

The 1877-1879 drought in Imperial Brazil: from Senator Pompeu to André Rebouças: teachings on workers and the market

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Abstract

In the 1870s, the Brazilian Empire sanctioned the Free Womb Law (1871) and a set into motion a series of modernizing reforms. Amid the crisis of slavery and the drought and famine of 1877-1879, landowners and slaveholders, ministers, provincial presidents, and representatives of technical knowledge forged plans to utilize the “free labor” provided by migrants, which showed clear leanings toward the peasant economy. During the first year of the drought, the engineer and abolitionist André Rebouças wrote and published a series of articles comparing famine-stricken Ceará with British India, seeking a model of governance to be followed in Brazil.

Keywords: Imperial Brazil; drought; work; market; André Rebouças (1838-1898).

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While the Dickensian slum remains in the world history curriculum, the famine children of 1876 and 1899 have disappeared (Davis, 2002, p.18).¹

The question involves aid and rescue for 2,147,000 Brazilians. Were these slaves, they would be worth at least 2,147,000:000\$. Hardly then, would it be excessive to employ 20 to 30,000 *contos de réis* to save them from starvation and plague, robbery, murder, and prostitution (Rebouças, 1877, p.35).

The Great Famine of 1876-1879 had truly global reverberations, impacting areas as varied as Java, the Philippines, New Caledonia, Brazil, South Africa, and the Maghreb (Davis, 2002, p.18-19). This global dimension, which passed unnoticed by historians for more than a century, was not missed by the many travelers, chroniclers, economists, and politicians, who in the late 1870s, analyzed, wrote, photographed, and reported on the “calamity of the drought.”

In 1877, André Rebouças (1838-1898) wrote a series of articles comparing drought in Ceará and India, seeking lessons to be applied in the provinces of northern Brazil.² The originality of his perspective is rooted in a “holistic” vision of the nation’s problems; technical and social questions were not addressed separately. Elements such as hydrological infrastructure, nutrition, wages, labor, and land access were combined to develop a solution to water shortage in Brazil.

What is interesting from the perspective of Mike Davis (2002) is that he characterizes the drought and famine of 1876-1879 as a global subsistence crisis of the Victorian period. The relationship between the famine and the Victorian era is constructed from evidence demonstrating that imperialism advanced after each of these events, which were accompanied by extensive mortality among the local populations. In this sense, the 1877-1879 Ceará drought involved Victorian as well as national imperatives, illustrating the asymmetries of an Empire often considered to be divided into two parts: the North and the Imperial Court/Southern Provinces.

Between 1871 and 1889, fundamental changes emerged in this regional balance of power. Centralism and the greater political weight of the southern provinces generated tensions and inequalities (Mello, 1984, p.17). These were “decried” daily in the newspapers of the northern capitals and by politicians such as Senator Pompeu,³ who asked himself, with regard to the fall of the Rio Branco ministry (1875), what advantages had been obtained for Pernambuco, the northern province that supported the Central government without receiving in return even so much as the barest improvements to the port of Recife, a longstanding demand.

Davis’s hypothesis is provocative for the implications it raises. He suggests that famine did not occur on the margins of history, but rather at the locations being integrated to the global economy as tropical producers. The millions who died did so amid the violence of assimilation into the political and economic structures which Wallerstein (1979) called the world-system.

Thompson (1998, p.160) emphasized the overwhelming victory of the intellectual proponents of the new political economy involving regulation of the grain trade. In Davis’s

words as well as Thompson's, this victory is translated into deaths. Many died when the economic principles of Smith, Bentham, and Mill were applied. In Ireland, in India, and in a large part of the colonial empire, when food was scarce Adam Smith's notions on free trade in cereals transformed into an economic prescription. Thompson cites some examples of the persistence and recommendation of this model. In India, some local authorities asked for cheap grain to be imported, both in Kaira in 1812 and in Madras in 1833; the governor's response was that the way to alleviate the shortage was to keep the grain trade free, allowing supply and demand to play out freely. A similar situation was also seen during the great Irish famine. The idea was to not intervene in the market. "Relief exercises must take the form of distributing a pittance of purchase money, (at whatever height 'the order of nature' had brought price to) to those whose need passed the examination of labour on public relief works" (Thompson, 1998, p.219).⁴

The words of the "new science" delegitimized the traditional forms of protection that societies had known and practiced since time immemorial.

Drought, mortality, and statistics

Within the context of the great 1877-1879 drought in northeastern Brazil, Rebouças advised following the British example in India, not providing donations (although the onus was on the state to provide relief), but rather giving remuneration in exchange for work. He recalled that during the previous drought of 1844-1845, Senator Pompeu (the local authority on drought and the Northeast) had stated that it had been imprudent of the government to not take advantage of the migrants' services, giving the people handouts instead of workplaces and salaries.⁵

José do Patrocínio, before he became notorious for his links to the abolitionist campaign, was a correspondent for the *Gazeta de Notícias* newspaper and traveled to Ceará, where he remained from May through September 1878 to write articles on the drought and submit them to the Court. According to Frederico de Castro Neves (2007, p.81): "No one knows for sure what kind of information he had previously about Ceará or about the drought, other than that mortality among the local population was very high and that disease propagated in an impressive manner." This was likely the news that motivated his placement as a correspondent; horror generated curiosity. References to the drought in the Northeast during the nineteenth century were linked to the naturalist chronicles, which typically resort to this horror in narrating the unspeakable: entire families dying of hunger, parents selling their children, eating them, abandoning them. Women selling themselves for a plate of food, prostituting themselves. Crows eating drained children. Unburied bodies abandoned by the roadsides. All these hellish images were used to describe what was happening in the Northeast during drought times (Theóphilo, 1922; Smith, 1879).

The numbers are also horrific. Although the data are not precise, they are "indicative" of the suffering and catastrophe involved. During the 1877-1879 famine, the city of Fortaleza, with approximately 25 thousand inhabitants, received 114 thousand migrants who transformed the city into the capital of a "terrifying kingdom" (Theóphilo, 1997; Neves, 2000, p.48). Some estimate that there may have been more migrants, since not

all received public aid and consequently were not counted in the official statistics. The reporter Herbert Smith, who was in Ceará covering the drought for *Scribner's Magazine*, reported that it was likely that five hundred thousand *sertanejos* had died of smallpox and starvation during the drought. In addition to writing for the magazine, in 1879 Smith published a book based on his trip to Brazil, in which he repeats the statistic of five hundred thousand deaths caused directly by hunger and the diseases that followed the drought (Smith, 1879, p.421). He obtained this figure from the partial statistics that were being drawn up during the crisis. All these numbers are estimates; we know that Imperial statistics were faulty (Senra, 2006, p.47-59). Mike Davis, in turn, estimates that during the three global-scale droughts (1877-1879, 1889-1891, and 1896-1902) which had profound impacts on subsistence, the human death toll could not have been less than thirty million.

On the loss of human life during the famine of 1877-1879, the pharmacist Rodolpho Theóphilo (1997, p.6), a Ceará resident who closely followed the process, said:

France lost 23,000 soldiers out of an army of 1 million men to smallpox, and the capital of Ceará over little more than two months lost 27,378 lives out of a population of just over 100,000 souls.

Obituaries for the month of December registered the staggering figure of 15,352 deaths: 14,491 from smallpox and 861 from other diseases.

Death figures are never very accurate, but they can provide us an idea of the magnitude of human tragedy.

Each agricultural crisis was followed by a wave of migrants who abandoned the badlands to move toward the coast and even left the drought-affected provinces entirely in search of better living conditions. In this way, emigration reiterated its universally known mechanisms: factors of expulsion and attraction (Cardoso, 2011; Barboza, 2016). Reasons for leaving include lack of rain and drought, revealing more profound reasons related to the agrarian issue, which appeared as an agricultural crisis when the rains did not come. We should stress that what led the migrants to leave was not a natural phenomenon, but rather a social one: the concentration of land, the lack of drought defenses etc.

According to Mike Davis (2002), drought is the struggle between natural variability in rainfall and the hydraulic defenses of agriculture. Any drought with a significant agricultural impact is the result of two processes operating in different temporalities: there is meteorological drought, which is when less rain falls, and hydrological drought, which occurs when the water supply system is not enough to save the harvest. Hydrologic drought always brings with it a social history. A newspaper spoke of a double crisis during the 1888-1889 drought: one produced by the meteorological phenomenon and the other by government order (*Emigração*, 12 jan. 1889). Rebouças himself (1877, p.15-16), in his study on the drought in the Northeast, underlined the difference between rainfall in Ceará and in India:

Thanks to the dedication of Senator Pompeu, for Ceará we have regular observations of the rain gauge from 1849 until 1876.

The five-year averages are as follows:

1849-1853..... 1,372 millimeters

1854-1858..... 1,491 millimeters
 1859-1863..... 1,482 millimeters
 1864-1868..... 1,378 millimeters
 1869-1873..... 1,784 millimeters
 1874-1876..... 1,306 millimeters

Therefore, in terms of annual average rainfall, Ceará is among the more favored regions of India.

From these data, Rebouças affirmed that the solution to the problem in Ceará and the other affected provinces was infinitely easier than in India. The long-term solution would consequently be to construct drought defenses and access to water reserves for the *sertão* population, small landholders, family units, or residents, and to maintain stocks of grain. Although the various aspects of Rebouças's project, which incorporated recommendations from Doctor Giacomo Gabaglia, a military officer and mathematician who was part of the scientific committee known as the Butterfly Commission that traveled in some provinces (Kury, 2009), were very interesting, for this article we selected the role played by direct aid and the discipline of work because they are part of the juncture which is our focus here: the slavery crisis and movement of the free labor force into the market.

Demographic recomposition in the *sertão*

How can a society that periodically suffers major population losses and death from a vicious circle encompassing “lack of drought defenses-drought-famine-epidemics” also be a “provider of workers” (Secreto, 2003)? The answer lies in a previous process: the internalization of the *sertanejo* northeasterners, which involves the ability to feed livestock and conduct subsistence agriculture described in the classic works by Capistrano de Abreu (1998), Celso Furtado (1979), and Josué de Castro (1984) and analyzed by Guillermo Palacios (2004).

Poor food quality and instability were common to all societies in the Old Regime. Scarce nutrition led to increased mortality rates, since deaths generally resulted from ecological catastrophes accompanied by epidemics, among other tragedies that did were not exceptional; rather, natural adversity such as drought, flooding, or frost was enough to break the balance of subsistence.

Of course, subsistence in the *sertão* peasant economy left a very narrow margin for food storage. When rains were regular, nutrition in the region was good and relatively balanced compared to other regions: meat proteins, starch from cassava and maize, and poorer quality calories obtained from sugar and *cachaça* (sugarcane liquor). Josué de Castro states that if not for the droughts, the northeastern *sertão* might not have made the hunger map. He compares it with other corn-focused regions (like the southern United States, Central America, and Romania) and comes to the conclusion that this is one of the more balanced regions in terms of supply:

And that in this area, the existence of certain natural conditions and mainly, the kind of local life, with their traditional habits, created in this zone a nutritional complex in which the serious protein and vitamin-related shortcomings of corn are made up for

by the other usual components of the diet ... perhaps the most rational and balanced in the country including the areas free from hunger (Castro, 1984, p.166).

From what Castro and Furtado state, we can consider that the population in the *sertão* was sufficiently well fed to maintain substantial demographic growth, which was only interrupted when agricultural crises resulting from the periodic droughts changed this situation (Furtado, 1979, p.61-64; Freyre, 2002, p.181; Castro, 1984; Vasconcelos, 2001). These conditions ensured an abundant population. The other element that scaled up this population (to the point of creating “surplus population”) was drought, and along with it migration to coastal cities, which resulted agglomeration there.

Just as important as analyzing nutrition is indicating how this sector of peasant agriculture or poor autonomous farmers was originally formed. Palacios (2004, p.147-148) defines it in contrast to slavery agriculture (the plantations) and to the State. Its origin is found in 1700, when it appears for the first time in documentation as a differentiated group. These farmers were transformed into autonomous workers dependent on the market in roughly 1875, when they were directed toward the plantation-focused agrarian system. In general terms, Ceará can be considered part of this scenario, although it does have some peculiarities, as highlighted by Pinheiro (1989-1990). The 1860s were a challenge for the landowners in the province, who strongly perceived the lack of workers due to recruitment for the War of Paraguay and increased demand resulting from the development of commercial agriculture exports: coffee, cotton, and sugar (Pinheiro, 1989-1990, p.218-219). Ceará sent 5,648 soldiers to fight in the War of Paraguay, while Minas Gerais (which had three times the population) sent only 1,070 (Mello, 1984, p.25).

Interprovincial slave trade: slave labor and crisis

During the nineteenth century, displacement of workers from the Northeast to other regions (particularly the southeast) was well known, especially due to the interprovincial trade in slaves between the stagnant or declining sugar-producing regions and the thriving areas producing coffee. But during 1877-1879, three years of harsh drought, all of the Northeast and Ceará in particular experienced another type of worker displacement: poor free people affected by the drought. The landowning class decided to temporarily make an exception to controls on this “reservoir” of labor and made it available to the expanding regions. The relationship between drought and emigration was cemented, at least officially, by subsidizing travel (Secreto, 2007, p.43).

Peter Eisenberg (1989) calls attention to the problem of the “transition” between slave labor and free labor, and suggests understanding it through continuities. In his opinion, the abolition of slavery was a long process spanning nearly all of the nineteenth century; within this process, this author did not find a dramatic transformation in which the slave disappeared, and another worker, the free man, appeared in his place (p.187-212). Foreign immigrant workers appeared as one alternative in the dual process of supplying the lack of skilled labor and dealing with the process of “transition,” especially in certain provinces and during the last decades of the nineteenth century, because they fulfilled the requirements of

the landowning classes: they were cheap and abundant. Although the concept of “transition” was questioned by subsequent historiography, the assumptions raised by Eisenberg for considering the “politics of slavery” and of free work remain in force.

In addition to international migration, which had been discussed in the Empire since the 1820s, other possibilities began to be considered from the mid-nineteenth century, namely the Brazilian worker. The feasibility of converting the broad subsistence sector into market-dependent work was considered. The major problem faced by the landowning class was that workers were scattered over the country’s vast expanse, mainly as clusters or residents, though they did not often consider themselves in such terms (Palmeira, 2009). According to Furtado (1979), recruitment of Brazilian workers could only be feasible with cooperation from the landowning class. This author affirms that at the end of the nineteenth century, Brazil already had a “stock” of labor which led him to believe that had the labor shortage in the coffee plantations not been resolved with European immigrants, an alternative would have arisen within the country itself. Furtado (1979, p.121) bases this idea on the fact that five hundred thousand workers mobilized from the Northeast to the Amazon region between 1872 and 1900 to work in rubber tapping. Yet there was an extremely hostile attitude in the country to the domestic transfer of skilled labor, which can be explained by the political power of the groups whose interests would be harmed. The political and economic power of the dominant groups was based on the ability to supply manpower. These groups, which had more or less homogeneous interests, were active in Ceará from 1877 onward, between fear and economic necessity: fear of the multitudes gathered in the urban centers during periods of drought, as Neves mentions (2000), and the need for workers in sufficient quantity to ensure cheap labor and political power.

At the end of the nineteenth century – in 1877-1879 and 1888-1889, periods of notable drought – a system of migration with travel subsidized by the government was established in order to mitigate the horror to “bourgeois” sensitivities caused by the presence of the miserable, tattered, hungry, dirty, and sick. The destinations offered to workers were São Paulo, Pará, Maranhão, and Amazonas. The latter three were most popular, perhaps because the migrants thought that from there they could more easily return to their own region after the aftereffects of the drought were eliminated or when they “got rich,” but also because a stream of spontaneous immigration had already been directed there. Many of the “new immigrants” had friends or relatives in the Amazon region (Secreto, 2003, p.3). In the novel *A normalista* [*The teacher in training*], by Adolfo Caminha (1985), a migrant named Mendonça goes to the capital with his wife and daughter, loses his wife, and in fact never really makes it to his destination. He mentions to a companion his desire to go north to try his luck. The companion supports this plan, and says that life in Ceará is worth nothing at all. “Pará, okay, that is a land of abundance and money. A hardworking and honest man like you, with a bit of experience, could get rich overnight. The rubber plantations, you know the rubber plantations? They were a gold mine. So many came back laden, with hands in their pockets and heads held high” (p.16).

The travel policy was intended for the “migrant from Ceará to travel in conditions better than a begging vagabond, treating him as a worker relocated due to circumstances beyond him” (Brasil, 1889b, p.102). At that conjuncture, it was not spontaneous immigration. The

travel of the northeastern workers was paid for by the treasury: the Ministries of Agriculture and of the Empire funded their tickets. Those heading to São Paulo were taken to the coffee farms once they arrived to the port of Santos, using mechanisms created by the government to direct transatlantic immigrant workers inland: lodging for immigrants, train tickets, forward contracts (Secreto, 2003). They also had incentives to travel to Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo; Barra de Piraí could accommodate 1,200 people in rural installations. But the Imperial Ministry of Business went even farther, purchasing a property near Angra dos Reis in order to house immigrants there who “were able to work advantageously for themselves and for the State ... this will be acquired for the price of fifteen public bond policies” (Brasil, 1889b, p.93).

Most likely it was the fear of the masses that led Ceará’s ruling class to open the doors to migration (Greenfield, 1985; Neves, 2000). These masses occupied public spaces in the city of Fortaleza, becoming ubiquitous. The local newspapers only spoke of the multitudes of the poor and the (in)action of the government. Within the context of the northeastern drought, specifically in Ceará, Frederico de Castro Neves (2000, p.69-71) states that “the masses acted strategically.” After March, with the plantations lost and the cattle sick, dead, or moved to less dry areas, many people began going toward the coast, thinking about escape. As the migrants moved in search of protection and assistance, the hotbeds of conflict increased. This led to a “negotiation,” with the migrants’ strength lying in their numbers. The masses of people waiting for a solution was simultaneously the main argument as well as the most powerful means of pressure. Hunger was the essential motivation. The most essential “things” that the migrants negotiated obviously included food, but also subsidized travel, which many wanted in order to escape this context, probably thinking about their return.

The peasant strategy in the face of hunger and how the ruling class dealt with it were not very different in the nineteenth-century Northeast than they had been during the Old Regime in Europe. For centuries, hunger always returned so insistently, writes Fernand Braudel (1995), that it was incorporated into the biological regime of men, to the point of being part of everyday life. One reason was the mediocre grain yield; one or two bad harvests sometimes were enough to cause a catastrophe, and a middling season left the peasant population extremely vulnerable. Although it was the city dwellers who most complained of hunger, Braudel states that not everything they said should be believed, since this urban sector had other ways of accessing food, like buying abroad, along with the city’s own reserves. On the other hand, when the harvest failed there was no other solution for rural peasants than to move the city at any cost, beg, or (in many cases) die in the streets. The same was true for the migrants in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century: they went to the cities and begged on the streets, when they were allowed to. Some also died there or in makeshift shacks built on the outskirts of the city to contain them. Reaching the coast did not guarantee that they would escape danger.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Ceará’s landowning class complained of the marginal position of this province in respect to slavery. “The province of Ceará was one of the areas that most lost slaves, in percentage terms, to interprovincial trafficking. Between 1850 and 1880, 16,480 slaves left officially. These transformations made it an order of

the day to organize labor relations in the province based on the free man/poor national” (Pinheiro, 1989-1990, p.203). The same author cites the *Jornal Araripe* from April 2, 1859: “the farmers, owners, or mill owners ... Not having large factories or slavery for their respective traffic, here find the undeniable need to utilize rented [workers].” Therefore, this landowning class in the context of the drought is seen in the disconnect between having to decide between allowing workers to leave (and even organizing their exit) and improving the mechanisms to control the movement of workers by regulating individual mobility. The president of the province in the 1860s recommended applying Article 295 of the Criminal Code, which describes vagrancy: “Any person not having an honest and useful occupation that provides subsistence, after warning by the Justice of the Peace, without sufficient income. Penalty: labor and imprisonment for eight to twenty-four days” (Pinheiro, 1989-1990, p.218).

According to Rodolpho Theóphilo (1922, p.361), 6,559 slaves left through the port of Fortaleza during the three years of the drought. During nearly all of the nineteenth century, there were mechanisms to control the movement of the poor free population. These intensified, however, from the middle of that century. The project to squelch idleness, presented almost simultaneously with the abolition of slavery, recognized two basic conditions for defining the crime of vagrancy: habit and indigence. Prosecution for vagrancy could only occur systematically, as a complement to the formation of a free labor market; it was one of the instruments for disciplining the workforce. For this reason, persecution of vagrants and drunkards became frequent after abolition. In areas where free workers were very important, like Ceará, the means of control over the poor were more intense. The problem of labor was grouped together with the maintenance of social order (to the point of inducing freed or free people to sell their labor or to become a “dependent” or a “client” to some local boss, like a household group, resident, partner etc.). This issue had two dimensions: on the one hand, the practice targeted measures obliging this potential employee to sell his labor, while the concepts and values which shaped the work ethic were also revised (Secreto, 2007, p.43).

Reformism and the labor market: domestic workers

The Law of Free Birth was approved in 1871, two agricultural congresses were held in 1878 in Rio de Janeiro and Recife, and the service leasing law was approved in 1879, which was not intended to attract immigrants, but rather discipline existing workers (Secreto, 2011). During the Agricultural Congress in Rio de Janeiro, the problem of the lack of skilled labor was addressed. Meanwhile, in Recife it was said at the congress that there was not an absolute lack of workers, but rather a relative lack; those who denied the lack of labor in the Northeast did so considering the situation in 1878, when thousands of people from the *sertão* who were scourged by the Great Famine of 1877-1879 invaded the *Zona da Mata* coastal plain region.

The reformism of Rebouças, who focused on abolitionism as a main point, involved the question of labor as a whole. When he published *Abolição imediata e sem indenização* [*Immediate abolition without indemnization*] (Rebouças, 1883), he condensed some of the

issues that were systematized around the drought in the northern provinces. His criticisms of the agrarian structure and the immigrant project to solve the labor problem set his analysis apart from that of his contemporaries (Santos, 2006). As for the drought, he advised following the British example of not giving donations to the destitute (although the onus was on the government to provide relief), but he commended doing so through financial remuneration. He saw this as an opportunity to get “arms” into the market which, during times of abundance, worked in subsistence farming.

Yet as Einsenberg stresses (1989), the mere presence of migrants was not enough for large plantations to take advantage of them; they still needed to be transformed into skilled labor available to work in the mills. This particular situation highlights a commonplace practice in the *sertão*: the seasonality of supply. During dry seasons, workers migrated to the western part of the Zona da Mata, and returned to their fields along with the rains, or more generally emigrated to the coast and the wetter areas during the droughts, returning to their farms when the rains allowed them to resume farming for subsistence and the local market.

The movement of migrants between “exodus” and returning to their fields exemplifies the dramatic situation between the need to sell labor and the “peasant” ideal. But not all migrants had their own farms, and not all affected by the drought had wild areas that could serve as “safe havens.” Many migrants were dispossessed. The northeastern landowners gathered at the agricultural congress planned to take action affecting this group, proposing a series of restrictive and repressive measures that the state should take to encourage (coerce) free men to work on large-scale plantations. The government would also act on this group of men by providing public aid and guiding them out of the province of Ceará (Secreto, 2002).

During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the price of coffee recovered while sugar prices remained low, creating strong pressure to transfer labor from one sector to another. Even so, during the 1860s (as the Civil War was raging in the United States), the market was very good for cotton from Ceará. The president of the province of São Paulo, in his annual report for 1871, stated that the foreign colonist was “not” the only possibility for free workers. It should be remembered that many Brazilian families worked on farms, under the same contractual conditions as the foreigners. Immigrants served as a good example that led other free people to want to be contracted for rural labor on the farms, which in his opinion had not been the case previously. As a successful example of this model, the president of the province of São Paulo cited 63 Brazilian families who worked for Luiz Antônio da Silva Fidalgo, of São José do Paraíba, through partnership contracts.

As we have mentioned, in nineteenth-century Ceará, which had few drought defenses, if the rains did not come after March the crops were lost and the cattle weakened. With these possibilities for remaining in the *sertão* exhausted, the farmers looked for some way to survive on the coast. The presence of migrants in the city began negotiations and requests for “aid”: food, clothing, medical assistance, travel assistance to leave the drought-stricken area, headed to the north or to the south.

Local disapproval of migration to other provinces of the Empire was seen in newspapers such as *O Cearense*, which opposed emigration to the north in 1877-1879 (Emigrantes,

18 abr. 1877; *Emigração...*, 20 maio 1877), and later, in 1888-1889, opposed emigration to the south (*Emigração*, 12 jan. 1889). Meanwhile, *O Retirante* (7 nov. 1877, p.1), only condemned emigration to the rubber plantations during the drought of 1877-1879: "The south is thus our salvation," it said. The destination of the emigrants was one of the two most controversial issues. The other, which preceded it, was emigration in itself as a solution to the crisis. Emigration was considered an extreme solution. This is not to say that some sectors did not benefit from emigration, such as the shipping companies and the farmers who employed the migrants. But everyone agreed that emigration ultimately was a last resort, when all the alternatives for solving the problem within the drought-affected territory had been exhausted. Sale of slaves to the south and the export of migrants generated an "obscene prosperity," emphasizes Mike Davis (2002). Joaquim da Cunha Freire, Baron of Ibiapaba, profited from ships exporting human cargo from Fortaleza and Mossoró. Singlehurst Brocklehurst and Company, a British emporium in Fortaleza that provisioned the government and transported migrants to the north in coastal steamer line, profited from the drought, as did the Casa de Comércio Boris Frère, which sold essential foodstuffs (Monteiro, 2002, p.228-229; El-Kareh, 2002).

Antônio Ferreira Vianna, the Imperial Minister of Business, recommended that "only when it was impossible to retain immigrants through labor [should] travel be provided to those who wish to move to other provinces, respecting as much as possible their expressed preferences with regard to destination ports" (Brasil, 1889b, p.92).

Based on the letters requesting travel assistance during the 1888-1889 drought, applicants in Ceará preferred the north. Nevertheless, the report cited above denounced the existence of "malicious persons" who planned immigration to Amazonas and Pará, despite the propaganda directed in the opposite direction to the south, where the emigrants (in the words of the minister) would find resources awaiting them.

Before being resolved by emigration, the possibilities of retaining workers in the territory of Ceará would be exhausted. Such possibilities were determined by the expansion of public works, since "the idea of direct aid was repugnant," as Caio Prado, president of the province of Ceará, stated in 1888 (Brasil, 1889a, p.95). Instead of handouts, it was proposed that the migrants would provide labor for public works and receive aid in the form of monetary remuneration for services rendered. But as described in *O Cearense* (25 out. 1877, p.1), during the 1877 drought there was great difficulty arranging work for swelling numbers of refugees. A great supporter of aid linked to public works was André Rebouças, who seemed to believe what he read in the *Journal des Économistes*, as we shall see. He spoke highly of relief that involved employing migrants and providing them with monetary compensation so they could provide for themselves in the market.

The strength of the markets

The "new science" discounted direct aid, "alms," and "charity." Instead, it suggested that aid be offered as "remuneration" or wages for work performed.

There is a direct relationship between drought, labor, and end of slavery. Remember that slavery ended in Ceará in 1884, four years earlier than the formal end of slavery in Brazil.

This was not an “abolition” like the *Áurea Law*, but rather an extinction. The newspapers of the time reported very clearly: “In Ceará there are no more slaves.” It was a large-scale ransom. Slavery was extinguished through a series of circumstances until it was converted into a premeditated policy promoted by the “reformers” (Alonso, 2000, p.40; Hall, 1976, p.146-149) and by the population (both slaves and free).

The ending of slavery in Ceará mostly took place via indemnification paid to the slaveowners. The most common mechanism was raising funds to purchase the freedom of the slaves, allocating funds from emancipation taxes collected on the export of slaves for this purpose. The remainder took place through “gracious liberations.” Three years before the date considered to mark the end of slavery in the province, on January 27, 1881, the *jangadeiros* fishermen of Fortaleza who transported people and goods between ships and shore refused to carry slaves. This movement immortalized the dock hand Francisco José do Nascimento (also known as the Sea Dragon), a mulatto who led the closing of the port to interprovincial trafficking. In this way, the most recurrent time frame for the end of slavery in Ceará involves two points in time: 1881 and 1884. But closer examination of the problem indicates that this time frame dates back to the 1877-1879 drought, when many slaves were removed.

In 1881, *O Cearense* (12 set. 1881, p.1) published the official speech of the provincial president at the start of the legislative year, in which he commented on the apparent paradox between the considerable revenue collected during the worst years of the drought (1877-1879) and sparse revenues afterward. The newspaper said that in 1878 and 1879, substantial sums had been collected from the slave export tax. The drought period saw intense interprovincial trafficking between Ceará and the provinces of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

In 1872, there were an estimated 31,913 slaves in Ceará, representing 4.4% of the total population. Between 1856 and 1861, 1,345 were sold out of the province; between 1863 and 1870 2,170, and between 1872 and 1876 (the period preceding the great drought), 3,168. Finally, during the drought period itself, 7,667 slaves were sold outside of the province (Assunção, 2009). According to the abolitionist newspaper *Libertador* (15 jan. 1881, p.5), at the beginning of 1881 there were 25,773 slaves in the province, corresponding to 84:740\$701 in emancipation funds for Ceará.

It is not surprising that when the drought was over, a movement emerged against the interprovincial slave trade. Prior to this time, it was the southern provinces that resisted slaves brought in from the north, in an attempt to maintain slavery as a national institution (Mello, 1984, p.50-51). Ceará had lost a large portion of its work force because of the drought; a significant portion of this loss resulted from deaths, while a smaller number stemmed from the departure of workers via migration and “exports.”

Although Rebouças’s main reformist argument was abolition, this was certainly the first step in a larger trajectory that included reorganization of land ownership and involved the question of labor in general (Trinidade, 2004, p.270-281).

His proposal for the Northeast stemmed from a comparative study between means of alleviating droughts in British India, and he proposed employing these methods in northern Brazil. He allied himself with proponents of a very common interpretation in

wanting to view domestic issues from different points of view during the Imperial age: the comparative perspective. He and other readers who were eager for knowledge and news had access to events in India through the *Journal des Économistes*, a French periodical that significantly influenced Latin American intellectuals. After reading the article “La famine dans l’Inde anglaise,” Rebouças stated that he wanted for Ceará and the other drought-stricken provinces “everything that science and the experience of more advanced peoples on the road to progress teach.” In his view, “science and experience” (1877, p.13) could be found in British hands.

The liberal globality of the nineteenth century has specific characteristics. It fostered the widespread circulation of printed matter (governmental as well as private) on policies related to settlement, finances, health, statistics etc. The *Journal des Économistes: revue mensuelle de l’économie politique des questions agricoles, manufacturières et commerciales* was a good example. Through this journal, men of science and politicians obtained information on the rest of the world during the 1800s. News about Algeria, Australia, Argentina, and India appeared in this internationally circulating publication.

From reading the international press, Rebouças (1877, p.11-12) believed he had access to what happened in India.

In fact, the recently received newspapers from London demand:

- That public storehouses be filled with grain;
- That railways be established as part of the campaign to bring aid to the more remote points;
- That transport services involving carts pulled by men be established;
- That a vast system of artesian wells be established;
- That large camps be set up – refuges, where the hungry can receive rations;
- That charity be strongly urged throughout the British Empire;
- In short, that everything that can be achieved with money be done.

In their philanthropic enthusiasm, they say: ‘If calamity can be combated with pounds sterling, let’s start the fight!’

He believed, or stated that he believed, that the British were willing to make many sacrifices on behalf of the Indians, while in Brazil nothing was done for those suffering in the north. We do not doubt the veracity of Rebouças’s source. It was clearly a propagandist text that was quite far from the reality in India.

We can divide Rebouças’s proposal to tackle drought in Brazil into two parts. The first part is the policy reading he did on the situation: the importance of keeping the market logic functioning, even in an extreme situation. The other consisted of technical readings on the drought and future possibilities for defense against this scourge.

The “policy” reading can be broken down into two dimensions: a critical view of Imperial policy, and defense of the market logic with respect to grain and work. In this sense, it follows the postulates of classic economic policy but is adapted to the local reality. The “technical” reading on the situation (which also included policy reading, as we will see below) led him to propose deploying dams, extending railroads, and creating granaries and silos.

In 1859-1861, the Scientific Exploration Commission carried out a comprehensive survey of Ceará. It was the first national commission to produce scientific discoveries and

reports. “In a context affirming the Imperial elites, local institutions claimed the status of knowledge producers for themselves” (Kury, 2009, p.28). The commission was divided into five sections: botany, headed by Francisco Freire Alemão; geology and mineralogy, led by Guilherme Schüch, Baron of Capanema; zoology, headed by Manoel Ferreira Lagos; geography and astronomy, led by Giacomo Raja Gabaglia; and ethnography, headed by Antônio Gonçalves Dias. The expedition produced an essay by Gabaglia (1861) entitled *A questão das secas na província do Ceará* [*The issue of drought in the province of Ceará*]; two other essays were published in 1877, the first year of the catastrophic drought. Between September 1860 and June 1862, the Baron of Capanema published more than thirty articles in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*. Rebouças had significant knowledge at his disposal to enter the debate on solutions to the drought in the northern provinces. This was the framework from which both Rebouças as well as his colleagues at the Polytechnical Institute based their interventions. An essay by Gabaglia was the basis for a set of “techniques” in extraordinary sessions at the Polytechnic Institute.

What differentiates the Rebouças analysis from others by his contemporaries, colleagues in the same professional space, was the comparative and “policy” bias with which he studied the problem. Notable in the extraordinary sessions held in October 1877 at the Polytechnic Institute were the technical arguments submitted by several of the participants.

On October 9, 1877, André Rebouças, José Américo dos Santos, Adolpho Pereira Pinheiro, Emigdio Adolpho Victório da Costa, Francisco Carlos da Luz, Luís Schreiner, and Antônio Alves Câmara proposed a meeting for October 18 to discuss the most economical ways to carry out Gabaglia’s project to improve the natural conditions in the province of Ceará; for the extraordinary session, the advisors Henrique de Beaurepaire Rohan, Guilherme Schüch Capanema, Professor Charles Frederick Hartt, Doctor Sobragy, and Zózino Barroso e Coutinho were invited.

Even though the meetings at the Institute were based on discussions of Gabaglia’s plan, it is certain that the debate began by including other proposals which generally had already been included in this author’s diagnosis and recommendation in *A questão das secas na província do Ceará* (Gabaglia, 1861). After two sessions a consensus was reached: artesian wells would be drilled, railways constructed, trees planted, and dammed ponds and fisheries created. For immediate relief, Rebouças insisted on aid via hiring migrants to carry out the public works he suggested.

Rebouças (1877, p.90; emphasis added) also added: “Prepare ‘Algerian silos;’ build Gouy (Stephen) system grain storage, encouraged by Imperial Decree no.5.778 from 28 October 1874; Doyère Silos and ventilated Deveaux system granaries.”

Doyère himself, the French agronomist who invented a system for storing food grains and was cited by Rebouças, stated that the freedom to trade in grain generated some concerns. “Storing” allows traders the freedom to sell or not to sell. This was and remains the main issue in the grain trade, the possibility of placing this product on the market at the best possible moment (Doyère, 1862, p.22). Inventories, when administered according to the public interest, could represent an efficient means of aid. During the drought of 1743-1745 in China, stocks in public granaries were managed to feed two million peasants over an

eight-month period. This grain was borrowed from the tribute storehouses of territories that were unaffected by drought (Davis, 2002, p.315).

The *O Cearense* newspaper published a letter from the firm Monteiro & Cia. of Rio de Janeiro to their colleagues in Fortaleza, Maia & Irmãos, reporting that the company would take advantage of a boat leaving the port of Rio de Janeiro for Maranhão and send 2,500 essential items. The traders clarified that it was not their intention “to take part in the disgraceful usury that plagues this unfortunate province, but rather compete with basic necessities, with reasonable interest” (Extrato... 17 maio 1877).

This last recommendation brings us to one of the most important issues related to market imposition: providing grain (or food in general) according to the criteria of the market opportunity. Since the “moral economy” (Thompson, 1998), we know how difficult it was to impose market logic, and how the plebeian groups were opposed to its “impersonality” and moral detachment in terms of selling foodstuffs. Rebouças deemed the customary practices for serving the poor during the previous drought in 1844-1845 ineffective, since they resorted to donations or “debasement of alms.”

According to Angela Alonso (2000), the intellectual output of the 1870 generation is marked by criticism of the institutions, practices, and fundamental values of the Imperial *status quo*. In her view, the modalities vary according to the degree of marginalization or proximity of groups in relation to the institutions, the goods, and the privileges of the Imperial order. Positions of adherence, she continues, does not depend on adherence to foreign doctrines (p.40). All this is very clear in our case. Rebouças’s (1877, p.27) first critique is directed at the Empire:

Initially, the ministers boldly denied, in full Parliament, the existence of the horrendous scourge: they called it ‘exaggeration of the *sertanejos*,’ or ‘a partisan weapon to discredit the situation.’ ... To punish Lopes (this is the official phrase), we spent 600 *mil contos de reis* and sent 100,000 Brazilians to die from plague and bullets.

We ask much less to save 4 provinces of this Empire.

We will not kill anyone. We hope to God to save a million of our brothers! (Emphasis in the original).

Final considerations

Key to the reading proposed by Alonso (2000, p.36) – that is, understanding the texts and practices of the 1870s generation, not according to foreign theoretical references, but against the backdrop of local politics – is that we must understand Rebouças’s intervention in the issue of the drought in the Ceará. On the one hand, he presented the problem as resulting from Imperial inaction and lack of public aid policies. His plan should be contextualized amid the criticism of the War of the Triple Alliance (which marked the group of reformers as well as the period), from adherence to economic liberalism and from an understanding of the regional asymmetries intrinsic to Imperial politics. The drought, as an extreme situation, exposed a series of local and national conflicts and problems at the place where these dimensions and those of international capitalism intersected: the slavery crisis.

Rebouças referred to India as a “pretext” in order to point out the errors committed in the high politics of the Empire. We should consequently not cling too tightly to the veracity of the success of the aid policy during the drought in India (which is more than doubtful). Today, this episode is recognized as one of the greatest colonial atrocities. In any case, comparativism works in Rebouças’s argument as a criterion for “authority.”

The global subsistence crisis of 1876-1879 was accompanied by the expansion and consolidation of liberal principles deregulating the grain trade. Intervention in the market to ensure low and stable food prices was discouraged in India as well as Brazil. At the same time, sending aid without a counterpart of work was not recommended. This latter point was central in the debates of the 1870s.

Let us return to the second proposal, which Rebouças stated involved saving 2,147,000 Brazilians, who if they were slaves, would be worth at least 2,147.000:000\$. This comparison is not trivial; it is the type of propagandist argument that tries to stir support. In the slavery crisis, and in questioning this as a militant abolitionist, he proposes understanding the drought-stricken area as a potential provider of “free” workers. But for this to happen, discipline needed to begin immediately, hence the impossibility of free aid but rather assistance disguised as wages. Rebouças (1877, p.57) feared that free aid would cause the loss of work habits and turn migrants toward idleness, vagrancy, and begging. But on the contrary, if this opportunity were seized, “if there is a Marquis of Pombal to accomplish this reform, the drought of 1877 will only be described by future generations as a providential revolution,” (p.85) perhaps as the birth of a “free” market for labor and grain.

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NOTES

¹ Citations in English from Davis (2007) were sourced from Mike Davis, *Late Victorian holocausts: El Niño famines and the making of the Third World*, New York, Verso, 2001.

² In 1941, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) divided Brazil into five regions: north, northeast, midwest, southeast, and south. But these regional boundaries and designations that (with some adjustments) are still in use today did not exist during the Empire. In the nineteenth century, Brazil was divided into two regions: north and south. The former spanned from Amazonas to Espírito Santo, and the latter from Rio de Janeiro to Rio Grande do Sul. In this article, we prefer to use “north” to refer to the region that from the IBGE designated as northeast, but we do not rule out the use of this term, especially when it is employed by other authors. See also Mello (1984, p.15).

³ Tomás Pompeu de Souza Brasil (1818-1877). An intellectual and political scientist from Ceará, graduate in law from Recife and the Olinda Seminary, he was a public figure because of his work in the scientific, journalistic, and political fields. He was a diligent columnist for the *O Cearense* newspaper, which he eventually headed. Pompeu pursued dialog with the Brazilian Historical and Geographic Institute (IHGB) when it was preparing a scientific expedition to explore the provinces of the Empire, and may have influenced the choice of Ceará to begin these efforts. The arrival of the Scientific Commission in 1859 preceded the publication of his book *Memória sobre a conservação das matas e arboricultura como meio de melhorar o clima da província do Ceará* [*Memoir on conserving wild areas and cultivating trees as a way to improve the climate of Ceará province*] by only a few months. His interpretation of the causes and potential solutions

to the droughts contrasted with the ideas of Guilherme Capanema, although they were similar to those of Giacomo Raja Gabaglia. In 1862 he published the *Ensaio estatístico da província do Ceará* [Statistical assessment of Ceará province], and in 1864 he was elected senator. André Rebouças used his studies as a fundamental reference and incorporated several of his recommendations. Rebouças (1877, p.24) pays tribute to Pompeu, since his death coincided with the year the drought began: “In this Empire we only have reliable data for the scourge of droughts for Ceará, and this is thanks to the exceptional devotion of Senator Pompeu to this magnificent province.” Rebouças described the senator’s last work, *Memória sobre o clima e as secas no Ceará* [Memoir on the climate and drought of Ceará], as “the last service that this great citizen provided his native province.” See also Bastos (2013).

⁴ Citations in English from Thompson (1998) were sourced from Edward Palmer Thompson, *Customs in common*, London, Penguin, 1991.

⁵ Rebouças, like many others in the nineteenth century, used the term *retirantes*. For a critical approach of this term and others linked to migrants from the Northeast, see Ferreira (2016, p.51-60).

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