

Silva, Maciel Henrique
Nem mãe preta, nem negra fulô:

histórias de trabalhadoras domésticas
em Recife e Salvador (1870-1910)

[*Neither black mother, nor negra fulô:*
stories of domestic workers in
Recife and Salvador (1870-1910)]

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When we speak of domestic work in Brazil, we should have in mind a well established, long standing, perennial institution in our society. Heavy labor, it is traditionally carried out by poor, usually black women, subject to uncertain and subjective rules that, in the intimacy of family homes, can give protection from the insecurity of the streets but, at the same time, brutally oppress these workers.¹ Living with the omnipresent possibility of humiliation, violence and sexual abuse was the day-to-day experience of thousands of female workers who live in this complex, slippery world, outside of regulation. A significant part of the history of this institution situated between the last decades of legal slavery in Brazil and the first half of 20th century, but still so present in 21st century Brazil, is retold by the historian Maciel Silva.

With care and sensibility, the author narrates the experiences of domestic servants in two great Brazilian capitals, Salvador and Recife, using extensive research and interpretative rigor. The author deals with the period starting from the decade of the 1870's, when free persons, slaves and poor fee women were recruited for the tasks "from the doorway inward", as they said at the time, while 1910, was chosen as a demarcating point due to the consolidation of diverse urban reforms in Brazil, and consequently, changes in habit, rhythm of life and in the domestic working dynamic. Originally presented as a doctoral thesis in Social History at the Universidade Federal da Bahia, the book is also

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a highly valuable study regarding these questions.

By marking the start of her study during the 1870's, the author links the situation of domestic workers to the labor organization that would emerge with the end of slavery, inevitably starting from the promulgation of the law of the 28th of September, 1871, the name of which was the Law of Free Birth. As Silva affirms this law undoubtedly altered the understanding of the domestic labor of free workers, given that it would bring, with contracts, changes to labor rules, in terms of hours and dwellings for domestic servants. These were no longer necessarily fixed to the home of the employer. There were also changes in terms of expectations, both for employees as well as for employers. The context of the 1870's would be therefore, a starting point from which to think the formation of this class, given that the author analyzes free and freed workers in action as domestic servants well before the official mark of the end of slavery.

It is impossible to separate the origins of domestic work from the environment of slavery in societies where this form of labor exploitation was dominant for so many centuries. For Silva, however, if slavery characterized domestic work, and many of the struggles of free and freed domestic workers were forged in the struggles for autonomy within slavery, she does not define the *class* of domestic servants, that is to say, one does not encounter a *class* in the domestic slave. This is because Maciel Silva seeks, which we consider to be a central issue of her book, to explain the "formation of the class of domestic workers in Brazil", a class that, for the author, would only have formed itself through the experience of freedom, even if precarious, of those same workers. Inspired by a perspicacious reading of E.P Thompson, Silva emphasizes much more *formation*, that is to say, prefers to think in terms of historical processes, conflicts and heterogeneity to deal with the concept of class, making use of the experience of subjects more than the fixity of a pre-established category.

Female slaves, therefore, are not part of the class considered by the author. Silva, intends, on this basis, to escape from the stereotypes both of the "black-mother", the generous slave who cared for white children, and the "Black Fuló" the beautiful and seductive *mucama*, who frequently, both in the literature and in analyses of scholars, appeared characterized as a domestic worker, hampering their analysis as protagonists of their own histories. These stereotypes already explained and reduced their lives according to a condition of passivity, as victims of an inescapable system. Therefore, the effort of the author goes in the direction of defining domestic workers as a class marked by struggles for

rights and against exploitation and also through their dealing with conflicts within their own class.

In defining this *class* without including the enslaved workers who lived within the homes, one resolves the problem of dealing with the diverse legal questions of the workers who lived under these conditions. Even given this however, the author does not free herself from another theoretical problem: dealing with a “domestic class” within the working class. This does not seem to be the preoccupation for this author, who does not enter into the debate regarding duties and class, thereby avoiding confronting this question. Their option to outline the thesis of the class formation of domestic workers is based on analysis, instead of on a theoretical discussion of *class*. To this end, she presents extensive research and a sophisticated interpretation of the sources, revealing the workers in action. She brings together in this manner, a human story, in which free and freed women struggle, act with solidarity against bosses in certain moments and in disputes between each other in others, suffer rape and other violations, confront accusations of theft, make use of gossip, help one another and also compete amongst themselves. They negotiate questions of honor, fidelity, gratitude, protection, goodness, zeal, and freedom amongst others, notions specific to that society, and in doing this, *act* as a class, in the same way that their employers do.

Though *class* is a central notion from which the author wishes to think the experience of domestic workers, gender and race are also included in her analysis. Without looking for an easy solution, Silva seeks the moments in which gender overlaps with class as well as race, showing that reality is much more complex than the categories that we use to try to understand it. If it is true that the workers were mainly black, there were also non-blacks amongst them. At times, poverty and the fact of being women more strongly marked the position of the domestic workers than race itself. Once again, with a wealth of sources, analytic care, and a great narrative capacity, Marias, Creuzas, Donatas, Theodoras and so many other girls and women appear, with their stories and ways of dealing with their problems, while resisting and living.

The chapter in which the author utilizes novels, memorials, short stories and other fictional texts as sources for social history merits special emphasis. Based on the inventions that literary figures from Bahia and Pernambuco made regarding those who were domestic servants, Silva reconsiders, with mastery of writing, many of the sensibilities of the era in question. In texts that reveal much more regarding the world view of the masters than regarding any reality

of the workers, the historian captures the fears, preoccupations, violence and subtleties of the paternalistic relations marked by conflict between employees and employer. However, it is in the chapter in which the author analyzes the criminal proceedings that these conflicts appear with all the color of the violence of the real world. In accusations of theft, physical aggression, and attacks on people's honor, Maciel Silva uncovers for the reader, the experiences of deflowering and rape, physical and verbal abuse, humiliations and precariousness that marked the lives of these workers, also permeated by solidarity, support networks in the neighborhood, gossip and other forms of approximation, and, at times, competition, between them. Throughout the text, the talent of the writer appears and enriches the interpretation of the historian. The result is a painful and complex universe that emerges, making visible so many women who lived through these histories.

Much effort to compare the two great capitals characterizes the initial chapters of the book. The lack of equivalent documentation between the two cities, however, means that Salvador appears much more than Recife. To complete the study, Silva makes a careful analysis of the legislation of this labor context, together with the contracts that began to regulate it. The author also accompanies the trajectories of young girls who left the Santa Casa de Misericórdia in Bahia, to work as domestic servants in the houses of traditional families in Bahia, a rich documentation that in recent years has been utilized with greater attention by historians. If in the first part of the book, the greater effort is that of situating the reading in the specific contexts of Salvador and Recife, and in the images constructed in the literature regarding domestic servants and their world, in the second part the author is preoccupied with reanimating the experiences of these workers.

By reconstructing these trajectories, full of intense conflict, such as in those cases presented from the Santa Casa and their unhappy experiences in the homes of their employers, Silva argues that the instability and violence of the world of slavery and the solidarity established between the workers places in check in diverse situations, the then dominant paternalism, constructing life possibilities for these workers, even if in unequal and precarious conditions. Without falling into heroic or binary simplifications, the author interprets the power relations of that world, showing their complexity and the difficulties in regulating work so rooted in the subjectivity of the relations that were established in the intimacy of these homes.

A highly relevant and important theme, it necessarily refers to the struggle

of domestic workers in recent decades from the history of our citizenship, rights, respect, and dignity in both work and life. These are themes taken up by the author during the development of the book, though the author moves away from any attempt at linearity in the interpretation of the struggle of these workers. In shadowy times such as these which we confront, in which the rights of workers are so under threat, the book by Maciel Silva is more than ever necessary, reconsidering fundamental questions of our society, which seeks to be modern while being so barbarously marked by archaic and inhuman values. This book leads us to reflect on the force of domestic labor in Brazil, in this way of ordering, of including at home without including in fact, of treating “well” without treating as an equal, of demarcating the class positions and situations of privilege of one and the dependence and humiliation of the others. So many incongruences and contradictions, the back and forth of the constitution of class, are revealed with precision in this invaluable book.

REFERENCE

GRAHAM, Sandra Lauderdale. *Proteção e obediência: criadas e seus patrões no Rio de Janeiro, 1860-1910*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1992.

NOTE

¹ I refer here to the binome *protection* and *obedience*, as domestic work was characterized in a now classic text on the subject, by the historian Sandra Graham. As servants, and being obedient workers, they were protected by their masters, living in the intimacy of the homes, far from the dangers and unpredictability of the streets. The author shows, however, that these conventional meanings were ambiguous: the house could be a place of injustice for the servants, just as the street could signify freedom, far from the control and observation of their employers. See GRAHAM, 1992, p. 16.

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