

Foreword to the Brazilian Edition

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This book is at the crossroads of various paths in recent historiography.¹ Walter Fraga followed the trails of experience and self-reflection blazed by slaves, freed people, and masters, to understand conflicts and alliances in the Bahian Recôncavo (the bay on which Salvador is located, and its immediate agricultural hinterland) from the end of the nineteenth to the early twentieth century. In so doing, he abolished the radical dissociation between “slavery” and “freedom” which had led many scholars to see the end of bondage in 1888 as either the terminus of one historical road (and research agenda) or the beginning of another; for it became clear that strategies, customs, and identities were worked out before emancipation shaped subsequent tensions between subalterns and their superiors. Indeed, the focus on actual lives, lived and pondered, as a way to discover broader social logics, brought Professor Fraga to the path of microhistory, an approach that seeks “God” (evidence of larger processes of change and continuity) in the intricacy of “detail.”² This option, in turn, took him to people’s names—that is, to the method of nominative record linkage—as a strategy for tracking persons over time in order to trace individual and collective biographies. *Crossroads of Freedom: Slaves and Freed People in Bahia, Brazil, 1870–1910* is the point of encounter of these diverse but converging paths.

To say this, however, only weakly defines the book’s qualities. The crossroads in this case are exceptionally charged with power—so much so that it is difficult to do justice to Fraga’s method in a brief compass. How does one explain, for instance, the magic of chapter 2, in which the author employs detailed police documents and an exceptionally rich trial record to reconstruct the assassination, by slaves, of a priest-administrator on a sugar plantation of the Carmelite Order in 1882? Fraga analyzes and contextualizes the case so skillfully that it illuminates slave owners’ theater of dominion and

bonded workers' refusal to play their ascribed roles, at the precise moment when slavery as a labor system faced a profound crisis of legitimacy.

How does one describe, as well, the wizardry of chapter 5, in which Fraga uses very diverse sources—among them, lists of slaves in probate records, two criminal trial proceedings, and the correspondence of a sugar plantation owner—to follow a group of freedmen over time, before and after abolition, and “triangulate” their experiences from several points of view? The author looks first at an episode in June 1888 involving the “theft” (expropriation) and slaughter of seignorial cattle by a small group of freedmen still living on the property where they had recently been emancipated. He then turns to another event, equally well documented, in 1889, in which some of the same individuals can be seen participating in an association of freed people dedicated to the same end. The analysis of these cases lays bare the day-to-day conflicts between former masters and slaves over the latter group's “customary right to garden plots” (continually trampled upon by landowners' cattle) and, indeed, even reveals some of the symbolic resistance of freedmen to planter rule. (Upon reading the first version of this chapter, my colleague, Professor Sidney Chalhoub, suggested that it be titled “The Great Cattle Massacre,” since it calls to mind historian Robert Darnton's attempt to uncover—also from a banal, but culture-revealing episode—the metaphorical arsenal that printers' apprentices in eighteenth-century France drew upon to take shots at their guild masters.)³ Finally, to cite one more example among many, how might one characterize the enchantment of chapter 8, in which Fraga reconstructs the family ties of slaves and of people freed on May 13 (those liberated at abolition in 1888) on another sugar plantation, from varied sources—including an interview with a male centenarian who still remembered some of the people encountered in the written documents about the property and furnished details about their lives circa 1920?

It would not be surprising if many readers of these chapters, even those familiar with the historical method, are left with the impression that Fraga has a “strong Saint” (*santo forte*) as his counselor; after all, how else might one explain his serial discovery of so many marvelous sources, much less the uncanny skill (*feitiço*) in his analysis? In fact, however, *quem sabe faz a hora*; command of craft makes opportunity—including the possibility of “luck”—happen, and creatively puts order into the results. Professor Fraga is gifted with patience, meticulousness, and imagination to an extraordinary degree; he did not need help to open new paths (*abrir caminhos*).

And what paths they are! For the tracks and trails of this microhistory lead to new interpretive highways. The Orixás are indeed in the particular. The

crisis of the slave system reveals itself here in all its complexity, on a specific ground that is “good for thinking.” Recent studies on Brazil’s Southeast have characterized the destruction of forced capitalized labor as an eminently political process. Manifesting itself in the countryside and on the streets, as well as in official places like Parliament and the courts, this process in the Southeast destabilized the “imaginary institution” of slavery, thereby drastically reducing the “futures market” in commodified people—that is, the expectations regarding the subsequent life of capitalized labor—as is evident in the crash of the purchase market in bonded workers, from 1881 on.⁴ Fraga’s book documents a similar history in Bahia, using the tools of the social historian. It also demonstrates the economic force of slave labor in sugar. (Sugar planters in the Recôncavo not only largely depended on bonded workers until the eve of abolition;⁵ they also, for many years, were unable to attract or coerce a sufficient number of free laborers to maintain production at pre-1888 levels.) The study then shows that the crisis in the legitimacy of slavery in Bahia during the 1880s—occasioned in part by the opposition of common people to this labor system, as well as by movements of flight and rebellion among bondspeople—was broadly similar to the process occurring in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and other places.

Fraga’s book also blazes a trail into virtually unopened land: that is, into the labor systems and the experiences of workers in Bahia during the post-abolition period. It shows the relative bargaining power of freed people in this region; here, the former slaves were able to increase the number of days during the week that they could devote to their own garden plots on lands still owned by their previous masters, at least well into the 1890s. This was something that apparently lay beyond the reach of their counterparts in that other major sugar-producing region, the Zona da Mata of Pernambuco.⁶ One also observes in this early post-abolition period a significant migration of freed people from the rural Recôncavo to cities and other agricultural areas (the cocoa region in southern Bahia, for instance), which confirms this analysis; evidently, many persons found that the best opportunities for work and income lay outside the Recôncavo—a situation that, for a certain time, must have increased the bargaining power of those who decided not to move.

Migration, in any case, brought to the towns and the manufacturing sector men and women who—as Fraga shows in detail—had created community and family ties, as well as common customs and traditions of contestation, during slavery. Indeed, perhaps the most promising trail this book opens for other researchers lies in the suggestion that the lived and pondered experiences of former slaves contributed to forming the sociability

of urban workers. “It is not surprising,” writes Fraga, “that thirty-one strikes broke out in Salvador and the [towns of the] Recôncavo between 1888 and 1896,” nor that “on May 12, 1902, when calling upon the ‘Bahian people’ not to forget ‘our emancipation,’ . . . the labor leader and ex-abolitionist Ismael Ribeiro spoke out in the name of ‘my ancestors.’”

In the epilogue, Professor Fraga recalls the “inexpressible melancholy” of the Afro-Brazilian engineer, André Rebouças, in 1895, on realizing that the conquest of full citizenship for people of color in Brazil “[was] still a long way, a very long way, off, in the centuries to come.” Yet all of Fraga’s analysis reveals that projects and hopes for reform in this direction were not lacking in turn-of-the-century Bahia. Indeed, such projects and sentiments were so in evidence that they provoked strong reactions from the elite—including the attempt, ultimately successful, to empty the annual celebrations of May 13 of that demand for additional rights which had characterized them immediately following 1888. Countering the amnesia produced by defeat, Fraga’s study foregrounds struggles which did in fact exist and which could help inspire the opening of new roads toward citizenship today.

Crossroads of Freedom has its own history of converging paths. It was originally a doctoral dissertation in history at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp). It clearly reflects the theoretical and methodological concerns of professors and students associated with the Center for Research on the Social History of Culture (CECULT) at that university. But it also engages in dialogue with a recent international bibliography on the experiences of slaves and freed people in other historical contexts.⁷ Then too it reflects the author’s solid training in history as an undergraduate and master’s student at the Federal University of Bahia and his close interaction with young and established Bahian scholars, some of them also with doctorates from Unicamp.⁸ Indeed, at the crossroads of these and other paths, a new generation of historians is aborning in Bahia—or rather, is “taking the stage.” (I play here on the expression *baiano não nasce, estreia*—“people from Bahia are not born, they premiere.”) In this “show” of style and competence, Walter Fraga has a leading role.

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