

Poverty Research Network

Workshop #1: 'Poverty, Inequality and Forced Labour'

11 September 2017

Federal Fluminense University, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Regional lead: [Norberto Ferreras](#), Professor of American History, Universidade Federal Fluminense



Workshop report

The first Workshop for the Poverty Research Network project was hosted by the School of History, at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), Niteroi, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on the 11th of September 2017. The workshop was organised by Professor Noberto Ferreras, and brought together scholars from different research groups within UFF as well as from other research centres in Brazil and the UK.

The Workshop adopted the UN SDGs 1 (End Poverty) and 10 (Reduce Inequality) as the main points of entry into academic debate about and inquiry into historical narratives of poverty and inequality, and how both themes have been conceptualised and articulated in Brazil, Iberia and across the imperial Atlantic World.

The workshop began with a tour of the city, led by Prof Ferreras. This exploration of the city highlighted the landscape of poverty and inequality in Rio de Janeiro today and the visual and structural traces of the deep history of forced labour regimes. We made a number of visits to important sites which show how slavery has shaped the landscape of Rio de Janeiro. We began at *Cais do Valongo*, the original slave port, which commemorates the four million slaves that arrived in Brazilian ports in three hundred years of slavery. This gave us the opportunity to discuss the public history of slavery, the politics of commemoration, and the importance of the archaeology of inequality. Later in the day we visited the [Quilomba do Grotão](#), one of the many communities formed by people escaping slavery that still exist in Brazil today. These historic communities formed by escaped slaves are still fighting for social justice today. Drawing upon the history of their community, they are engaged in a battle for the legal recognition of their property rights. These communities are also exploring more equitable ways of living and are seeking to make communal rather than individual property claims, and to develop a self-sufficient community based upon environmentally sustainable energy. This respect for the environment and endeavour to create more equal and environmentally sustainable communities is part of the battle to overcome the legacies of colonialism and their forced labour regimes.

We later visited the Law Faculty at UFRJ which provides advocacy and representation for landless groups and individuals in legal disputes over rural landownership, including the Quilombas. In a meeting at the Faculty with a founding members and activist of the Legal Advice Centre, [Mariana Criola](#), Prof. Ana

Claudia Diogo Tavares explained the complex history and constitutional position of these claims to participants in the Poverty Research Network (Prof. Ferreras, UFF; Dr McClure, University of Glasgow; Dr Collins, University of Nottingham). The activism and advocacy of the Centre has been directed at the rights enshrined in Article 68, of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, and re-defined in 2003. The legislation, then passed into law, the right of “self-designated ethno-racial groups who have their own historical trajectory, specific territorial relations”. This law allowed groups to collectively stake a claim to ownership to an area of land which they had occupied historically as descendent of enslaved peoples. In addition, the advocacy group works to represent those in dispute with large and powerful landowners and businesses who have laid illegal claims to ownership of land. These illegal or ‘false claims’ have taken place through the issuing of false land deeds for publicly owned land, the sale of which is prohibited.

Under centre-left governments of Lula and Dilma, the Advocacy Centre secured budgets and premises from which to operate services and work in conjunction with the branch of government (INCRA)[1] empowered to enforce legislation pertaining to rural landownership and land use. However, after the impeachment of Dilma and the installation of PMDB and President Temer, funding has stopped and the centre now longer has a base. In addition, the lawyers at UFRJ working for the advocacy centre also hold positions in the University or are attempting to secure professional employment there. This means that the service is precarious while the conditions of those needing advocacy and representation has increased. Specifically, it is now those who have already secured land titles that are under threat as landowners and the political party that supports their interest (PFL[2]), attempt to reverse the legislation through constitutional challenge in the Supreme Court. This means that no more cases can be submitted or processed until this challenge has been decided upon at the judicial highest level. Ultimately, the aim of the legal challenge on the part of the PFL, agribusiness and powerful landowners, is to alter the interpretation of the law and restore primacy of the constitutional of property rights, reversing decisions to date. Meanwhile, those with land titles issued through the constitutional act, are being subjected to intimidation, violence and even forced off their land. Furthermore, Prof. Diogo Tavares, a well-respected scholar and lawyer, has been subjected to aggressive professional denunciations and personal attacks in the mainstream media for her advocacy work with rural landless movements.[3]

The centre now faces a number of serious challenges under the present regime and political climate in Brazil. The lack of funding for the centre also means there are no researchers to support the land claims and conduct the all-important searches for deeds of ownership, some of which need to be traced back to the middle of last century, and which expose ‘false claims’. Furthermore, UFRJ is also under considerable financial constraint and political pressure placing additional strain on faculty staff. Although the centre and the rural residents it advises and represents have links to other social justice groups across Brazil, such as the urban social housing movement MNLM[4] and the Landless Workers Movement (MLT), as well international social and political movements which support landless causes in other regions, such as Palestine, the Centre currently has no prospect of funding, from government or non-government sources in Brazil or elsewhere.

Following these meetings, we began our intensive one-day workshop at the UFF in Niteroi. The workshop was entitled ‘Genealogies of our times: poverty, labour, and inequality’, and explored the historic connections between forced labour regimes, poverty, and inequality in Brazil. The workshop was structured around 3 main themes and sessions: poverty and governability, poverty and labour, poverty and visibility. Over the course of the day, scholars presented nine papers, with an opening presentation by Dr Julia McClure (Glasgow), and closing plenary by Prof Ferreras (UFF).

The papers considered ways in which poverty and inequality have been debated and defined historically. They critiqued how both the condition of poverty and the poor as a social class have been constructed and represented by groups with more economic and social capital. The workshop provided a trans-regional and trans-historical comparative framework which historicised the construction of the category of the poor by elite groups, and the fluctuations in attitudes towards the poor, and the causes and solutions to poverty.

The workshop highlighted important continuities with the ways that the poor and poverty have been represented and addressed in terms of binaries and otherness and in relation to religious and moralistic discourses. The poor were often categorised in terms of condemnation/salvation and criminalisation/redemption because they were either false/real, deserving/undeserving. As other, they were a social and moral risk, a threat to public order, usually resulting from their capacity for contagion. Notions of contagion and pollution were also often overlaid with notions of desirability and consumption, as both poverty and the poor have also been exoticised, eroticised, pitied and commodified in Brazilian and Iberian history and contemporary society.

Historical debates about poverty by individuals and institutions, invariably called for interventions which fell into two broad categories, which were not always mutually exclusive: relief (charity) and regulation (criminalisation). Curiously, these two broad forms of intervention invoked similar visions and sentiments about the poor in order to justify interventions. In sum, charitable interventions to provide relief to individuals who were poor, as well as regulation as way of controlling and criminalising the condition of being poor, frequently associated the poor body with visions and feelings of disgust and repulsion rather than pity and empathy.

The papers, from different historical perspectives and disciplinary approaches, addressed key questions about narratives of poverty which could inform contemporary development strategies and principles. The material covered and evidence produced asked the following questions: which concepts about the poor and poverty were developed and by whom? What purpose did these concepts serve and what value systems did they invoke or rely on? On what terms were interventions and regulation justified? How and why were the poor differentiated in relation to one another and from the non-poor?

The papers also highlighted discontinuities and revealed important cleavages at different historical junctures, reminding us of the contingent nature of contexts. Crucially, the workshop highlighted that even in historical moments of extreme inequality, there was not always a consensus among the non-poor (usually the political elite) about who should be considered poor and what should be done about poverty. Elements of crisis of critique among the political elite, however they were constituted as group, can be detected in narratives of poverty in the past as well as present.

Hence, the fifteenth century Dominican scholar, academic, jurist and theologian Domingo de Soto, not only condemned the processes of colonisation of the Americas on the part of the Spanish crown, but also criticised the implementation of laws by both Spanish and Portuguese crowns which criminalised the poor. In her paper on the panel, Poverty and Governability, Prof Silvia Patuzzi (UFF) explored the pronouncements made by this man of letters, cloth and confident of the crown and how de Soto chastised his peers among the non-poor for their own social praxis regarding the poor. Meticulously argued, de Soto unpicked notions of and distinctions between the needy and idle, about liberty and marginality which suggest a thread of historical continuity in concerns about poverty, mobility and migration.

Themes in the high-level ecclesiastical and scholastic debates examined by Prof Patuzzi were picked up by Professor Renato Franco (UFF) in his paper on sixteenth-century theological and humanist debate on the question of '*esmola*' or alms; a debate concerned not with what should be given or by whom, but who should be entitled to beg for alms. These debates created typologies and hierarchies of poverty, through binaries of real and false poor, whereby only the former were entitled to beg while the latter would be made to work or 'serve'. Here we encounter another level of differentiation; the idea of a 'deserving poor', invoking a differentiated vision of what the poor deserved in terms of charity, as well as differentiating types of poor people. All views and visions emanated from the perspective of those who were in a position to regulate the provision of services to and for the poor, but which hints at ways in which the poor themselves navigated their own position and condition vis-à-vis the non-poor. Papers by Profs Patuzzi and Franco, then, revealed vocabularies and visions, systems of knowledge and values, which shaped and determined practices around poverty and in turn exposed, often vividly, anxieties about the poor held by the non-poor over four hundred years ago.

The historical debates about poverty, as shown by Patuzzi and Franco, demonstrated how definitions of and anxieties about the poor and poverty have been inextricably linked historically to competing concepts of labour. Labour, then, was often presented as cure or punishment for idleness but alternatively understood as a service for the collective good. As Dr Julia McClure (Glasgow) explained, for some groups and in some historically specific contexts, unpaid work was regarded as a worthy activity in itself, a selfless act which benefitted the soul as well as the common good. Such historical concepts of poverty were examined through Cristo-centric forms of charity in the Spanish Middle Ages and the early modern Spanish Empire. McClure's periodisation of Cristo-centric thought, revealed a transition in conceptions of poverty and work on the part of institutions which went onto to hold a foundational role in imperial life in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. Moreover, as McClure demonstrated, imperial territorial expansion and accompanying economic growth produced greater riches for European elites but also produced greater inequalities among Europeans.

Imperial growth and growing inequalities prompted and required new narratives of poverty. Thus, ecclesiastical and imperial discourses of poverty transitioned from regarding the poor as diversified in constitution to more bifurcated. Subsequently, by the sixteenth century, the poor were increasingly criminalised and marginalised as beggars were banished from the realm as well sites of governmentality. Meanwhile, religious orders were awarded primacy in the institutionalisation of imperial Spain. Indeed, more than a mere symbolic mapping of power of colonial order, the first charitable hospital was built on site where Cortes met Moctezuma. Crucially, transitions and transformations in concepts of charity and labour, reveal increasingly racialized concepts of service, illustrated here by McClure through the composition and constitution of galley slaves; a group of labours crucial to the expansion of Spanish maritime power in both the Atlantic and Pacific regions. Thus, by the end of the sixteenth century, the expressed preference was for 'black slaves' to man the galleons, rather than foreigners, criminals and 'vagabonds' in general.

Prof. Leonardo Marques paper afforded an opportunity to consider how wider concepts of inequality have operated across historical narratives and historiographical debates about European imperialism. Herein, Marques examined how the Iberian world and peoples hold a formative but inferior position and role vis-à-vis the Anglophone world and peoples in concepts and history narratives about Western modernity. These inequalities have repercussion for both popular perceptions of colonial history and social relations across Latin America, which resonate through to twentieth-century paradigms and policies about development and democracy. However, Marques stressed how attempts to create alternative historical narratives presents immense challenges, not least of all due to the problematic nature of claims to over-simplified historical continuity between inequality and poverty in the colonial past and those in the present. In his search for alternative narratives and new perspectives on the history of imperialism, inequality and poverty, Marques emphasised the need to not only search out new sources of historical evidence, but to re-examine gaps in our understanding, spaces in the stories, and discontinuities in the metanarratives of history and historiography. More importantly, such endeavours and enquiries could well lead to conclusions about inequalities in the past that do not always sit comfortably or fit neatly into conventional views and traditional understandings of inequalities in the present. This approach has implications for theories of not just colonial history in the Americas but for the slave trade, abolition, industrialisation and concepts of modernity.

Tensions and competition in contemporary Brazil about the significance of experiences of inequalities, past and present, were considered in the paper by Dr Jane-Marie Collins (University of Nottingham). Collins approached the history of poverty in Brazil through definitions and experiences mobility and access to capital, and specifically through historical process of manumission. Collins showed how the relative and comparative frequency of mobility in Brazilian slave society defined the narrative of racial democracy in Brazil, which remained pervasive throughout the twentieth-century. Thus, manumission, as feature of a society in which extreme inequality was the norm, served to illustrate in structural disadvantage is constructed, systemic inequality perpetuated, and poverty created. Collins argued that a re-signification of the historical process of manumission exposes how narratives and conditions of poverty

have been created through processes which, paradoxically, have been understood primarily as evidence about socio-economic mobility.

Inequality, and specifically represented through female labour of 'washerwoman' was examined by Prof. Maria Inêz Turazzi (UFF) in her paper on the lithographs of Frederico Guilherme Briggs. Son of a British businessman who married a Brazilian woman, Briggs was part of the emergent artistic social circle Brazil, and more specifically the city of Rio de Janeiro, in the first half of the nineteenth century. In her paper, Turazzi used the notion of gaze, or 'looking' (*olhar*), at poor people, in this case enslaved women, and specifically the figure of the washerwoman. Through an exploration of visual representations of the washerwomen different historical contexts, Turazzi considered the processes of objectification of this specific form of female labour and worker. Thus, we learnt how images and ideas about poor labourers in general, but the washerwoman in particular, circulated within the *carioca* milieu, across Europe as well as between Brazil and Europe. The washerwoman, as one of the most persistently historical features of poor women's labour, was also one that was highly adaptive, figuratively speaking. Through a visual history of the washerwoman, Turazzi revealed how historical narratives gender in which the female body and labour – which in the case of Brazil was both poor, black, and probably enslaved – were fused into visions that were alternately wholesome, quaint, tantalising and even amusing. Above all, such images tended to essentialise the female condition and naturalise the experience of poverty for a specific social and then racial group. Indeed, Briggs book, *The Brazilian Souvenir – A selection of the most peculiar costumes of the Brazil*, published in 1845, essentialised ideas of slavery itself and pre-dated both the better known works of Fletcher and Kidder and Debret and Ruguendas, all of whom would know his work in detail. Even so, Briggs, was not just studied by his contemporaries and successors, he too framed his own 'olhar' of slave labour in Brazil through the lens of English nineteenth-century representations of poor labourers. Here, Turazzi traces and illustrates the circulation of images which were central to the construction, legitimisation, naturalisation of a discourse of poverty and labour, which travelled well beyond the borders of Brazil, and recalling the 'fluxo e refluxo' (Pierre Verger) of the slave trade itself.

Prof. Maria Verónica Secreto Ferreras (UFF) paper on André Rebouças, introduced a different vision and nineteenth-century Brazil, from the post-Abolition period and from an abolitionist and descendant of slaves. A military engineer who held key roles in the Paraguayan War, the expansion and construction of ports, Rebouças was a monarchist and close personal friend of Dom Pedro II, and went into exile with the Bragança household when the monarchy fell in 1889. He was, though, intellectually and politically, a radical abolitionist in the way he linked emancipation to land reform and wage labour. In this paper, though, Secreto focussed in his work in water management and specifically his responses to the drought of the 1870s, and his role in policy papers and recommendations in collaborative anti-drought projects, and his own publication in 1877 on the problem of drought in the North of Brazil. An historical narrative somewhat neglected in comparison to that of abolitionism, rising republicanism and the decline of the monarchy, it was nonetheless a feature of Brazilian society which pre-occupied Rebouças and to which he was deeply committed ideologically and professionally. As Secreto revealed, Rebouças ideas for anti-drought projects and water management were informed not just by his skill and knowledge as an engineer but as a social activist too. His policies and proposals confirmed a joined-up vision for tackling poverty, through charity, welfare and improved infrastructure; a vision that also attacked socio-economic inequality. Ahead of his time in many ways, Rebouças's anti-poverty ideas reveal an approach which placed those in most need first when it came to policy formation and implementation.

The paper by Prof. Bianca Friere-Medeiros, (USP) presented encounters of poverty, between favela tourists and favela residents in contemporary Brazil, in which narratives of inequality frequently collide. Using tools of analysis from study and history of 'slumming' in past, Friere-Medeiros stressed the multiplicity of narratives on the part of both tourists and residents, and the different 'gazes' that favela tourists bring to Brazil, and how those living in favelas have responded to those gazes. For the former, it is clear that many favela tourists seek, if not demand, a packaged experience of poverty and inequality that is sanitised and safe. Above all, the Rio favela, could not be any favela, but crucially contained a view and a terrace from which to enjoy that view. Indeed, some favela tourist agencies promise precisely this. Using interview material of tourists, though, Friere-Medeiros revealed how for some tourists their

experiences did not always conform with their own preconceptions, nor with (stereo)typical tourist narratives of favela life. Crucially, the rise in favela tourism (a global phenomenon not limited to Brazil), confirmed the economy of poverty as one in which poverty holds a material and marketable value, which the poor themselves utilise. This economy also interfaces with other narratives of and policies on poverty, particularly pacification and residential segregation, in ways that are not always straightforward or one-dimensional. In sum, through the prism of favela tourism, we learn how those who experience poverty develop strategies for coping with poverty as well as their own 'narratives' about poverty in modern Brazil.

Prof. Norberto Ferreras (UFF), provided the closing paper for the day and some thought-provoking reflections on definitions of inequality as well as economies of inequality. In his paper, Prof. Ferreras raised a number of challenges to contemporary and high-profile international anti-inequality campaign strategies – specifically that of anti-slavery international. While on the one hand, anti-slavery international recognised the differentiated nature of 'forced' labour, consciousness-raising campaigns employed seemingly inflated figures about the levels of global slavery, without explanation of context. In comparison, Prof. Ferreras demonstrated the multiplicity of experiences of labourers caught up in the narrative of 'modern' slavery, and exposed how the conflating of exploitative conditions (such as migrant labour) with 'slavery' failed to address the root problems of exploitation and poverty itself. Above all, these campaigns presented an undifferentiated vision of 'slavery', which, paradoxically, allowed the some of the worst offenders in terms of 'employers' to evade detection, and remain unaccountable.

In sum, the workshop produced an account of the history of global poverty in which differentiation, discontinuities and points of departure inform our understanding of poverty and inequality, as historians. The history of poverty explored in the workshop revealed how the political elite, who were by definition the non-poor, had a preference for undifferentiated visions of the poor, not least of all because they appeared to offer the possibility of simplistic solutions for dealing with poverty. The papers presented suggested how historical narratives of poverty and inequality, even when they attempted to suppress, contain or conflate diverse (and divergent) experiences of poverty and inequality, by definition reveal attempts by the poor themselves to force their presence and voices into those narratives and in ways that could frustrate, if not confound, supposedly anti-poverty interventions and regulations themselves.

The events of this workshop, its site visits and meetings with activists, indicated the importance of cross-disciplinary discussion and discussion with activists and signposted new directions in poverty studies. It particularly highlighted the value of collaborations between history and law and the importance of trans-regional and trans-historical comparisons.

Co-written by Dr Julia McClure (Glasgow) and Dr Jane-Marie Collins (Nottingham)

[1] Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária / Nacional Institute for Settlement and Agrarian Reform

[2] Partido da Frente Liberal / Liberal Front Party – which has recently changed its name to Democratas.

[3] <http://www.viomundo.com.br/denuncias/solidariedade-a-professora-mariana-trotta-agredida-covardemente-por-colonista-de-veja.html>

[4] Movimento Nacional de Luta para Moradia / National Movement and Fight for Housing