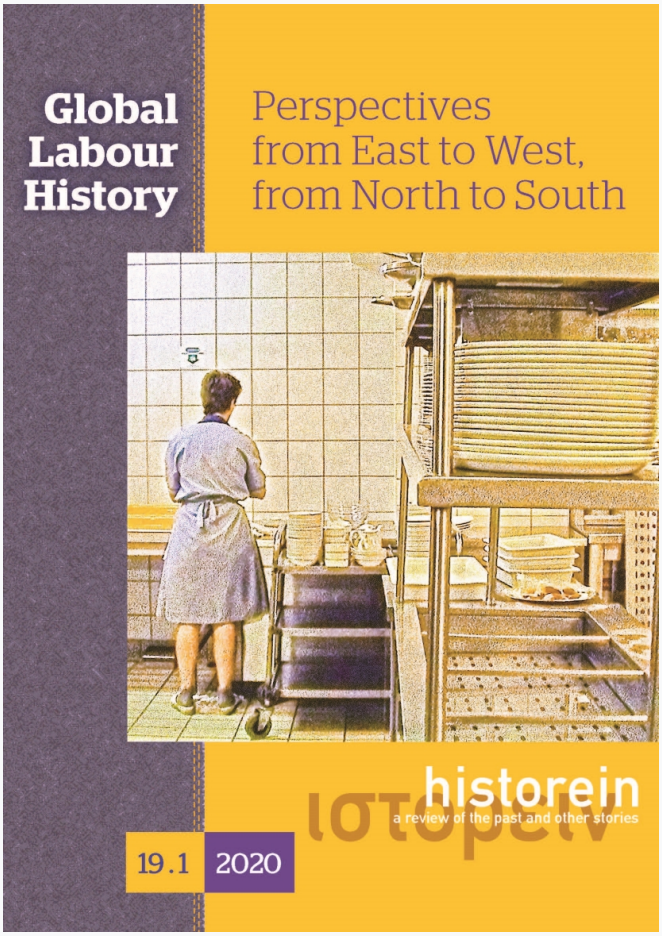
Historein

Vol 19, No 1 (2020)

Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South



Forms of Unfree Labour in Brazil: Dealing with Racism and Racialisation in Amazonian Agriculture

Julia Harnoncourt

doi: 10.12681/historein.18612

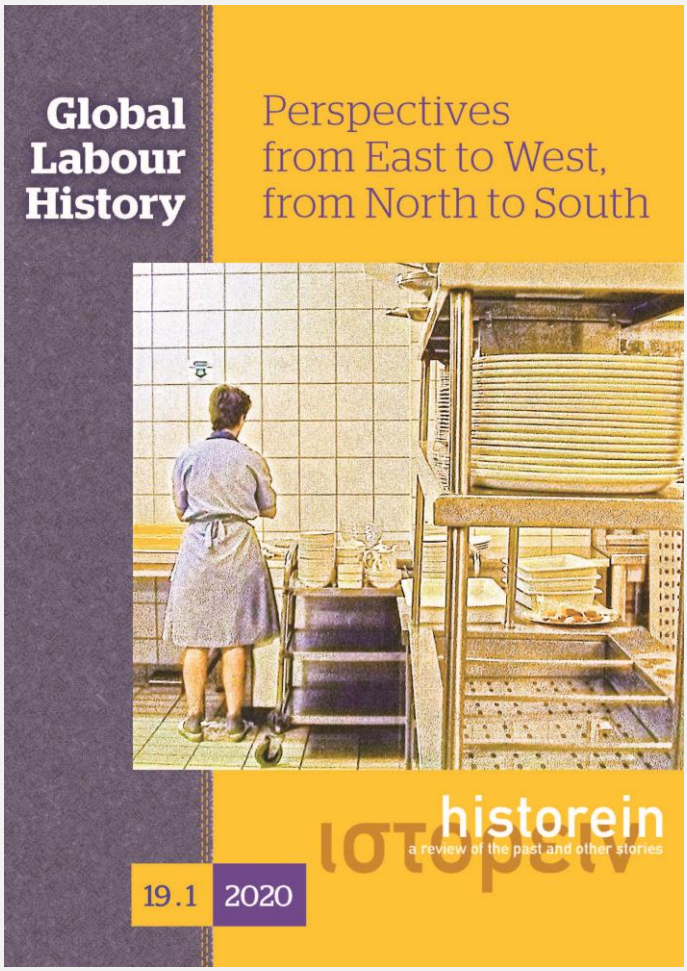
To cite this article:

Harnoncourt, J. (2020). Forms of Unfree Labour in Brazil: Dealing with Racism and Racialisation in Amazonian Agriculture. *Historein*, *19*(1). https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.18612

Historein

Vol 19, No 1 (2020)

Historein 19/1 (2020)



Forms of Unfree Labour in Brazil: Dealing with Racism and Racialisation in Amazonian Agriculture

Julia Harnoncourt

doi: 10.12681/historein.18612

To cite this article:

Harnoncourt, Julia. 2020. “Forms of Unfree Labour in Brazil: Dealing with Racism and Racialisation in Amazonian Agriculture”. *Historein* 19 (1). https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.18612.

Forms of Unfree Labour in Brazil: Dealing with Racism and Racialisation in Amazonian Agriculture

Julia Harnoncourt
University of Vienna

This article approaches the complex topic of racism and racialisation in connection to labour relations, more specifically their role in creating, supporting and reconstructing *trabalho escravo* (slave labour) in agriculture in the northern Brazilian state of Pará. The article, which forms part of an extensive interview study on *trabalho escravo* in this region from 1995 to 2017, perceives racism as part of the (re)construction of these labour relations as well as of the creation of the pool of the possible labour force.[1]

Unfree labour[2] in Brazil, conventionally known as *trabalho escravo*, is defined and has been prohibited by law as labour analogous to slavery (*trabalho análogo ao de escravo*) since 1995. Using this legal definition, Brazil has also introduced elaborate laws and mechanisms to fight this labour condition. At first, only the restriction of the movement of the labourers legally constituted *trabalho escravo.* In 2003 the law was changed, following the experiences of state employees in the fight against this labour condition. Today, *trabalho escravo* is defined by three elements: first, the restriction of movement of the labourers (*cerceamento da liberdade*); second, degrading conditions (*condições degradantes*); and, third, exhaustive workdays (*jornadas exaustivas*). Only one of these factors has to be present to constitute *trabalho escravo*.[3] Degrading conditions and exhaustive workdays are normally determined by judges when the labourer's life is in danger.[4] Though the 2003 definition is contested and it is uncertain how long it will hold,[5] it is also the definition used by this article.

It is generally estimated that some 25,000 people enter *trabalho escravo* every year in the Amazon region alone.[6] However, Xavier Plassat, of the leftist Catholic Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), one of the organisations most involved in the issue, said that he had come up with the number, which is an informed invention, as it is difficult to make estimates regarding illegality in labour relations.[7] What is known are the numbers of people freed from *trabalho escravo* by state organisations.[8] Around 50,000 labourers were freed from 1995 to 2015, most of them in Pará.[9] Despite this fact, Pará has barely been studied. The concentration of *trabalho escravo* in and the lack of research on this state is rooted in intra-Brazilian power structures, as Pará is a peripheral state within Brazil. Statistically, the northern states such as Pará have lower incomes and higher inequality rates, as well as

less industry and infrastructure, than the southern states. In the Amazon region, large landowners can exercise more power as the state is less present, which also leads to more unpunished violence.[10] Furthermore, the northern states have been racialised in the sense of being constructed as backwards, in a way similar to colonial discourses.[11] These states also contain a higher non-white[12] population.[13]

The agricultural labourers in *trabalho escravo* all over Brazil are nearly all non-white men,[14] which opens up the hypothesis that these labour conditions have a reciprocal relation to the imagery of gender as well as to racism; the second being the subject of this article.

This article relies on interviews with members of organisations and individuals involved in the fight against *trabalho escravo*[15] and organisations tackling racism[16] that I conducted as part of a larger study.[17] Conducting interviews seems the most effective way to document the interconnection of racism and *trabalho escravo* in northern Brazilian agriculture, as this relationship has rarely been addressed in academic studies, at least not extensively. Often, apart from my discussions with activists who were specifically concerned with racism, I had to to ask my interview partners two or three times before getting a profound answer: initially, they often said at first that there was no relation and that employers did not choose the labourers *because* of their skin colour. However, after further questioning, the structural racism became apparent.[18]

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define racism and explain the normal trajectory of labourers in *trabalho escravo*. In light of the existence of many different definitions, it is crucial to underline that race, as a biological fact, does not exist. It is socially constructed. Race is produced through the practice of racism and inscribed in social reality.[19] Racism is a practice of dominance. It (re)produces and legitimises the unequal distribution of resources, rights and power.[20] It supports hegemonic power structures through discourses, policies, social structures, everyday practices and personal interactions. Racism is not necessarily based on biology. Physical traits, religion, cultural patterns or, for example, language can be taken as the base for racialisation, that is, the grouping of people on these grounds in combination with the ascription of static character traits.[21]

Trabalho escravo in Amazonian agriculture is often described as a vicious circle in Brazilian discourse: Before being employed, the labourers live in impoverished rural areas, with very little options to earn a living for them and their families. In order to earn some money, these labourers migrate to other regions, where they suspect they will have more opportunities. This migration is either done alone or incentivised and organised by a *gato* (labour recruiter), who promises them a job under false pretences. When the labourers get to their destination, they often have to wait for a job offer from an employer and so they stay at a so-called hotel. The circle of indebtedness, often a part of *trabalho escravo*, begins either with the organised travel or at the “hotel”. Once the labourers arrive at the workplace

and are put to work, everything is added to their debt, for example, the tools, food and quarters. At the *fazenda* (large agricultural enterprise), the living and working conditions fall short of any standards and endanger the labourers' lives. Leaving the *fazenda* is difficult if not impossible. The lack of freedom of movement is either produced through the geographical space inside the Amazon jungle, which lacks infrastructure, or through armed vigilantes who threaten the labourers with physical violence or even death. When the labourers are no longer needed – which normally happens after some months, as their main job is the clearing of the rainforest and the preparation of the *fazenda* – they are left in some village with (nearly) no money, and the vicious circle begins anew.[22]

Most labourers found in *trabalho escravo* in the agricultural sector work either on *fazendas* that raise cattle (62 percent) or in charcoal production (12 percent) that is used in the processing of pig iron and in growing soya (5.2 percent).[23] The goods they help produce are important products for Brazilian exports.[24]

Below, I present my arguments in three separate points: First, I describe the basic, structural elements in Brazilian society and the labour market that sustain and (re)produce inequality, which is a precondition for *trabalho escravo*. Then, I treat racism within *trabalho escravo*. Finally, I discuss the racialisation of the *peões de trecho* and its role in legitimising the labour conditions in *trabalho escravo*.

Racism as an agent that structures capitalist production/labourers' conditions

Brazil is among the 20 countries with the highest inequality index.[25] Inequality rates in Brazil depend highly on skin colour. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, non-white people [26] have less access to good housing and education opportunities. They earn significantly less than white people, who on average earned 72.5 percent more in 2017. Non-white people are more likely to be un- and underemployed and to work in informal jobs. They also work to a higher percentage in the lowest paid jobs with the most informal labour, like agriculture (60.8 percent "non-white" people), construction (63 percent) and domestic labour (65.9 percent), which incidentally are also the labour sectors with the highest percentage of *trabalho escravo.*[27]

Cinara,[28] a militant of the black women's movement Centre for the Study and the Defense of Black People in Pará (CEDENPA) in Belém, confirmed this picture:

> If we think about the fact that the black population in Brazil is the one that has the most difficulty in getting qualified jobs, the one with the highest rates of unemployment, and the one that earns the least, it means that the correlation [with *trabalho escravo*] is certainly intense. Because here in the north and northeast – I do not have any research – the ratio must be almost 80 percent black persons among the people [who are in *trabalho escravo*], also because of the profile of this population. There is a very close relationship. I would also say that these two realities are interconnected.[29]

Indeed, a study by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) from 2011 on *trabalho escravo* in agriculture shows that the majority of the labourers in *trabalho escravo* are non-white people (81 percent in total; 62 percent of them define as *pardos*, 18.2 percent as black and 0.8 percent as indigenous).[30]

One of the reasons for the structural inequality in Brazil and the distribution in the job segments in agriculture and domestic labour springs from Brazil's long history of slavery (from the sixteenh century to its abolition in 1888).[31] An important part of the structure of Brazil's society and the labour market dates to that period. This is especially true for the worst labour conditions and, therefore, for *trabalho escravo.*[32] Even after abolition, ideals and behavioural techniques stemming from the structures of slavery are inscribed in white and non-white people. The now free black population posed a threat to existing power structure and the white elite was not eager to give up their power positions. Juridical equality was installed but no integration projects were implemented. Furthermore, other mechanisms were put in place that upheld asymmetrical positions and advantages.[33] For example, a new law of land distribution, where land was now bought and not lent by the state, excluded former slaves from owning land as they were not in a position to buy it.[34] Other important moments in the formation of the specific form of racism in Brazil are the notions and practices of *branqueamento* (whitening) and Gilberto Freyre's concept of racial democracy in the 1930s.

Branqueamento as an ideology and practice developed in connection with scientific racism in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The idea was that the skin colour of a population would influence its moral, biological, cultural and economic progress and that lighter skin would show and further this progress. Methodologies and hegemonic ideas of how to change a population's skin colour changed over time: first, Christianity was already believed to have lightened Brazil's population. In the nineteenth century, whitening was deemed possible through miscegenation and by furthering European immigration.[35] *Branqueamento* was an official ideology until the first half of the twentieth century, but it is still subliminaly existent and visible, for example, in the sale and purchase of whitening creams and similar products, as well as in the selective hospitability regarding migrants, where indigenous and black Latin Americans, Africans, Arabs and, to some degree, Asian people have a severely different experience in Brasil than white immigrants.[36]

Freyre's concept of racial democracy, in contrast, at least in the eyes of his time, tried to include the influence of (at least) black people in Brazilian history, but in turn denied the existence of racism in the past and present. The Portuguese colonialists and slaveholders, according to him, had been relatively benign. Therefore, a racial democracy had evolved in Brazil, in which all races knew their place, accepted it and, with that, helped the progress of Brazil as a nation. This image remains very powerful inside and outside Brazil.[37] The notion of racial democracy leads to the reality that black movements have to

fight continuously in order to make their experiences and realities visible. It is also certainly the reason why racism is not automatically seen as an important element in *trabalho escravo*.

Racist structures and discourses are always reproduced, renewed and adjusted according to the needs of a society in order to uphold the existing power relations. It is the concrete structures of domination that determine which differences are socially and politically relevant and in which form.[38] Therefore racism (but also class and gender, for example) influences labour relations in today's capitalism in a way that favours the accumulation of capital. The splitting of the labour force is a tactic to minimise the cost of labour: One group is excluded from good and regular jobs, which leads individual members of this group to take any job, however bad the conditions, as the group experience teaches them that other jobs are not available.[39]

And this is precisely the experience of the labourers; it is the lack of opportunities in their hometowns, the bad labour conditions already experienced and the needs of their families that drive them to take job offers that later turn out to be *trabalho escravo.*[40] Therefore, the intersection of structural racism and class formation plays an important role in determining non-white people as the pool of labourers that are the main target for *trabalho escravo*.

The splitting of the labour force does not only work on a local, but also on a global, level, as the international division of labour shows that people from the peripheries have the worst labour conditions, either in their regions or as migrants in the centres.[41] This is also evident in the system of *trabalho escravo*, where in Pará, a peripheral state, it is Brazilian migrants who work in these conditions, while in the global cities, like in São Paulo, it is transnational migrants (often Bolivians) in the textile sector who work in *trabalho escravo*, for example. While the lack of (formal) citizenship worstens the situation of transnational migrants and makes them vulnerable to *trabalho escravo*, the agricultural labourers in Pará only posess a subaltern citizenship – a lack of access to citizenship rights – as the Brazilian researcher Jessé Souza has termed it.[42]

At the same time, these structural inequalities (exclusion and peripheral inclusion in the labour market) are denied through the "myth of merit". This myth claims that under capitalism all people are born with the same chances, attributing socioeconomic differences to individual talents and effort.[43] But capitalism needs inequalities and differentiation to facilitate the accumulation of capital, as Paulinho, a priest and CPT organiser in Pará, expressed in an interview:

> If there were no slaves, how would there be masters? How would there be bosses if there were no labourers …? It is necessary to exploit the other … There should be social balance, but there is no social balance in capitalism. There has to be inequality. Inequality is real, it is the backbone to maintaining exploitation.[44]

While capitalism claims the equality of all humans, it negates it and rewards the

taking of supremacy, with racism serving as a legitimising legend and structural element for these inequalities.[45] From the myth of merit emerges the image of self-inflicted poverty. Precarious economic and bad labour conditions are made a problem of personal traits, which again feeds racist discourses and partly leads to the internalisation of racist stereotypes.

Hierarchies and inhumane treatment: The labour situation

Not only is the pool of labourers partly structured by the long history of slavery and the postabolition era; the labour relation itself resembles slavery – hence the name. The system of *trabalho escravo* in agriculture is characterised by structural as well as physical violence. It is pinned together by a rigid hierarchical system, which is headed by the *fazendeiro*, the owner of the agricultural enterprise, followed by the manager, who directs armed personnel. The labourers are at the bottom of the hierarchy and are also differentiated according to the form of their labour organisation (for example, long- or short-term labour, paid by piece or by hour). The aforementioned ILO study describes how these hierarchies also reflect the racial structure in society, as the *fazendeiros* and managers are mostly white men. The *fazendeiros* often originate from and live in the southern parts of the country, mirroring, again, the geographical stratification. The labourers, on the other hand, are not white and normally come from the northern parts of Brazil.[46]

Another factor constituting *trabalho escravo* is the implicit dehumanisation, a specific form of racism. The labourers are not treated as fellow human beings. They have no access to medical care, no work safety equipment, live in very rudimentary and overcrowded housing, often with no sanitary facilities, and are not provided with sufficient food or potable water. Often, the food that they are given has already gone off.[47] In an interview, a labourer said that they went without food for days, as they did not receive their pay and, thus, could not buy any. The labourers had to go on strike to receive their pay and, consequently, to be able to eat. He also spoke about illnesses: One labourer got sick from spraying pesticide and the *fazenda* managers just told him to drink milk. Malaria is also a big problem in the Amazon region and the labourer said that if a labourer got sick, his colleagues had to organise to get him to a hospital themselves, which is very difficult. The employer did nothing in those cases. And even though he did not restrict their movement himself, the Amazon jungle and the lack of infrastructure did the rest.[48] This interview made it clear that the labourers in *trabalho escravo* are not treated as human beings; their human dignity is disregarded, which is often mentioned in the Brazilian discourse. Their lives have no meaning to the employers.

Most of the *fazendeiros* justify the treatment of their labourers by claiming that they were unaware of their situation or that their subcontractors are responsible for managing

the labourers. But, as Raffaela, a member of the human rights group Centro da Defesa da Vida e Dos Direitos Humanos Carmen Bascaran (CDVDH), said, in most of the cases the *fazendeiros* are well aware of the labour conditions:

> This employer has every record of what is produced. Sometimes he goes to the *fazenda*, to the property. Therefore, he knows what resources he offers. He knows that he does not offer adequate accommodation. He knows that he is not paying correctly, that he is [paying] late. He knows that the alimentation is weak … He does it … aiming to augment the profit and because he thinks that these people do not deserve to have their rights respected, because they already lived in a situation of extreme poverty in their homes and that they have to live the same way in the workplace, because, at least in Pará and Maranhão, that would be the valorisation of the culture of that region. Therefore, they think that it is normal, that it is cultural, that the labourer drinks the water where the cattle drink it, that he lives in a shed of plastic sheets, because this was culturally experienced for a long time … I see it more as irresponsibility on the part of the employer, even as a person, because he does not see himself in the other. He leaves the labourers there, but he does not understand that he [the labourer] is a citizen, who has rights that must be respected, or he understands it, but he does not want to do it, in order to reduce his costs.[49]

In her statement, Raffaela not only confirms the dehumanisation theory touched upon above but also talks about the culturalisation (othering) of the labourers, both of which are particular forms of racism.

In terms of culturalisation (othering), it is claimed that these living conditions are normal in the culture of the labourers, that it is either a form of respect for their culture, letting them live how they do in their own homes and/or that the labourers want to live this way. They are, even if not explicitly, seen as deserving of these living standards. With this they are constructed as “others”. The way in which this is done inherently includes elements of the legitimation of slave treatment as well as the notion of race (cultural racism).[50] Of course, the conditions are not seen as just in the eyes of the labourers, who often claim that they are treated like animals.[51]

The feeling of the labourers that they are not treated as humans (dehumanisation through labour conditions) is also reflected in the view of the *fazendeiros*, as they, as Raffaela states, do not see themselves in the other, in the labourer (dehumanisation through delimitation). They are not seen as the same and, therefore, do not deserve the same rights in their eyes.

How the labourers’ status is reduced through the labour condition

As mentioned above, the labourers are often left with very little or no money in some village far from their hometown, after their job clearing the woods and building up a *fazenda* is done. Often they either cannot go back to their hometowns, to their families, because they lack the money to do so or are ashamed to do so for the same reason. Consequently, they

stay and search for a new job in agriculture. When they do that again and again, they become so-called *peões do trecho* (roughly "migrant labourers").[52] Iana, a CPT militant in Pará, explained their condition in an interview:

> Who are those *peões do trecho*? Normally they are people who have lost their family ties. They came [to Pará] and stayed here … "I'm going to Pará. I'm going to earn money and then I will go back to my family. I'm going to work and do my best in order to improve my living conditions. Then I will go back to my family to help them, to improve their situation." A lot of them come alone and finally stay here and they go from *fazenda* to *fazenda* … They are then far away from their family and lose contact with them.[53]

As the *peões* are normally only seen in the villages when they are without work, certain prejudices are ascribed to them and they are discriminated against. They are seen as a corresponding category of people or, as I would argue, they are racialised.

Racialisation is best described by the psychologist Birgit Rommelspacher. Writing about the racialisation of Muslims, she states that their religious trait is used as the basis for othering in a way that the construction of otherness is not just limited to religion; Muslims are constructed as having an "essence of character" inscribed in their nature.[54] Just as religious affiliation to Islam becomes biologised over time, so too does the sociocultural status of being a *peão de trecho.* Racialisation is, therefore, a process where people are grouped together on the basis of a specific element, such as being agricultural migrant labourers from lower social strata, in this case. From this starting point, supposed group specific personal traits are deduced.

The term *peão (de trecho)* has been used for poor migrant labourers since at least the nineteenth century.[55] The supposed "essence of character" of the *peão de trecho* in the Amazon region is produced and reproduced in a specific and constantly recurring description. Therein, the fact that they are poor and mostly black plays a role.[56] The *peões* are described as irrational people who do not possess the ability to plan their future and who, in general, have a proclivity to lie, engage in criminality, be sexually promiscuous and have alcohol problems. They give rise to physical disgust and are described as dangerous, vindictive, ungrateful and lazy people, who, with guidance, can be good labourers. All these traits have already been applied, for example, in racist discourses on colonised people, slaves or the lower classes in general.[57]

Binka Le Breton, an author who mainly writes about the Amazon region, relates a conversation she had with three women in a bar in Araguaína. One of these women, who turned out to be a *gata* (labour recruiter), thought that the author wanted to hire *peões* and warned her about their problematic behaviour:

> They kill each other for the smallest reason … Of course, they drink a lot but this is not a problem if you know how to deal with them. If you get their respect, everything

> is fine. But in Xingú, I tell you, it's not easy. The *peões* cheat in card games, smuggle drinks into the workplace and end up completely drunk. They fight, attack each other sexually and always run away, so they don't have to pay their bills. I tell you, it's a nightmare. You simply cannot trust them. Sometimes I think they're worse than animals … They argue, they fight, they always complain. They lie shamelessly. Worst of all is they are a bunch of lazy people. If you let them, they keep rolling around in their hammock, pretending to be sick. Additionally, they do not do their job right. I'm telling you, these guys aren't worth anything … They're cool if you are hard on them … You have to make them respect you. You know what? They're really a race you cannot trust.[58]

Apart from the fact that this *gata* explicitly calls the *peões* a race, we can also see that these prejudices legitimise discrimination and inequality as well as, in this case, the violent labour relations in which the labourers are exploited. It becomes obvious that the violent treatment of the labourers and ignorance of the living conditions of these humans (or half humans – they are ultimately described as worse than animals) is seen as appropriate. Plassat, the CPT coordinator for the *trabalho escravo* sector, confirms that these views are shared by the *fazendeiros*:

> What's the idea? "It is normal that you have to be firm with the ignorant labourer, because if you are not he does not work, if you are not he falls into alcoholism or searches for the public charity of social programmes. You have to be firm.[59]

Here, labour coercion is described as a reformatory process, which is even in the interest of the labourer (so he does not become an alcoholic) and/or of society as a whole (so that the lazy labourer does not abuse the social system). Following the logic of the two quotations above, labourers escape from the workplace not because of the terrible conditions, but because of their characteristic trait to run away from their debts and because of their supposed fraudulent character, which justifies restricting their movement. Also, they supposedly just pretend to be sick – even though a lot of labourers in fact get malaria – which legitimises the nonexistence of medical treatment.

But it is not only the *fazendeiros* who (re)produce and believe these images of the *peões.* A documentary made to expose the harsh reality of *trabalho escravo* also reproduces these images. At the same time, it shows the paternalistic attitude of the labour inspectors from the Special Mobile Labour Inspection Group (GEFM) who come to free the labourers.[60]

In the documentary, when the labour inspector, a blonde woman, interviews a labourer who is trembling and sweating, she asks him if he is trembling out of fear, which he affirms. She laughs and says that she was just coming to sort out his life and that he should not be afraid. Later on, the same labour inspector explains: "The majority of the labourers don't know, they don't have documents, they don't know how to write, they don't even have an understanding of the money they receive."[61]

Antônio, another *peão*, plays a central role in the documentary. After he was freed

from *trabalho escravo*, the labour inspectors pay him the sum of money he should have received by working on the *fazenda*, a common practice after the liberation of labourers. The moment Antônio arrives to be with his family, he distributes nearly all the money to some children while his family members and friends advise him to not to spend the money at once, not to use it to buy alcohol and to do something useful with it.[62] Neither the documentary nor the labour inspector appearing in it explains that the labour condition and the condition of the labourers are structural. Rather, they are presented as something that are partly an outcome of the labourers' character and, for that reason, partly self-inflicted, with the *fazendeiros* taking advantage of this nature. In addition to the dehumanisation and culturisation, a process that patronises and infantilises the *peões* can be observed.

All of these discursive strands legitimise labour coercion but with different reasoning. While, for example, the dehumanising discourse sees in the labour coercion the protection of society or of the self, the patronising one states it as benefitting the other, the labourer. The forms of legitimation do, of course, overlap. As Plassat describes above, it is argued that labour coercion transforms the *peões* into productive members of society while helping them to get a grip on their lives. The infantilisation argument might even be more effective than the dehumanising and patronising ones in drawing a whole society into a legitimising discourse, involving not only the subjugators and, as we have seen, the people who are supposed to help the labourers, but also the subjugated themselves.[63]

Finally, racism and racialisation are also internalised. Frantz Fanon and Nilma Bentes both describe this internalisation as a feeling of inferiority, instilled through the interaction with a society that perceives them as such and disadvantages them socially and economically.[64] Of course, the aforementioned "myth of merit" plays an important role in this internalisation process. In the end, the internalised feeling of inferiority facilitates and legitimises the unequal distribution of wealth, rights and resources as the socioeconomic differences appear to be self-evident and naturally ordained.[65]

Therefore, even the conditions in *trabalho escravo* are seen as normal and somehow just by some of the labourers.[66] Le Breton was told the following by a migrant labourer: "I'm not afraid to die and I will never leave work. Those who left are weaklings. They didn't have the structure to pay their food. I want to say that if a man owes something, he must pay."[67] This attempt to differentiate oneself from the common prejudices against the group that the person is identified with, without questioning those prejudices as such, is a further consequence of internalisation. In this case, the labourer is eager to finish the work and to pay his debts in order to not identify himself with the "weaklings" and the ones who do not pay what they owe, the "typical *peões*." He does not want to be typical but, at the same time, accepts the prejudice ascription in general. After all, in order to rise one's status, the hegemonic discourse has to be accepted. It is problematic, though, as a nonsubjugated status can never be reached following the logic of supposed inferiority and internalisation

because the supremacy of the others is never put in question.

The infantilising argument works in a similar way: Like in colonial or other racist infantilising discourses, this strand is open to some kind of supposed betterment for the people subjected to it. The judges of that are not the labourers themselves, though: their rationality, diligence and trustworthiness is judged from outside. But, it facilitates the acceptance of subjugation, as at least some kind of praise from their self-proclaimed masters is possible.[68]

Finally, racist and racialising discourses are an effective part of disciplinary power, in the way Foucault described it in *Discipline and Punish*.[69] Generally, in racialising, poor people are ascribed specific characteristics. These mostly legitimise their position as subordinates as well as their poverty. Regarding the *peões de trecho*, racialisation makes it possible to not see the labour relations as highly exploitative, but the characteristic traits of this population group as the problem. Racism and racialisation help to explain existing inequalities in a way that their victims are perceived as responsible for their disadvantages, because of their alleged characteristics or lack of diligence.[70] But people are not socially downgraded because of personal inherent deficits. It is because they were excluded, inherent deficits were ascribed to them, which often ends in racialisation, as social downgrading and racism are tightly interlocked.[71]

Conclusion

This article has attempted to show that racism and racialisation are structuring factors of the labour market and that they play a role in constructing unfree and terrible labour conditions. First, it points out the existence of structural racism as an important factor in the inequality of Brazilian society and in the labour market, as it is the intersection of race and class that constitutes the pool of possible labourers for *trabalho escravo*. Secondly, it explains the hierarchy in these labour relations and their racist connotations; also the concept of dehumanisation through labour conditions and the treatment to which the labourers are exposed. Finally, it describes the racialisation of the labourers as a special group – the *peões de trecho* – as a strategy of legitimisation as well as of labour control through internalisation, as it impedes the fundamental questioning of these labour, power and social conditions, even on the part of the labourers.

Concerning the connection between the creation and maintenance of terrible working conditions and racism in general, the precarious status of the labourer is usually a prerequisite for unfree labour. This prerequisite is codesigned by forms of exclusion within a society. Racism plays a role in creating and legitimising these mechanisms.[72] Racism and working conditions are generally closely linked, as not only do they create segments in the population that can be used as a cheap workforce, they also cheapen workforce control, making potential organised or nonorganised uprisings and other forms of resistance more difficult.[73] By delimiting persons into different groups of people and using already existing

prejudices, the low pay of the discriminated persons can be pushed further downwards. Then again, the existence of people who have to work for low wages also threatens the jobs of the less precarious labourers, which is also frequently made explicit. Therefore, the dominant group, together with the state, finds methods to secure their jobs, through immigration policies and various other forms of exclusion and structural racism, which actually aggravates the problem, as the supposed exclusion is rather a form of precarious incorporation into the labour market.[74]

---

[1] Julia Harnoncourt, *Unfreie Arbeit: Trabalho escravo in der brasilianischen Landwirtschaft* (Vienna: Promedia 2018).

[2] Unfree labour and *trabalho escravo* are not totally congruent, but as I discuss in my book, the concepts, implications and discussions behind the term are, in my opinion, more applicable to analysing this condition on a global level than other terms like "modern slavery" as they work on a moral rather than a systemic level.

[3] *Perfil dos principais atores envolvidos no trabalho escravo rural no Brasil* (Brasília: ILO Office in Brazil, 2011), 6.

[4] Julia Harnoncourt, "Trabalho escravo? Ein historischer Vergleich auf globaler Ebene," *JahrBuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 14, no. 3 (2015): 63.

[5] See the discussions in the Brazilian Federal Senate: "40 ameaças do Congresso Nacional aos direitos humanos," *Brasil de Fato*, 24 January 2017, accessed 10 September 2019, https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2017/01/24/40-ameacas-do-congresso-nacional-aos-direitos-humanos/.

[6] See, for example, *Perfil dos principais atores*, or Leonardo Sakamoto, *Trabalho escravo no Brasil do século XXI* (Brasília: ILO Office in Brazil, 2007).

[7] Xavier Plassat, CPT, "Trabalho escravo e o mundo," interview with author, 26 November 2014; Oliveiros, CPT, "Trabalho escravo," interview with author, 23 October 2014.

[8] The *lista suja* documented all labourers who are freed and the companies that exploited them. The objective of this list was to prevent the use of *trabalho escravo* in the production chain. However, it was suspended in late 2014/early 2015 and reintroduced in 2016, but under different rules. Due to the political changes in Brazil, state institutions fighting *trabalho escravo* were starved financially and the concept is constantly called into question, all of which has contributed to the shortening of the lists since 2016. For this reason, I only refer to numbers produced before the interruption. Harnoncourt, *Unfreie Arbeit* (esp. the chapter entitled "Staatliche Mechanismen").

[9] See, for example, "Dados sobre trabalho escravo no Brasil," *Reporter Brasil*, 2016, https://reporterbrasil.org.br/dados/trabalhoescravo/.

[10] José Guilherme Carvalho da Silva, "As diversas faces da violência na Amazônia," in *Em defesa da vida: A realidade dos/as defensores/as de direitos humanos sob a situação de risco e ameaça no estado do Pará* (Belém: CEDENPA, 2008), 41; Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti, "Introduction," in *The Brazil Reader*, ed. Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Abdìas do Nascimento and Elsa Larkin Nascimento, "Dance of Deception: A Reading of Race Relations in Brazil," in *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States*, ed. Charles V. Hamilton, Lynn Huntley, Neville Alexander, Antonio Sergio Alfredo Guimaraes, and Wilmot James (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

[11] Georg Fischer, Christina Peters, and Frederik Schulze, "Brasilien in der Globalgeschichte," in *Brasilien in der Welt: Region, Nation und Globalisierung 1870–1945*, ed. Georg Fischer, Christina Peters, Stefan Rinke, and Frederik Schulze (Frankfurt am Main, New York: Campus, 2013), 39.

[12] I use this term and not *preto* and *pardo* as I want to open up the discussion of racism against indigenous people, who are often forgotten. There are nearly no studies on racism against indigenous people.

[13] Nascimento et al., *Dance of Deception*, 108–9.

[14] Plassat, CPT, interview; Oliveiros, CPT, interview; Patricía Trindade Maranhão Costa, *Combatendo o trabalho escravo contemporâneo: O exemplo do* Brazil (Brasília: ILO Office in Brazil, 2010).

[15] Including landworker and general labour unions in Pará, the CPT (the most important reference in the fight against *trabalho escravo* in Pará), Reporter Brasil (the most important journalistic reference for *trabalho escravo* in Brazil), a labourer who had such an experience, a labour inspector and a labour judge (state representation) and some other individuals and political groups that I was recommended to talk to.

[16] Including well-known local activists of the Centre for the Study and the Defense of Black People in Pará (CEDENPA) and activists of the Indigenous Center Maria in Santarem, in which indigenous people fight for their rights, as well as other people recommended to me.

[17] These interviews were conducted as qualitative, problem-centred expert-interviews, as the people I interviewed deal with *trabalho escravo* or racism in their everyday life. My interview style relied mostly on reflections of Bourdieu on power relations in interviews (Pierre Bourdieu, "Verstehen," in *Das Elend der Welt: Zeugnisse und Diagnosen alltäglichen Leidens an der Gesellschaft*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu et al. (Konstanz: UVK, 1997)). The analysis is based on grounded theory, which both meant sharing my intermediate findings with the interview partners (Andreas Böhm, Heiner Legewie, and Thomas Muhr, "Kursus Textinterpretation: Grounded Theory," *Forschungsbericht* (Berlin: Technische Universität Berlin; Atlas, 2008).

[18] See, for example, Oliveiros, CPT, interview.

[19] Maria Helena Rodrigues Navas Zamora, "Desigualdade racial, racismo e seus efeitos," *Fractal Revista de Psicologia* 24, no. 3 (2012): 564.

[20] Wulf D. Hund, "Rassismus im Kontext: Geschlecht, Klasse, Nation, Kultur und Rasse," in *Grenzenlose Vorurteile. Antisemitismus, Nationalismus und ethnische Konflikte in verschiedenen Kulturen*, ed. Irmtrud Woyak and Susanne Meinl (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2002); Wulf D. Hund, *Negative Vergesellschaftung: Dimensionen der Rassismusanalyse* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2006), 119.

[21] Hund, *Rassismus im Kontext,* 25; Rodrigues Navas Zamora, "Desigualdade racial," 564.

[22] Maranhão Costa, *Combatendo o trabalho escravo*.

[23] The numbers are from 2007. Ibid., 9.

[24] Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Brazil," 2016, accessed 31 January 2019, https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/bra/#Exports.

[25] Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook. Country Comparison: Distribution of Family Income – GINI Index," 2017, accessed 30 January 2019, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html.

[26] The statistics institute determines five categories: white, black, *pardo* (which, more or less, means mulatto), indigenous and yellow (people who define as having Asian ancestry). The attribution of these skin colours are based on self-definition. Publications, though, mostly only publish or work with the numbers of black and *pardo* people, excluding the rest.

[27] Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, *Síntese de indicadores sociais: Uma análise das condições de vida da população brasileira, 2018* (Rio de Janeiro: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2018), 27–29, 36–37, 39, 45.

[28] Most of the names are anonymised, as *trabalho escravo* is a delicate topic that could be dangerous for my interview partners. Real and full names are used for interviewees who already have a public profile.

[29] Cinara, CEDENPA, "O racismo no Brazil," interview with author, 5 November 2014.

[30] *Perfil dos principais atores*, 57.

[31] Since the colonisation of Brazil until the Lei Áurea in 1888, "legal slavery" was a determining part of society, first enslaving indigenous and later African/Afro-Brazilian people. Thomas E. Skidmore, *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press 2010), 5, 31–32.

[32] Tamis Porfírio Costa Crisóstomo Ramos Nogueira, "Mucama permitida: A identidade negra do trabalho doméstico no Brasil," *Cadernos de Gênero e Diversidade* 3, no. 4 (2017): 49; Talita Bedenelli, "Trabalho escravo: 'Há fazendas com hospitais para o gado, mas o trabalhador não tem nem água tratada'," *El País Brasil*, 3 April 2017, accessed 10 September 2019,

http://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/03/29/politica/1490822084_983546.html.

[33] Bentes, *Negritando,* 29; Roberto da Silva and Juliano da Silva Tobias, "A educação para as relações étnico-raciais e os estudos sobre racismo no Brasil," *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros* 65 (2016): 177–99, 183–84; Carlos A. Hasenbalg, "Race and Socioeconomic Inequalities in Brazil," in *Race, Class and Power in Brazil*, ed. Pierre-Michel Fontaine (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1985), 27; Andreas Hofbauer, *Uma história de branqueamento ou o negro em questão* (São Paulo: UNESP, 2006), 173, 180–90, 213.

[34] Michael Hanchard, "Black Cinderella? Race and the Public Sphere in Brazil," *Racial Politics in Contemporary Brazil*, ed. Michael Hanchard (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 64; Regina Célia Lima Xavier, "Raça, classe e cor: Debates em torno de construção de identidades no Rio Grande do Sul no pós-abolição," in *Cruzando fronteiras: Novos olhares sobre a história do trabalho*, ed. Alexandre Fortes, Henrique Espada Lima, Regina Célia Lima Xavier, and Sílvia Regina Ferraz Petersen (São Paulo: Perseu Abramo 2013), 106.

[35] Hofbauer, História de branqueamento.

[36] Jefferson Puff, "Racismo contra imigrantes no Brasil é constante, diz pesquisador," *BBC Brasil*, 26 August 2015, accessed 10 September 2019, https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/noticias/2015/08/150819_racismo_imigrantes_jp_rm.

[37] Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães, "Nach der *democracia racial*," in *Rassismus: Beiträge zu einem vielgesichtigen Phänomen*, ed. Bea Gomes, Walter Schicho, and Arno Sonderegger (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2005). 95–118.

[38] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Geschlecht und Nation* (Emmendingen: Die Brotsuppe, 2001), 25.

[39] Étienne Balibar, "Preface," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Étienne Balibar et al. (London: Verso, 1991), 9; Nogueira, *Mucama Permitida*, 56; Nicola Phillips, "Unfree Labour and Adverse Incorporation in the Global Economy: Comparative Perspectives on Brazil and India," in *Economy and Society* 42, no. 2 (2013): 172.

[40] Ricardo Rezende Figueira, "A persistência da escravidão ilegal no Brasil," in *Desafios aos direitos humanos no Brasil contemporâneo*, ed. Biorn Maybury-Lewis and Sonia Ranincheski (Brasília: Verbena, 2011), 58–59.

[41] Linda McDowell, "Life without Father and Ford: The New Gender Order of Post-Fordism," in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n.s., 16, no. 4 (1991): 417.

[42] Siobhán McGrath and Kendra Strauss, "Unfreedom and Workers' Power: Ever-present Possibilities," in *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Production*, ed. Kees van der Pijl (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015); Jessé Souza, *Die Natualisierung der Ungleichheit: Ein neues Paradigma zum Verständnis peripherer Gesellschaften* (Wiesbaden: VS, 2008), 16.

[43] Nilma Bentes, CEDENPA, *Aspectos da trajetória da população negra no Pará* (Belém: UFPA, 2013), 56–57; Tom Brass, *Labor Regime Change in the Twenty-First Century: Unfreedom, Capitalism and Primitive Accumulation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), 43; Cinara, CEDENPA, interview; Jessé Souza and Boike Rehbein, *Ungleichheit in kapitalistischen Gesellschaften* (Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2014), 9, 37.

[44] Paulinho, CPT, "Trabalho escravo e terra," interview with author, 11 November 2014; translation by the author.

[45] Birgit Rommelspacher, "Intersektionalität – über die Wechselwirkung von Machtverhältnissen," in *Feminismus: Kritik und Intervention*, ed. Ingrid Kurz-Scherf, Julia Lepperhoff, and Alexandra Scheele (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2009), 84.

[46] Harnoncourt, *Unfreie Arbeit* (esp. chap. 2.3.4. "Hierarchien"); *Perfil dos principais atores*.

[47] Ângela Maria de Castro Gomes, "Repression and Changes in Slave-like Labor in Brazil: In the Present Time and Uses of the Past," *Revista Brasileira de Historia* 32, no. 64 (2012): 156; *Perfil dos principais atores*, 48–49.

[48] Andreas and Maria, MST, "Um Casal no Acampamento do MST fala sobre o caso da Cabaceiras," interview with author, 1 November 2014.

[49] Raffaela, CDVDH, "A situação do trabalhador, mulheres e a luta contra o trabalho escravo," interview with author, 27 November 2014, translated by the author.

[50] Siobhán McGrath, "Fuelling Global Production Networks with Slave Labour? Migrant Sugar Cane Workers in the Brazilian Ethanol GPN," *Geoforum* 44 (2013); Plassat, CPT, interview; Raffaela, CDVDH, interview; Souza and Rehbein, *Ungleichheit in kapitalistischen Gesellschaften*, 41.

[51] Lisa Carstensen, "Trabalho forçado e tráfico de pessoas: uma análise do discurso em instituições e organizações internacionais e Brasileiras," *Brasiliana–Journal of Brazilian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 17.

[52] Helen Osório, "'Com a sua marca': Trajetórias e experiências de trabalhadores escravos e livres na pecuária no Brasil meridional," in Fortes et al. (eds), *Cruzando fronteiras*, 195–97; Iana, CPT, "Trabalho escravo," interview with author, 22 October 2014.

[53] Iana, CPT, interview.

[54] Rommelspacher, *Intersektionalität*, 28.

[55] Osório, "'Com a sua marca'"; Iana, CPT, interview.

[56] Plassat, CPT, interview.

[57] Étienne Balibar, "'Class Racism'," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambigous Identities*, ed. Étienne Balibar et al. (London: Verso, 1991), 209; Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 23; Vânia Maria Losada Moreira, "A conquista do trabalho indígena: Fé, razão e ciência no mundo colonial," in Fortes et al. (eds.), *Cruzando fronteiras*, 139–60; Ricardo Rezende Figueira, *Pisando fora da própria sombra: A escravidão por dívida no Brasil contemporâneo* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2004), 268.

[58] Binka Le Breton, Vidas roubadas: A escravidão moderna na Amazônia Brasileira (São Paulo: Loyola, 2002), 43–44.

[59] Plassat, CPT, interview, translated by the author.

[60] Caio Caveicchini, Evelyn Kuriki and Ivan Paganotti, dirs., “Correntes,” documentary film (São Paulo: Repórter Brasil, 2005).

[61] Ibid., translated by the author.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Bentes, *Negritando*, 27; Hund, *Negative Vergesellschaftung,* 41.

[64] Bentes, *Negritando*, 19; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

[65] Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, “Nem Preto nem branco, muito pelo contrário: Cor e raça na intimidade,” in *Contrastes da intimidade contemporânea*, ed. Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras 1998), 179; Souza, *Natualisierung der Ungleichheit*, 55.

[66] Castro Gomes, *Repression and Changes in Slave-like Labor*, 165; Antonho, Secretaria Municipal de Agricultura Tucumã, “A política e trabalho escravo,” interview with author, 23 November 2014; Iana, CPT, interview; Raffaela, CDVDH, interview.

[67] Le Breton, *Vidas roubadas,* 178, translated by the author.

[68] Bentes, *Negritando*, 27; Hund, *Negative Vergesellschaftung,* 41.

[69] Michel Foucault, *Überwachen und Strafen: Die Geburt des Gefängnisses* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2015).

[70] Balibar, *Preface*, 12.

[71] Hund, *Negative Vergesellschaftung*, 120–23.

[72] Brass, *Labor Regime Change,* 5; Rommelspacher, *Intersektionalität*, 84; Plassat, CPT, interview.

[73] Tom Brass, “Some Observations on Unfree Labour, Capitalist Restructuring, and Deproletarization,” in *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues*, ed. Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), 11.

[74] Phillips, *Unfree Labour*, 172; Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen, “Introduction,” in *Racism and the Labour Market: Historical Studies,* ed. Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 1995), 12–13.