priority placed on family units had a second, and perhaps even more important,


54. In response to persistent reports of the maltreatment and exploitation of its nationals on São Paulo plantations, the Italian government in 1902 forbade its citizens to accept subsidized passages to Brazil, a prohibition which remained in effect until the end of the subsidy program in 1927. Italians able to pay their own way remained free to emigrate. Holloway, Immigrants on the Land, 42–43. On “the melancholy condition” in which the immigrants arrived in São Paulo, “all covered with rags, disheartenment writ upon their brows,” see Foerster, Italian Emigration, 316.

55. Denis, Brazil, 196, 216; Beiguelman, Formação do povo, 79; Holloway, Immigrants on the Land, 55.
motive, argues Verena Stolcke: providing cheap (often free) and abundant child and female labor for the plantations.\textsuperscript{56} Plantation labor under slavery had been a family affair, involving women and children as well as adult males. Slave women worked in the fields, sorted coffee, performed household chores, cultivated subsistence plots, and cared for their children, who in turn helped in progressively heavier tasks as they got older. Following emancipation, the most intractable of the libertos’ labor demands, and the most significant, as viewed both by the planters and by the former slaves themselves, was that women and children would no longer be used in field labor. Many families went further and withdrew their women and children from wage labor altogether, leaving the fazendeiros and their wives to complain bitterly about having to do their own washing and prepare their own meals. “If the libero does little, the liberta does absolutely nothing. They laze in the doorway of their houses, yawning and napping, killing time in one long, unconscious dulce far niente.”\textsuperscript{57}

As the planters structured the subsidized immigration program, they sought to ensure that their new workers would supply the female and child labor that the old workers were no longer willing to sell. To their great good fortune, this proved to be the case. Italian families in particular proved willing to put all their members to work, in a continuation of practices rooted in the old country. In the four Italian villages studied by Rudolph Bell, women had comprised between one-third and one-half of the agricultural labor force in 1881; even in families which did not permit women to accept paid employment, “an expected part of a wife’s year-round labors would include joining the family in crop harvesting.” This use of female labor continued in São Paulo, actively encouraged by the planters, as did the intensive use of child labor, which was widespread in Italy despite government efforts to curb it. As a result, noted a contemporary student of the Italian experience in São Paulo, “every child past toddlerling earns more than its current cost.”\textsuperscript{58}

The immigrants’ willingness to send all members of the family to work


\textsuperscript{57} Quotation from A Província de São Paulo, Feb. 6, 1889. On libertos’ antipathy toward female and child labor, see Gonçalves, Relatório, 11 and Stein, Vassouras, 262. This desire of black families to protect women and children from the rigors of field labor would seem to undercut Fernandes’s observations concerning the lack of family feeling among Afro-Brazilians.

\textsuperscript{58} On labor practices in Italy, see Bell, Fate and Honor, 118–137; Yans-McLaughlin, Family and Community, 183–184; and Foerster, Italian Emigration, 85, 319. On the importance of family labor on the São Paulo plantations, see Stolcke, “Exploitation of Family Morality” and Zuleika M. Forcioni Alvin, “Emigração, família e luta: Os italianos em São Paulo, 1870–1920” (dissertação de mestrado, Universidade de São Paulo, 1983), 97–157.
not only won them a preferred position on the plantations, but also enabled many of them to accumulate the cash savings which eluded the Afro-Brazilians. Indeed, given the low wages on the plantations, only with multiple members of the family working was it possible to even make ends meet. "Only under the most ideal conditions," the Italian consul reported in 1901, "can a single colono make enough to live on." Family labor became not simply a means of upward mobility, but the key to survival on the plantations.59

Much the same was true in the factories of the capital, where workers' employability was determined less by their skill level than by their willingness "to submit to the discipline of production regulated by whistles which subdivided working days often longer than 12, 13, or 14 hours, in which women and children took part. . . ." As on the plantations, the immigrants' decision to subject themselves and their children to such conditions gave them a distinct competitive advantage over the Afro-Brazilians. The initial stages of industrialization in São Paulo would therefore be based on immigrant labor rather than black, and on labor carried out by every member of the immigrant family. The importance of this fact, and its implications for the industrial development of São Paulo, were intuitively recognized by British traveler Lilian Elwyn Elliott Joyce, who exclaimed that "to see this [São Paulo's industrial growth] and to watch the crowds of pretty chattering Italian girls pouring out of Braz and Mooca factories at noon or evening is to obtain a revelation of the newer South America."60

This "newer South America" offered no place for the Afro-Brazilians. They had bargained too hard, and demanded too much. Some of the more enlightened employers could understand the motives behind those demands, and how the experience of slavery had produced a deep determination among all Brazilians, and particularly black ones, to avoid conditions of employment at all reminiscent of the slave regime. But even these sympathetic observers joined in the general rejoicing over the coming of the immigrants, "which contributed greatly to rescue our fazendeiros from their dependence on the libertos, and from the just demands presented by the latter, after so many years of barbarous oppression."61 Those demands

59. Holloway, Immigrants on the Land, 141–142; see also Alvin, "Emigração" and Stolcke, "Exploitation of Family Morality." For similar observations on the importance of family labor in coffee production in Colombia, see Charles Bergquist, Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia (Stanford, 1986), 320–329.

60. Kowarick, "Subjugation of Labour," 114; Elliot, Brazil, 268. Labor organizers despaired of ever mobilizing these "pretty chattering Italian girls" because of the iron control which their fathers, husbands, and brothers exercised over them, and the refusal of these latter "to give up, even for a little while, the miserable sum" which their wives, daughters, and sisters brought home. Avanti!, Dec. 16, 1907, quoted in Hall, "Immigration," 402. Yans-
formed part of a bargain that São Paulo's employers did not care to accept and, because of their ability to import and hire European workers, did not have to accept.

By keeping the labor market oversupplied with white workers, São Paulo's government ensured that the goal first articulated by state legislators in the 1870s would be realized: that workers would have to seek out employers rather than vice versa. Of course, employers at the time did not see it that way. Bitter complaints about the short supply and instability (i.e., its tendency to flit from job to job in search of better wages) of immigrant labor persisted throughout this period, from planters and industrialists alike, who argued that it was the chronic shortage of adult workers that forced them to resort to child labor. But as several historians and contemporary observers of the period note, child labor was widespread in São Paulo's plantations and factories not because of the shortage of adult labor, but rather because of its abundance. Adult wages were so low that, in order to survive, families had no recourse but to send their children to work—which of course drove wages even lower. And by giving preference to immigrants who came with their families, the state had acted to ensure a more than adequate supply of child, as well as adult, labor.62

So lavish was the oversupply of labor in São Paulo that it helped produce an unexpected and unintended outcome: the growth of industry in the state. This was hardly the goal which the planters had had in mind when they first designed the subsidy program, but the combination of coffee export earnings (which provided investment capital and the beginnings of a local market) and abundant labor turned São Paulo by the 1920s into the most important industrial center in Brazil, surpassing Rio de Janeiro.63 And despite the demand for labor generated by this growth, according to the U.S. consul in São Paulo in 1922, as a result of immigration "it is doubtful that there exists anywhere an industrial sector that offers better

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McLaughlin similarly notes the enormous pressure placed on Italian children in Buffalo to contribute wage income to the family economy. "Because of this transference of family discipline into the factory, [employers] had few problems obtaining the highest possible output from children" (Family and Community, 192).


working conditions from the point of view of the employer. Workers in the various industries and workshops are abundant, hardworking, and they earn low salaries. The Portuguese workers in particular do anything to preserve their jobs. . . .” The consul described the Italians and Spaniards as more “independent” in spirit, but executives at the Canadian-owned São Paulo Light, Power, and Tramway Company found Italian workers just as tractable as the Portuguese: speaking of their motormen and conductors, they noted that “a large majority of these men are Italians who would do anything rather than lose their daily pay. . . .”

Restructuring the Labor Market: The Immigrants Lose their Preference

The desperation of these relatively privileged members of São Paulo’s labor force is perhaps the most convincing proof of the efficacy of the state’s labor policies. The planter state had sought policies which would keep labor cheap and insecure, and it found them. Such victories are never permanent, however. In the short run or in the long, they produce resistance and response. In the case of the immigrants, that resistance and response took various forms. One was the simple act of returning to their countries of origin, or pursuing more promising opportunities in Argentina or the United States. Another reaction was to shop about from plantation to plantation, or from factory to factory, in search of marginally better wages or working conditions, much as the libertos had done after abolition. A third was to pursue individual goals of upward mobility, pooling the combined earnings of family members to buy a small farm in the countryside or open a small business in the city. And a final response was collective: joining an urban labor movement which enlisted growing numbers of adherents in the cities, and taking part in strike actions in both the cities and the countryside during the early decades of the century.

These efforts by the immigrants to further improve their labor market position led to a gradual cooling of the Paulista elites’ initial rejoicing over immigration. By 1900, articles in the planters’ Revista Agrícola complained about the immigrants’ “inconstancy” and “ingratitude” in terms

64. Pinheiro and Hall, Classe operária, II, 126; “Increased Salary of Motormen and Conductors” (no date, but internal evidence suggests early 1920s), Arquivo do Eletropaulo (São Paulo), pasta 29.005, 1906–1924.

65. On these various strategies of resistance, see Holloway, Immigrants on the Land; Alvin, “Emigração”; Stolcke and Hall, “The Introduction of Free Labour”; and Fausto, Trabalho urbano. Historians have tended to underestimate the importance of strikes in the countryside because of their lack of success. For evidence that they occurred not infrequently, and were taken quite seriously by planters, see Stolcke and Hall, 185–186; Dean, Rio Claro, 179–180; and Holloway, Immigrants on the Land, 104–108.
much the same as those applied to the *libertos* in the 1890s: "nothing ties them to the soil; . . . they readily change their employers after each harvest. No more nomadic people could be imagined; they change incessantly from fazenda to fazenda." Particularly galling was the purchase by immigrant workers of their own small farms and homesteads. *O Combate* noted in 1919 that "certain fazendeiros have come to detest land sale agents today in the same way that those of yesteryear detested the abolitionists." Just as the abolitionists had lured slaves away from the plantations by inciting them to flight, so by the late 1910s real estate agents were luring workers away by offering to sell them their own homesteads.66

As employers' enthusiasm for the immigrants waned, so too did the state's, at least in that arm of the state responsible for labor policy. A series of articles published in the bulletin of the State Department of Labor during the 1910s traced the dangers of the labor gluts which periodically swept the state. While such gluts undoubtedly redounded to employers' short-term advantage, they also promoted criminality, vagabundagem, hunger, and generalized social tension. As wages fell in the countryside, the official publication argued, the result was an inflow of poverty-stricken immigrants into the capital, where they live "as parasites, as beggars, as invalids, feeding themselves on charity, by hustling, and by crime. . . ."

During the hiatus of European immigration caused by World War I, department staffers even began to rethink some of the negative consequences of "the privilege conferred on foreign immigration to supply workers for agriculture," the result of which had been to marginalize São Paulo's black and caboclo workers in the land of their birth. Articles published in the bulletin during the war years urged employers to reconsider the many virtues and abilities which Brazilian workers brought with them to the workplace—foremost among which, they noted, was the Brazilian worker's well-known disinclination to join unions or strike.67

66. *Revista Agrícola* (1899), 50, 350–352, 382–386; (1901), 166–167, 311; (1902), 75–84; (1904), 218–221. Again, my thanks to Thomas Holloway for acquainting me with this material and making it available to me. The observation from *O Combate* is quoted in Alba Maria Figueiredo Morandini, "O trabalhador migrante nacional em São Paulo, 1920–1923" (*tese de mestrado*, Pontifícia Universidade Católica—São Paulo, 1978), 78.


Abandoned to their fate, with no assistance from the government, [the *libertos* and caboclos] were easy and defenseless prey to the illnesses which conquered them, wasting their bodies, reducing their capacity for work, and destroying their race. While this was happening, we opened our pocketbook to the European immigrants,
São Paulo’s elites still had considerable financial and ideological capital invested in the notion of the superiority of immigrant labor, and after the war ended Governor Washington Luís announced the state’s intention to continue its policy of maintaining “the cheapness of labor, and particularly agricultural labor, by the introduction on a large scale of honest, hard-working immigrants.” But as the 1920s continued, and more immigrants either bought their way out of the wage labor market or continued to engage in hard bargaining with employers, the aura surrounding foreign-born workers darkened and faded away. A poll of Paulista fazendeiros in 1925 found a majority of them now willing to employ Brazilian labor, and two years later the program of subsidized European immigration was finally terminated.  

The impact on labor relations in the state was immediate. In 1928, for the first time since records had been kept, Brazilian migrants into São Paulo outnumbered European immigrants. The following year, one of the black newspapers in São Paulo city reported on the turnaround in labor conditions in the countryside.

[T]he men of color of our hinterland, those whose labor consists of the cultivation of the soil and the business of agriculture, are in excellent conditions as workers, enjoying the same advantages and benefits as the other men of the soil. Black workers are as highly valued as the Italians, who are São Paulo’s agricultural workers par excellence. Which is to say that the black of the hinterland, the colono or day laborer of color, has succeeded, more rapidly than

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who have no love for this land and their eyes fixed on their distant Fatherland, where many of them return after having saved some money. We gave them everything: land, housing, food, tools, medical assistance, and guaranteed work ("O saneamento da população agrária do Brasil," 6: 23 [1917], 245–246).

Kowarick nicely captures the “rehabilitation” of the Brazilian worker during the war years.

His lack of ambition came to be seen as the parsimoniousness of one who is content with little, is not after easy gain, and above all, does not make demands; lack of constancy was translated into versatility and aptitude for new kinds of work, while lack of discipline was metamorphosed into stoutheartedness and dignity. The former wanderer was ready to go wherever he was needed. His love of adventure and scrapping changed into fearlessness and courage to perform risky tasks, while his wariness became a sound characteristic with which to reject spurious ideas, so much in vogue at the time. . . . His indolence came not from sloth or a vagabond nature, but from lack of opportunity to work, while his vices were now seen as a result of the misery in which he had been bogged down for centuries and from which he must now be removed ("Subjugation of Labour," 119).

the blacks of the city, in establishing himself vis-à-vis his peers, obliging them to recognize his value and worth.69

Though the dominance of European workers would last longer in the cities, by the 1930s and '40s Afro-Brazilians were entering factory employment in ever larger numbers as well, coming to form part of São Paulo’s industrial proletariat. As a white worker who lived through this period recalls, their entry into the urban workplace was due to the same factor as their earlier exclusion: state policy governing the labor market. If immigration had not been reduced and “there hadn’t been a shortage of manpower, the blacks would never have managed to get into the factories. Everything would have stayed the way it was. If the immigrants had continued to come the bosses would have given them the preference, leaving the Brazilian worker behind.”70

Conclusions

Throughout this essay I have sought to stress how evolving interactions among employers, workers (both black and white), and the state explain the marginalization of Afro-Brazilian workers in São Paulo’s postabolition economy and society. Clearly, the legacy of slavery helped shape this process, by producing both employers unaccustomed and unwilling to bargain with their former slaves, and a former slave population with very specific demands concerning the conditions under which they would work as free men and women. But that legacy applied throughout most of Brazil, yet “in no other place in the country [besides São Paulo] were white immigrants so clearly the ‘winners’ and blacks the ‘losers’ [in the process] of economic development and prosperity.”71

The explanation for São Paulo’s uniqueness is to be found in state policy which undercut workers’ bargaining position by flooding the labor market with European immigrants. In addition to keeping wages low and weakening a labor movement committed to racial equality and interracial solidarity, this policy enabled employers to turn their backs on those workers who sought to drive the hardest and most demanding bargains.

70. Fernandes, Integração do negro, I, 157. Afro-Brazilian entry into the industrial labor force was further assisted by state action at the national level in the form of the Lei de Nacionalização do Trabalho, enacted by the Vargas regime in 1931, which required at least two-thirds of the labor force in industrial and commercial establishments to be native-born Brazilians. Agriculture was explicitly exempted from this requirement. Diário Oficial dos Estados Unidos do Brasil, Aug. 25, 1931, pp. 13.552–13.558.
71. Hasenbalg, Discriminação, 254.
Those workers were initially the former slave *libertos*; but by the first
decades of the 1900s, the immigrants and their children had become
increasingly aggressive and effective in the pursuit of their individual and
collective interests. Turning the preferences which they had been granted
by the state government to tangible advantage, they started to make
demands that both the Paulista elites and the small, native-born middle
class found increasingly objectionable. The result was the redefinition
of state policy in the mid-1920s to end the official preference given to
Europeans, and the subsequent gradual restoration of Afro-Brazilians to a
competitive, if subordinate, position in the market for manual labor. 72

This 40-year hiatus from the labor market was extremely damaging
to the Afro-Brazilians, as emerges both in testimony from the period and
in the marked disparities between São Paulo’s black and white popula-
tions documented in the censuses of 1940 and 1950. 73 By depriving Afro-
Brazilians of work experience and income, and reinforcing racist assump-
tions concerning the unemployability of black people, it would make that
much more difficult their struggle in subsequent years to play a full and
equal role in the life of their society. Florestan Fernandes has argued that
understanding the nature of race relations in his country is essential to
understanding and shaping “the very destiny of democracy in Brazil.” 74
As a democratic government celebrates the centennial of the abolition of
slavery, it would do well to consider how its predecessors worked to bar
blacks access to jobs, livelihood, and the pursuit of happiness, both dur-
ing the years of slavery and after, and what it might do, even at this late
date, to right those historical wrongs and remove the obstacles to black
advancement created by earlier state policy.

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72. On rising anti-immigrant feeling among the middle class, see Steven Topik,
“Middle-Class Brazilian Nationalism, 1889–1930: From Radicalism to Reaction,” *Social
e e história*, 8th ed. (São Paulo, 1982), 36–37. On the entry of Afro-Brazilians into the
industrial proletariat, see Fernandes, *Integração do negro*, II, 160–324 and Maria Isaura
Pereira de Queiroz, “Coletividades negras. Ascensão socio-econômica dos negros no Brasil
e em São Paulo,” in her *Cultura, sociedade rural, sociedade urbana no Brasil* (São Paulo,
1978), 231–262.

73. For discussions of the inequalities documented in those censuses, see Fernandes,