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Book reviews

Escravidão e trabalho forçado: das abolições do século XIX às abolições contemporâneas, by Norberto O. Ferreras. Rio de Janeiro, Mauad X/FAPERJ, 2022, 319 pp. ISBN: 978-655-377-016-4.

Escravidão e trabalho forçado: das abolições do século XIX às abolições contemporâneas, by international labour historian Norberto O. Ferreras (Universidade Federal Fluminense and Latin American Network for Studies on the International Labour Organization), documents the history of the inclusion of forced labour and its Latin American permutations among the causes of international abolitionism and decolonization. This subject, according to the author, has been passed over by historiographers, despite the relevance of the phenomenon, which Ferreras easily traces back, in its many guises, to the relatively recent past in subcontinents with colonial roots, including Latin America. The author's global history perspective helps the reader understand the expansion of forced labour, including the incentives and advantages (rapid large-volume production and low-cost extraction) that contributed to its growth at the hands of those peddling a sinister form of capitalism – partly reprising slavery – which was tolerated in law and enabled in practice by nation States that benefited from the taxes and customs duties applied to these extractive enterprises.¹ Accordingly, given international efforts to criminalize forced labour and the considerable resistance and repercussions in the Latin American context, this study makes a unique, polemic and significant historiographical contribution to a distinctive line of Brazilian research.² A consideration of this long-standing problem – and its terrible survival into our times by ingeniously reinventing itself and proliferating in urban landscapes – points to the atrophy of capitalism and to expedient state negligence. These have gradually been identified and denounced, despite the concealment of their gravity, by the multilateral system (international trade unionism, the League of Nations, the ILO, the United Nations, etc.).

Forced labour evokes plantations, *haciendas*, mines and the characteristic juxtaposition of pitiful wages, bonded labour and debt with the exponential wealth it generates. It may also bring to mind Mark Twain's stories or Roger Casement's odyssey through the belly of the colonial and neocolonial systems in the Congo and the Amazon basin. These figures are indeed among Ferreras' first references.

¹ In other words, enterprises operating full-scale extraction or overproduction resulting in the exhaustion of the resource in question (almost always a raw material), or its substitution on the international market through the invention of a cheaper or more accessible product or derivative.

² Not only because it is an essential historical theme, but because over 1 million people currently live in conditions of modern slavery or forced labour. The ILO has been an adviser and ally in this fight for almost a century.

This book review is also available in French, in *Revue internationale du Travail* 164 (2), and Spanish, in *Revista Internacional del Trabajo* 144 (2).

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His book considers the vast, unbounded spread of different forms of forced labour – of “hells on earth” – in the Latin American capitalist periphery, and their deeper dimension as “internal colonialism”.³

We are not interested in this practice just because we are from the region, or because we are drinkers of maté tea, the farming of which continues to be denounced for its poor working conditions, tantamount to slavery. We are interested because of the insight it provides into the expansion, universalization and application of large-scale production methods which drew (and continue to draw) on forced labour [...]. It was a commonplace practice everywhere that offered labour at the lowest cost, in large quantities and outside a pre-existing labour market.⁴

This practice, updated for a modern, “civilized” and enterprising world, has all the markings of colonialism, similar to an enclave economy with limited reach in space and time: “What was happening in the Congo was being replicated in other parts of the world”.⁵

Forced labour is a perverse (indirect) form of slavery and a contradiction of the free labour that was developing in parallel during the first half of the twentieth century. The regulatory structure of the labour market and the conditions promoted at the international level by the ILO satisfied and exceeded the standards demanded by the first workers’ associations. Nevertheless, forced labour continued to prosper in many dark corners of the world, providing – as Alain Rouquié observed – a mirror image: “We find our problems augmented, in hypertrophy and dramatized. Accordingly, as was the case five centuries ago, we have a lot to learn from that new world”.⁶

As this book explains, the old practices of bondage and domination of individuals and entire peoples have historically thrived on complacency born of greed, opportunism, racism and other forms of lucrative marginalization. From this perspective, the explanation for this phenomenon is very simple, even though the complete transversality of capitalism – understood as the ultimate globalizing phenomenon – is achieved, surprisingly, with no regard for national sovereignty, historical circumstance and the internal organization of individual countries (laws and institutions). Ferreras provides a very clear description of the fine line between forced labour and what might be considered formal employment in our day and age, as if capitalism could choose its particular shade of grey depending on expedience. Instead of being rooted out, illegal work is encouraged in countries that send out citizen-workers and (a few weeks) later receive their remittances. It thus becomes part of the same spectrum of labour exploitation, configured – with apparent freedom – as just another economically and legally exceptional form of labour.

Escravidão e trabalho forçado raises some profound questions about subjection and rising precariousness in our societies, despite the optimistic belief that practices such as slavery are a thing of the past. Ferreras perceives a certain hypocrisy in the middle classes’ denunciation of and actions against the classical forms of exploitation. In my opinion, this represents a scathing judgement on the lack of historical figures to have fought such abuses; sensitivity and moral duty, if not understanding through lived experience, were in no short supply. Nevertheless, the author’s apportioning of responsibility is very apt:

This, like any other crime, must be combated and sanctioned. The means of dissuasion need to change, starting with living and working conditions in places of origin and in legally operating production centres; workers must be empowered and receive assistance from the state and support from society.

[...]

³ Referring to the academic debate between Pablo González Casanova and Rodolfo Stavenhagen.

⁴ Norberto O. Ferreras, *Escravidão e trabalho forçado: das abolições do século XIX às abolições contemporâneas* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X / FAPERJ, 2022), 8. Translations of quotations from this book by the ILR editorial team.

⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁶ Alain Rouquié, *América Latina: introducción al Extremo Occidente* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 2000), 16.

This requires us to rethink things. The state, through its agents, must be the guardian of this monopoly and primacy, while workers need to be given the right tools in order to make this fight more efficient. (p. 11)

And although “working in a coal mine is not the same as working in an office” (p. 302), the legal and working conditions to be found in each do not vary much across the world.

By tackling these problems of world history and the present day, *Escravidão e trabalho forçado* brings incisive clarity to the inscrutable conditions of work in Latin America today, offering sufficient historical perspective to identify areas of inertia and the continuity of old practices.

The research follows a logical and balanced structure, offering a historical account of abolition and its international treatment in the nineteenth century (Chapter 1); the contemporary movement against slavery following the Second World War and the search for definitions of slavery, trafficking and forced labour from an exclusionary and distant Western perspective (Chapter 2); the forms of forced labour in Latin America and their inherent practices, as well as their development and discussion from a historical perspective (Chapter 3); and abolitionism in the global contexts of decolonialization and the Cold War (Chapter 4). By way of conclusion, the author reflects on forced labour and the place of freedom in capitalism.

Ferreras' work invites scholars to consider the disconnect between the political and academic literature on and interpretations of forced labour and the pressing need to find the right concepts and expressions for a revision of the employment relationship. Indeed, these would need to be far removed from most of the paternalistic and redemptive arguments that do little to address such chameleonic forms of exploitation. The book also provides an overview of the current state of forced labour in the world and of the ambiguities and negligence that favour it, as in the case of sexual exploitation, child labour and bonded labour.

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