

## ABOLITION: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION\*

Joselice Jucá

The proximity of the centenary of Abolition in Brazil in 1888 has been remembered by historians as the magnum event of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, the study of abolitionism in Brazil has shown that, the analysis of the abolitionist process had occurred in a linear fashion. I mean, the abolitionist movement had succeeded as a consequence of the struggle of a group of people led by Joaquim Nabuco, with their tenacity and leadership, managed to achieved their goals.

With no intention to shadow Joaquim Nabuco's role played along the Brazilian reformist process, what should be particularly emphasized here is that, abolition in Brazil has suggested some interesting problems of interpretation.

It seems to me that Abolition in the Brazilian context, has been studied in isolation. Actually, whatever reason, the abolitionist process has never been seen as part of a much more far-reaching social reform involving land distribution. As a consequence, the studies concerning abolition until nowadays — with few exceptions — would focus attention on the way abolition was conducted instead of concentrating on other proposals of reform included in the abolitionist movement.

Unfortunately there is a tendency in Brazil to glorify the abolitionist campaign and its leaders emphasizing their patriotic movement ignoring a much more interesting movement led by those in favor of an agrarian reform.

In addition, historians have preferred to ignore the presence and the action of negroes engaged in their struggle for freedom, as it occurred, for instance, with the figure of André Rebouças and his group.

Rebouças' case is singular for different reasons: first, because he probably was the only black abolitionist able to construct a body of ideas related to the post-abolitionist period, i. e., he willed to solve problems of the black people *after* abolition. Second, because Rebouças was more consistent than many of his contemporaries, he worked out his agrarian proposals in great detail and he had a more far-reaching vision of reform. Finally, because Rebouças' social thought represents a new perspective from which abolition can be seen, thus, different from the peculiar way the dominant class, regarded it.

These points surely justify a more detailed analysis of the abolitionist process in Brazil and its problems of interpretation.

In spite of a consensus among historians that abolition was a profound change, it is opportune to emphasize that slavery as an institution was almost certainly fated to disappear as a consequence of the end of the slave trade in 1850 and Viscount Rio Branco's Law of the Free Womb (*Ventre Livre*) of 28 September 1871. In truth, the institution was becoming economically unprofitable. Nevertheless even after abolition, the economy of the traditional agrarian society continued to rest on the other two pillars, the latifundium and monoculture. The removal of these obstacles, and the promotion of a broader programme of social and economic reform, constituted the principal challenge for would-be reformers in their struggle throughout the nineteenth century (and beyond).

It is therefore inconvenient and unsatisfactory to study abolition in isolation, i. e., divorced from the social and economic proposals of reform which made up an important part of the abolitionist program. The fact that such proposals *were* part of abolitionism has tended to be forgotten by Brazilian historians. Until recently, the whole episode of abolition in Brazil has been studied in an aura of glorious patriotism — as a "single-issue" campaign in which an abolitionist like Joaquim Nabuco emerged as "the fiery apostle of abolition" — whose speeches in Parliament glorified "the dignity of human life, the bonds of Christian brotherhood, the immortality of the souls of those unjustly condemned to a life of cruel servitude".<sup>1</sup>

The role played by Nabuco among abolitionists is in fact quite distorted in traditional accounts. His remarkable capacity for leadership his aristocratic origins and his reputation as an orator have all served to place him in an outstanding position in the political landscape of the monarchy and particularly in the abolitionist campaign. Thus, in accordance with this "patriotic" approach, there has been a tendency to concentrate attention on Nabuco as a symbol of the abolitionist campaign and its goals. As a consequence, most of the other abolitionists who also played important roles in the 1880s, have generally remain in the back-ground. Even abolitionists like Joaquim Serra, Wenceslau Guimarães, André Rebouças and José do Patrocínio, have not received their due attention from historians, with the partial exception of Patrocínio, "a negro with a touch of genius".<sup>2</sup> Frequently their individual contributions as social thinkers have not been clarified by historians, and their activities have been lumped in with those of Nabuco as part of an indeterminate whole.

The lack of interest of Brazilian historians — at least until recently — in researching this "obscure aspect" of abolition can be accounted for in part

by the actual process of abolition in Brazil. Abolitionism was seen at the time as a *solution* of the agrarian question rather than for the slaves themselves. The emancipation of the blacks was actively orchestrated by the dominant classes, even though their interests and rights were, in traditional historiography, supposed to be adversely affected by abolition. <sup>3</sup> There was a consensus of opinion among historians that — to quote one of them — “the only question was to find a formula which should save from ruin thousands of *fazendeiros* who pinning their faith on the imperial constitution and the existing legislation, had invested their fortunes in lands” as well as slaves. <sup>4</sup>

In this analysis a seeming contradiction emerges from the fact that it was a Conservative cabinet led by *fazendeiros* that produced the abolition law. However this contradiction is far more apparent than real. Throughout the 1880s, the owners (particularly in the south) who had been resisting the idea of abolition became convinced that a free work force would be cheaper and more efficient. But apart from economic motives, other considerations were also involved. If the dominant classes, here represented by *fazendeiros* were in control during the final stage of abolition, they could for that reason prevent the government from adopting the other, more radical reforms espoused by abolitionists, such as agrarian reform and “Brazilian rural democracy”, both particularly advocated by Rebouças. <sup>5</sup>

To successfully achieve these more radical goals, abolitionism would also need, apart from political viability, to be a social movement carried out by representatives of the slaves themselves. The chaotic condition of the ex-slaves as freedmen later on demonstrated the failure of abolition as a social reform. In fact, in terms of social and economic gain, the ex-slaves remained marginal to society; without land work, or hope of a future. This is not surprising since abolitionism was — as we have indicated — intended to solve the economic problems of the dominant classes. In this sense, abolition can be considered as a remarkable economic *change* which may even have helped to speed the process of industrialization in the country, but not as a really profound *social* transformation.

There is one other aspect of abolitionism in Brazil which should be emphasized. Although abolition was carried out by representatives of the dominant classes abolitionism itself, as a movement, advocated a program of reform which included radical proposals such as the elimination of the latifundium and the democratization of the land. These reforms were in conflict — clearly — with the interests of one of the most representative segments of the elite, the landowners. In order to understand this contradiction, some important aspects of the problem should be clarified. One of them, is the use of the term “dominant class” in this context. It seems obvious that there were different class levels within the elite in nineteenth century Brazil. As one level there were Parliamentary politicians, again the land-owners, who frequently served as politicians as well, and on a third there were intellectuals, both genuine and “dilettante” most of whom were engaged in the press, or in other liberal professions such as law, engineering and medicine. Consequently, this dominant class, as a whole, had a variety of interests, some of which were completely divorced from those of the agrarian aristocracy.

The entrepreneur and investor of the nineteenth century was more closely identified with the ideas of industrialization and progress than with the maintenance of slavery as an institution. "Dilettante intellectuals" and liberal professionals were frequently drawn to anti-establishment causes because, despite the fact that abolitionists, generally speaking, were part of upper class, their primarily urban interests were divorced from those of the agrarian aristocracy, given their different origins, aspirations and roles in society.

Even Joaquim Nabuco, whose family was linked with the *aristocracia canavieira* of the North-East, was not for that reason necessarily identified with the continuation of slavery. His family's concerns were with urban, rather than rural affairs. Nabuco, in particular, throughout his abolitionist phase, was also linked with the Central Factories of London <sup>6</sup> which was involved in setting up *engenhos centrais* and the promotion of investments in Brazil. As we have seen, Rebouças had been an engineer and investor, who in accord with his capitalist background, was also closely involved with British capital and investments in the country.

At this point I must also stress that, Rebouças, abolitionism and Joaquim Nabuco represent distinctive ideas and attitudes in relation to the abolitionist movement. Both lines of engagement represent distinct interests and even different points of view concerning the movement.

In order to clarify this argument, I wish to recall that the Brazilian abolitionists in general formulated a two-pronged plan of attack. It included first, a campaign favouring the elimination of slavery's legal supports, and second, a programme of social reform entailing the destruction of the latifundium and monoculture to bring about "Brazilian rural democracy", to use a term invented by Rebouças himself — and not Nabuco, as is often stated. In terms of the participation of abolitionists, the line between the two approaches is quite indistinct. Propagandists like José do Patrocínio, Ferreira de Menezes, Vicente de Souza, Nicolau Moreira and João Clapp, considered by Nabuco as "the pioneers" <sup>7</sup> were already identified with abolition *in isolation* (the first approach), using emotional arguments in the press, influencing public opinion and stimulating voluntary manumission.

The other group, consisting of Nabuco, Rebouças, Joaquim Serra, Guimarães Lobo and others, was, according to Nabuco, the "moderate" group. But in examining their links with both approaches to abolitionism, it seems that this group was in fact much more radical than the so-called "pioneers" in its commitment to a major programme of reform. This group was not restricted to "militant abolitionists" and in fact, because of the expectations surrounding the change from slave labour to free labour, most of the advocates of immigration — the other great Brazilian "cause" of the time — joined these abolitionists, taking up or assuming their progressive proposals. Members of the Sociedade Central de Imigração such as Beaupaire Rohan, Alfredo d'Escagnole Taunay, Saturnino Cândido Gomes, and Wenceslau de Souza Guimarães among others, became firm supporters of abolitionism. <sup>8</sup> From its very foundation onwards, this influential society advocated a wide programme of social reforms, in ostensible opposition to all forms of exploitation.

This broad approach also reflected Andre Rebouças' main proposals, as synthesized in his concept of slavery:

"a escravidão não está no nome mas sim no fato de usufruir do trabalho de miseráveis sem pagar salário ou pagando apenas o estrito necessário para não morrer de fome. Aviltar e minimizar o salário é reescravisar. Mesmo nos países que se supõem altamente civilizados a plutocracia faz todo o possível para reduzir o salário ao mínimo absoluto; a landocracia principalmente, é reescravidora por atavismo não compreende a agricultura sem escravo ou sem servo da gleba".<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Rebouças' ideas on immigration were in harmony with his general opposition to slavery, within which he sought to avoid the "reescravidão do imigrante" by the landowner. In this sense, his proposals were never restricted to the abolition of negro slavery alone, but also included a social and economic policy designed to prevent alternative forms of slavery, such as the *fazendeiros* plan to use immigrant *colonos* as a substitute for slave labour. Rebouças, on the contrary, believed the opposite. In his view, the immigrant *colono* should be the means of destroying the latifundium and introducing "Brazilian rural democracy". In addition, Rebouças' concept of slavery was quite generous and ahead of his time, comprising many forms of slavery, particularly those related to social unjustness exemplified with the low payments of wage labour.

When we attempt to identify unique aspects of Rebouças' thought, it is useful to stress some evidence which shows how Rebouças actually anticipated many of the arguments commonly associated with other abolitionists. This indistinct vision concerning specific aspects of Rebouças' social thought, has contributed to stimulate debates on abolition and its problems of interpretation. In other words, in ignoring the social program embodied in the abolitionist campaign, historians have stressed too much the "patriotic" movement in favour of the black people and their fate.

In fact, it is impossible to discuss abolition and its forms of interpretation if we ignore the marginal situation of the free black people increasingly during the 1880s, when newly emancipated slaves were very much part of the Brazilian scene. Yet, it is far from clear that abolition benefited them very much. We cannot examine this aspect in detail here, but it is important to underline it. The fact that abolitionists, generally speaking, concerned themselves with emancipation without considering the integration of the former slaves into society does not appear to us to be a good indicator of the abolitionist movement as one of social reform. This is really the crux of the matter. It is also worth bearing in mind that, in observing the characteristics of assimilation, Katia Mattoso has noted that the whites' relatively willing acceptance of blacks and mulattos in the period before abolition increasingly diminished afterwards — even in such characteristically black areas as Bahia — and that accentuated social divisions can be detected. The rigid social stratification which has extended from the late nineteenth century to present times, with its strong (but often denied) ethnic prejudice, may well be due to the way in which abolition was implemented rather than to the system of slavery as such.

In fact, the difficulties of social integration experienced by ex-slaves as a class were thus considerable. What had been the central characteristics of the free coloured population in pre-abolition, slave-owning Brazil? For some authors<sup>10</sup> freed slaves in the earlier period were able to build themselves an intermediary life-style, somewhere between actual slavery and real freedom. Mulattos in particular seem to have been able to rise to some extent in the social scale. (Greater legitimization of mulatto births and marriages in sometimes taken to be an indicator of social mobility). The Rebouças family itself might be cited as a good example. However, it must be asked how this improvement was achieved, and what financial and economic means facilitated it. Most blacks, emerging from the tutelage of the masters, but still facing the hostility of a slavery-oriented society, were inadequately prepared to adapt to a free work environment. In fact, in most cases the only benefit received by freedmen was their freedom — and lacking education, without a land, and labelled by society as ex-slaves, they did not find it.

The role of free coloured men as artisans had earlier led to the formation of guilds similar to those in Europe. However, as the trades of goldsmith and silversmith were so lucrative, and since it was feared that such craftsmen would become economically powerful, they were forbidden in 1732 to exercise this profession by order of the crown, on the grounds that they would do "great damage to the public".<sup>11</sup> It might be concluded from this example that the possibility of social ascent by these groups appeared as a threat in a society dominated by whites. Specific cases in which mulattos rose socially and politically in the second half of the nineteenth century were undoubtedly due to individual enterprise. Nevertheless, mulattos were still targets for racial attacks when involved in quarrels and disputes.

Furthermore, there are some historians who argue that Brazilian society evolved from a two-class system in the colonial period into a more complex structure (by the later nineteenth Century) with an emergent middle class consisting of free coloureds, who entered liberal profession like engineering, medicine or law. Even if certain amount of social mobility did occur at this period, it remains true that most of them, even today, are still deprived of social and economic status. Possibly we should think in terms of a divided middle class in Brazil — with an upper section which has almost always had access to the political and intellectual life of the nation, and a lower section (much larger) made up of those who emerged from the artisan guilds and similar backgrounds, these being the remnants of the lower levels of the free black population, the majority of which never managed to acquire status due to the lack of integration and education prior to abolition.

During the pre-abolition period, abolitionists do not appear to have shown any great concern for the social and economic integration of slave labour. The main abolitionist proposal was, as we have stressed almost always, simply to free the slave without giving any special attention to his social and economic future. Emilia Viotti da Costa is accurate in her analysis of this aspect of the abolitionist movement:

"O movimento abolicionista extinguiu-se com a Abolição. Fora primordialmente uma promoção de brancos, de homens livres. A adesão dos es-

cravos viera depois. Nascera mais do desejo de libertar a nação dos malefícios da escravatura, dos entraves que esta representava para a economia em desenvolvimento, do que propriamente do desejo de libertar a raça escravizada em benefício dela própria, para integrá-la à sociedade dos homens livres. Alcançando o ato emancipador, abandonou-se a população de ex-escravos à sua própria sorte". 12

In conclusion, abolition as a form of *social* emancipation was never foremost in the mind of the abolitionist movement *as a whole*. It is possible however to discern a secondary movement — an active one — of those who saw abolition in a reformist light and who *were* concerned with its social ramifications after the advent of freedom. It is within this context that a small but representative group of reformers from the early nineteenth century onwards, had been proposing advanced measures relating to the ownership of land. For them, the answer to the multitude of social problems in Brazil lay in a correct organization of agriculture — the key to the successful integration of blacks after the emancipation, to make them landowners.

## NOTAS E REFERÊNCIAS

- 1 CALÓGERAS, J. Pandiá. *A History of Brazil*, p. 253. Other good examples are represented by Pedro Calmon, *História do Brasil* vol. V, p. 1725; João Ribeiro, *História do Brasil*, p. 405; Rocha Pombo, *História do Brasil*, p. 450. The remarkable influence exercised by these authors over generations of Brazilian students should perhaps be emphasized.
- 2 CALÓGERAS, p. 253.
- 3 "... the only class adversely affected by emancipation were the former slaveowners who for the greater part were the "fazendeiros" or plantation owners". *Ibid*, p. 259.
- 4 *Ibid*, p. 257
- 5 TOPLIN, R. B. *The Abolition of Slavery in Brazil*, p. 225-246; SKIDMORE, Thomas. *Preto no Branco: raça e nacionalidade no pensamento brasileiro*, p. 33; Richard Graham, "Landowners and Overthrow of the Empire" *Luso-Brazilian Review*, vol. VII, (Dec. 1970), p. 44-56; M. R. Trochin, "Retreat from Reform: the Fall of the Brazilian Empire, 1888-1889" (PhD Diss. University of Illinois at Chicago Circle 1983), p. 323; Robert Conrad, *The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery, 1850-1888*, p. 257 and 272.
- 6 See Joaquim Nabuco's Correspondence with the Central Sugar Factories: CAp 2 doc. 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 40; CAp 3 doc. 45, 447, 48, 54, 446; CA p 2 doc. 64; CAp 2 doc. 64; CAp 7 doc. 123; CAp 316 doc. 6442, 6448; CAp 327 doc. 6455; CAp 318 doc. 6474, 6475, 6477, 6478; CA doc. 6515, 6524, 6528, 6531, 6532; CAp 321. JNA
- 7 SKIDMORE, p. 33

- 8 The Society was created on 14 October 1883 by Rebouças, Taunay and Carlos Von Koserits during a meeting at the Liceu de Artes e Ofícios in Rio de Janeiro. After that, AR remained closely linked with its social programme and for a long time he was its secretary.
- 9 AR to Augusto de Castilho, 31 August 1895. ARA.
- 10 KLEIN, "Nineteenth-Century Brazil" in David Cohen, *Neither Slave nor Free*, p. 309; Octavio Ianni, *As Metamorfoses do Escravo: apogeu e crise da Escravatura no Brasil Meridional*, p. 173-174 and 192-193; Toplin, pp. 256-266; F. H. Cardoso, *Capitalismo e Escravidão no Brasil Meridional — o Negro na Sociedade Escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul*, p. 239.
- 11 Quoted by Klein, *ibid*, p. 326
- 12 COSTA, E. Viotti da. *Da Senzala à Colônia*, p. 450. See also F. H. Cardoso, *O Negro na Sociedade de Classes em Formação*, p. 80; Florestan Fernandes, *A Integração do Negro à Sociedade de Classes*, p. 316; Conrad, *ibid.*, p. 157.

## BIBLIOGRAFIA

- AMARAL, Luis C. *História Geral da Agricultura Brasileira no Tríplice Aspecto, Político, Social, Econômico* (São Paulo, 1958)
- BEIGELMAN, Paula. *Formação Política do Brasil. Teoria e Ação no Pensamento Abolicionista* (Rio de Janeiro, n. d.) /1980 ? /
- CALÓGERAS, J. Pandiá. *Formação of Brazil* (New York, 1963)
- CARDOSO, Fernando Henrique. *Capitalismo e Escravidão no Brasil Meridional. O Negro na Sociedade Escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul* (São Paulo, 1962).
- CARONE, Edgar. *O Pensamento industrial no Brasil (1880-1945)*, (Rio de Janeiro, 1977).
- COHEN, David W. and GREEN J. eds. *Neither Slave nor free: the Freedmen of Freedman Descendent in the Slave Societies of New World* (Baltimore, 1972).
- COLSON, Frank. "On Expectations — Perspectives on the Crisis of 1889 in Brazil". *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. XIII (1981), pp. 265-292.
- . "The failed Reform, Society and the Fiscal Crisis in late Nineteenth Century Brazil". *Nova Americana*, n. 5, 1982.
- CONRAD, Robert. *The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery, 1850-1888* (New York, 1972).
- . *Childdren of God's Fire. A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*, (New Jersey, 1983).
- COSTA, Emília V. da. *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Chicago Press, 1985).
- NABUCO, Joaquim. *Abolitionism; The Brazilian anti-slavery Struggle*. (Urbana, Illinois 1977).



- REBOUÇAS, André. *Agricultura Nacional: Estudos Econômicos, Propaganda Abolicionista e Democrática*. (A. J. Lamoureux e Co., Rio de Janeiro, 1883)
- SKIDMORE, Thomas E. *Preto no Branco: raça e nacionalidade no pensamento brasileiro*, (Rio de Janeiro, 1976).
- TOPLIN, R. B. *The Abolition of Slavery in Brazil*, (New York, 1972).

