

Slavery Will Only End in Brazil When Condo and Favela Kids Go to Same Schools

Written by Cristovam Buarque
Monday, 16 April 2007 12:06



On March 25, 1884, the state of Ceará began its Abolition of Slavery, which was carried out that same year, four and a half years before the rest of the Brazil. But the city of Redenção, in the same state, abolished slavery even earlier: on January 1, 1883, all the sugarcane plantation owners of that region freed their slaves and sealed a pact pledging that they would never again return to using servile labor. It was a something like the 1980s Brazilian slogan "Torture, never again."

One of these plantation owners, Colonel Benvindo, declared on that occasion that "the stain on my life was to have been a slave master."

That pact began months before, when another plantation owner, Gil Ferreira Gomes, decided to free his slaves and convinced the other owners to do the same. Few of them accepted his arguments.

The others said that, if the freeing of the slaves were desirable, then their slaves should be purchased and freed. Gil Gomes set out to raise the money, winning the support of the abolitionist society in Fortaleza and buying all the slaves with the condition that their replacement would be a salaried workforce.

One hundred twenty-four years later, we have not yet completed the work of Gil Gomes and the other plantation owners of Redenção, which before Abolition was not called "redemption" but Vila Acarapé. Nor have we completed the Lei Áurea, the federal law abolishing slavery, which came in 1888.

Because abolition will only be completed when the children from the mansion attend the same schools as the children from the slave quarters, when the children from the condominium attend the same schools as the children from the favela. And when all schools are of excellent quality.

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Brazil knows how to do it. We have the resources. But we are not doing it because we have lost our capacity for indignation about the exclusion.

Gil Gomes and his colleagues had this in 1881 when confronted with the social exclusion and the vices of wealth. We are not saying that the stain of our life is living in a time when there are children abandoned on street corners, girls prostituting themselves on the beaches, a mere 18% of young people finishing their secondary education.

We are witnessing the brutal inequality as if it were something natural. We are not revolting. Instead of 19th-century slave-ocratic masters of the sugarcane plantations, we are masters of the 21st-century income concentration.

Today we consider ourselves just as blameless when confronted with the poverty as did the 19th-century Brazilians when confronted with slavery. We see the inequality as something natural and permanent, something imported from the past.

We have also lost our capacity to feel concern for the greater interest of the country, the nation, the people and the future. We continue to be individualistic and corporativistic. We are not looking out for the other or for the group as a whole.

With such a degree of egotism, we are forgetting to seek equality of schooling, of rich and poor. We do not want to seek out other sources of resources to bring about the educational revolution.

When it is mentioned that this additional abolition is going to cost 7 billion reais (US\$ 3.46 billion), everyone stops; everyone gives up. They do not act as Gil Gomes did and seek the money necessary for the modern abolition - the school.

We have lost the sensibility possessed by those slave masters of Acarapé/Redenção. In that epoch it was even possible to say that there were heroic sugarcane plantation owners. Today, only heroes are the excluded poor, the illiterate, the day laborers, but, instead of freeing them, we are thinking of building more jails.

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Were it not for them and for the legacy of the actions taken one hundred twenty years ago by the abolitionists Joaquim Nabuco, José do Patrocônio, and a princess, it would be difficult for abolition to be possible now. The proof is that we continually delay its completion.

Unlike Colonel Benvindo, we are incapable of recognizing the stain and shouting, "Lack of education, never again."

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