

order creates the material order in its own image. Brazil, visibly held back by slavery on the road to prosperity, will not soar off into the future of greatness and opulence to which it is destined, except when on its free soil no plant grows moistened by the sweat and blood of the slave. (*Hear! hear!*) . . .

Those thousands of women who during the course of three centuries have so often cursed the hour of their motherhood and blasphemed Providence, seeing the innocent fruit of their bodies condemned to perpetual slavery, as if it were a crime to be born, will now raise their arms and . . . invoking the divine blessing upon those who

“O Abolicionismo” Joaquim Nabuco

10.6. “We Are Seeking Our Country’s Highest Interests”: An Abolitionist Analyzes Slavery and Calls for a Break with the Past (1883)

For some years after passage of the Rio Branco Law the anti-slavery movement was nearly dormant. However, as it became clear that most children “freed” by the law remained de facto slaves, that one of the law’s key creations, the emancipation fund, was freeing few persons, and that otherwise the plan to end slavery gradually was not achieving great results, a new group of anti-slavery leaders suddenly appeared to initiate an entirely new phase of the anti-slavery struggle. In 1879, the young Pernambucan, Joaquim Nabuco, began making anti-slavery speeches in the Chamber of Deputies, and the following year, supported by a few colleagues, he introduced a bill to ban some of slavery’s harsher features and to abolish it completely within ten years. His ideas brusquely rejected in the Chamber, Nabuco then turned to propaganda, organizing the Brazilian Anti-Slavery Society in September, 1880, and publishing a short-lived monthly newsletter, *O Abolicionista*. In that year journalists in Rio and other cities, notably the young mulatto José do Patrocínio (see Document 10.8), began to establish an abolitionist press, and newly formed emancipation clubs began holding regular meetings.

This outburst of anti-slavery activity aroused a powerful reaction among slaveholders, and, owing in part to this angry response, the new movement quickly declined. By 1881 most anti-slavery clubs were inactive, and late that year Nabuco himself was defeated in a bid for reelection, after which he sailed for England into self-imposed exile. It was during his residence abroad that Nabuco wrote his anti-slavery book, *O Abolicionismo*, from which this selection is drawn. In this work he brilliantly analyzed the effects of slavery upon Brazilian society and the nature of the abolition struggle. This selection includes a penetrating examination of Brazilian slavery as it existed in 1883 and a final appeal to Brazilians to make an abrupt break with the past and to begin a new era of reform and progress.

Source: Joaquim Nabuco, *Abolitionism: The Brazilian Anti-Slavery Struggle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 85-96, 164-173.

☛ Since the law of September 28, 1871, was passed, the Brazilian government has been trying to make the world believe that slavery has ended in Brazil. Our propaganda has tried to spread to other countries the belief that the slaves were being freed in considerable numbers, and that the children of the slaves were being born *entirely* free. Slave mortality is an item which never appears in those fraudulent statistics, behind which is the philosophy that a lie spread abroad allows the government to do nothing at home and to abandon the slaves to their fate.

The record of manumissions—highly creditable to Brazil—dominates the official picture and obscures slave mortality, while crimes against slaves, the number of Africans still in bondage, the hunting down of fugitive blacks, the fluctuating price of human flesh, the rearing of *ingênuos* in slavery, the utter sameness of our rural prisons, and everything unbecoming, humiliating, and bad for the government are all carefully suppressed. . . .

The Brazilian people, however, understand the entire matter. They know that after passage of the law of September 28 the life of the slaves did not change, except for those few who managed to redeem themselves by begging for their freedom. It is essential that we outline the condition of the slave today as it appears before the law, before society, before justice, before the master, and before himself, so that it will not someday be said that in 1883, when this book was written, abolitionists no longer faced the traditional slave system but another kind of slavery, modified for the bondsman by humane, protective, and comparatively just laws. I will sketch this picture of our slavery with strokes perhaps too rapid for a topic so vast.

Whoever arrives in Brazil and opens one of our daily newspapers finds there a photographic image of modern slavery more accurate than any painting. If Brazil were destroyed by a catastrophe, one issue of any of our great newspapers chosen at random would adequately preserve forever the forms and qualities of slavery as it exists in our time. The historian would need no other documents to re-create its entire structure and pursue all its effects.

In any issue of any major Brazilian paper—with the exception, I understand, of those of Bahia, where the press of the capital ceased the publication of slave advertisements—one would find, in effect, the following kinds of information which describe completely the present condition of the slaves: advertisements for purchase, sale, and rental of slaves in which invariably appear the words *mucama*, *moleque*, *bonita peça*, *rapaz*, *pardinho*, *rapariga da casa de família* [black servant girl, black boy, pretty piece, boy, little darky, girl for family service] (free women advertise themselves as *senhoras* in order to differentiate themselves from slaves); official announcements of slave sales, a queer kind of document, of which the latest example from Valença is one of the most thorough [see Document 8.15 for Nabuco's criticism of the government's sale of slaves and *ingênuos* at Valença, Rio de Janeiro province]; advertisements for runaway slaves accompanied in many papers by the well-known vignette of a barefoot black with a bundle on his shoulder, in which the slaves are often distinguished by the scars of punishment they have suffered and for whom a reward is offered, often as much as a *conto* [1,000 *milréis*], to anyone who can catch him and bring him to his master—an encouragement to the bush-captain's profession; rather frequent notices of manumissions; stories of crimes committed by slaves against their masters, but particularly against agents of their masters, and of crimes committed by the latter against the slaves, barbarous and fatal punishments which nevertheless comprise only a very small part of the lordly misuse of power which occurs, since this kind of abuse rarely comes to the attention of authorities or the press, owing to a lack of witnesses and informers willing to testify to this kind of crime.

One finds, finally, repeated declarations that slavery among us is a very mild and pleasant condition for the slave, better for him, in fact, than for the master, a situation so fortunate, according to these descriptions, that one begins to suspect that, if slaves were asked, they would be found to prefer slavery to freedom; which merely proves that newspapers and articles are not written by slaves or by persons who for one moment have imagined themselves in their condition. . . .

The provisions of our Black Code are very few. Slavery is not indentured servitude which imposes a certain number of specified responsibil-

ities upon the servant. It is the possession, domination, sequestration of a human being—his body, mind, physical forces, movements, all his activity—and it only ends with death. How can we define in legal terms what the master can do with the slave and what the slave cannot do under the supervision of his owner? As a rule the master can do *anything*. If he wants to shut the slave up inside his house forever, he can do so. If he wants to prevent him from establishing a family, he can do so. If the slave has a wife and children and the master desires that he neither see them nor speak to them, if he decides to order the son to whip the mother, if he wishes to usurp the daughter for immoral purposes, he can do so. Imagine all the most extraordinary injuries which one man can inflict upon another without killing him, without separating him by sale from his wife and children under fifteen, and you will have what slavery is *legally* among us. The House of Correction, in comparison with this other condition, is a paradise. Excluding thought of the crime of condemning an innocent person to imprisonment as an example to others—which is worse than the fate of the most unfortunate slave—there is no comparison between a system of fixed obligations, of dependence upon law and its administrators, and a system of proprietary subjection to a person who can be a madman or a barbarian.

Concerning the slave's civil capacity, according to the law of September 28, 1871, he is allowed to form a *pecúlio* [personal liberation fund] which he may derive from gifts, legacies, inheritances, and, *with the consent of his master*, from his labor and personal thrift. But application of this law depends entirely upon the master, who owns the slave and everything the slave possesses, in a country where the protection of bondsmen by the courts is neither spontaneous nor effective. Concerning the family, it is forbidden, under penalty of invalidating the sale, to separate a husband from his wife or a child from his father or mother, except when the child is over fifteen (Law no. 1,695 of September 15, 1869, Article 2). [Nabuco seems not to have known that a provision of the Rio Branco Law had lowered the age of the child who could be separated from a parent by sale from fifteen to twelve.] But a wedding depends upon a master's authorization, and if he is not allowed to separate a family by sale, he can break up that family whenever he desires and for as long as he likes by a simple command.

To recapitulate, I will sketch in broad strokes what slavery is *legally* in Brazil in 1883:

1. The present bondsmen, born before September 28, 1871, and today at least eleven and a half years old, are slaves until they die, *exactly* like those of earlier generations. The number of these, as will be seen, is more than a million.

2. Whoever is subject to slavery is compelled to obey without question every order received, to do whatever he is told, without the right to demand a thing: neither pay nor clothing, improved food nor rest, medicine nor change of duties.

3. The man so enslaved has no duties—to God, to his mother and father, to his wife or children, or even to himself—which the master *must* respect and allow him to perform.

4. The law does not fix maximum hours of labor, a minimum wage, rules of hygiene, food, medical treatment, conditions of morality, protection of women. In a word, it interferes as much in the organization of the plantation as it does in the supervision of draft animals.

5. There is no law whatever which regulates the obligations and prerogatives of the master; whatever the number of slaves he may possess, he exercises an authority over them which is limited only by his own judgment.

6. The master can inflict moderate punishment upon slaves, says the *Criminal Code*, which compares his authority to the power of a father; but in fact he punishes at will, because justice does not penetrate the feudal domain. A slave's complaint against his master would be fatal, as it has been in practice, and in fact the master is all-powerful. The attitudes of today are what they were in 1852. It is as dangerous now, and just as useless, for a slave to complain to the authorities as it was then. To accuse his master, the slave requires the same will power and determination that he needs to run away or to commit suicide, particularly if he hopes for some security in his servitude.

7. The slave lives in total uncertainty regarding his future; if he thinks he is about to be sold, mortgaged, or pawned, he has no right to question his master.

8. Any person released from the House of Correction or even confined within it, however perverse he may be, whether he be a Brazilian or foreigner, can own or buy a family of respectable and honest slaves and expose them to his whims.

9. Masters can employ female slaves as prostitutes, receiving the profits from this business with no danger of losing their property as a result, just as a father can be the owner of his son.

10. The state does not protect the slaves in any way whatsoever. It does not inspire them with confidence in public justice but instead surrenders them *without hope* to the implacable power which weighs heavily upon them, morally imprisons or constrains them, arrests their movement, and in short destroys them.

11. The slaves are governed by exceptional laws. The use of the lash against them is allowed, despite its prohibition by the Constitution.

Their crimes are punished by a barbaric law, that of June 10, 1835 [see Document 6.4], the sole penalty of which is execution.

12. The belief has been spread throughout the nation that slaves often commit crimes in order to become convicts, in this way escaping from slavery, since they prefer the chain gang to the plantation, as Roman slaves preferred to fight wild beasts, in the hope of achieving freedom if they survived. For this reason a jury of the interior has absolved criminal slaves to be restored later to their masters, and lynch law has been carried out in more than one case. Here we have slavery as it really is! Death by suicide is looked upon by the bondsman as the *cessation of the evils of slavery*, imprisonment with hard labor such *an improvement of his condition* that it can be *an incentive to crime!* Meanwhile we, a humane and civilized nation, condemn more than a million persons, as so many others were condemned before them, to a condition alongside which imprisonment or the gallows seems better!

13. Not all the powers of the master, which, as we have seen, are practically without limit, are exercised directly by him, absent as he often is from his lands and out of contact with his slaves. Instead, these powers are delegated to individuals without intellectual or moral education, who know how to command men only by means of violence and the whip.

It is odd that masters who exercise this unlimited power over their human property look upon the law's least intervention on behalf of the slaves as intolerable oppression. The resistance of our agricultural community to that part of the law of September 28 which granted the slave the right to accumulate his own *pecúlio*, and to use that fund to acquire his own freedom once he had saved it, proves that not even this crumb of freedom was willingly dropped from their table. The planters of Bananal, for example, whose names indicate that they represent the agricultural families of São Paulo as well as those on the borders of Rio de Janeiro province, stated in a petition to the Chambers: "*Either property exists with its essential characteristics, or it decidedly does not exist.*" Forced liberation, with the various measures relating to it, is armed vengeance which threatens every home, every family, the destruction of agriculture, the death of the nation." Significantly, when an attempt was made in the Council of State to give slaves the right to possess their own savings, the Marquis of Olinda declared, "*We are not creating ethical law.*" . . .

It is said that among us slavery is mild and the masters are good. The truth is, however, that all slavery is the same, and the goodness of the masters depends upon the resignation of the slaves. Whoever would try to compile statistics on crimes committed either by slaves or against them, whoever would inquire into slavery and hear the complaints of those who suffer it would see that in Brazil, even today, slavery is as

hard, barbarous, and cruel as it was in any other country of America. By its very nature slavery is all this, and when it stops being this it is not because the masters have improved. It is because the slaves have resigned themselves totally to the destruction of their personalities. . . .

What this system represents we already know. Morally it is the destruction of every basis and principle of religious or positive decency—the family, property, social harmony, humanitarian aspirations. Politically it is slavishness, the degradation of the people, the disease of bureaucracy, the languishing of patriotism, the division of the countryside into feudal domains, each with its own penal system, its own seat of judgement, beyond the reach of police and courts. Economically and socially it is the temporary prosperity of one class alone, and this class decadent and constantly in a state of renewal. It is the elimination of accumulated capital through the purchase of slaves, the paralyzation of each potential separate unit of national labor, the closing of our ports to immigrants who look to South America, the exaggeration of the social importance of money however acquired, contempt for all those whose scruples make them unfit to engage in our materialistic competition or cause them to fall behind in that competition. It is the sale of noble titles, the demoralization of authority from the highest to the lowest level, the inability of persons worthy of leading their country toward a higher destiny to rise to authority because of the people's reluctance to support their defenders, their disloyalty to those who sacrifice themselves on their behalf. And the nation, in the midst of all this demeaning of character, of honest labor, of quiet virtues, of poverty which would rise above its condition with clean hands, is, as was said of the southern states, "enamored of her shame." . . .

None of the great national causes which produced as their heroes the greatest spirits of humanity ever had better reason to exist than ours. Let every true Brazilian become the instrument of that cause. Let the young people, from the moment when they accept the responsibilities of citizenship, swear to abstain from the purchase of human flesh. Let them prefer an obscure career of honest labor to amassing wealth by means of the inexpressible suffering of other human beings. Let them educate their children—indeed, let them educate themselves—to enjoy the freedom of others without which their own liberty will be a chance gift of destiny. Let them acquire the knowledge that freedom is worth possessing, and let them attain the courage to defend it. . . .

The abolitionists include all those who believe in a Brazil without slaves, all those who anticipate the miracles of free labor, all those who suffer *slavery* as a detested vassalage imposed upon the entire nation by some and in the interests of some. They include those who now gasp in the foul air which slaves and masters freely breathe—those who do not

believe that Brazil, with slavery gone, will lie down to die, as did the Roman in the age of the Caesars because he had lost his liberty.

This means that we are seeking our country's highest interests, her civilization, the future rightfully hers. But, between us and those who are blocking the path, who will win? This, indeed, is the very enigma of Brazil's national destiny. Slavery injected fanaticism into her bloodstream, and she is now doing nothing to grasp control of her fate from those blind and indifferent forces which now silently lead her on.

10.7. A Municipal Chamber of São Paulo Gives Its Opinions on the Slavery and Labor Questions (1885)

By 1884 abolitionism was achieving unprecedented gains. In March of that year a popular movement allegedly freed the last slave in Ceará, and in a brief period from March to June the 1,501 slaves registered in the huge province of Amazonas were systematically freed by an enthusiastic population, led by the provincial president. In Rio Grande do Sul, the borderland province that Tavares Bastos thought might end slavery first (see Document 10.3), an enthusiastic movement freed two-thirds of the province's 60,000 slaves in a matter of months. In Rio the same revolution for slavery was displayed in public demonstrations, as local committees tried to free slaves in selected urban areas, imitating the strategy used with great success in Ceará.

In June, 1884, the emperor reacted to this situation with the appointment of a new Liberal Party cabinet. On July 15 this ministry, headed by the Bahian senator, Manoel Pinto de Souza Dantas, proposed a law to grant unconditional freedom to all slaves reaching the age of sixty. This so-called Dantas Bill, like the Rio Branco Law before it, set off an intense national debate, inspiring a senator from São Paulo, Joaquim Floriano de Godoy, to submit a questionnaire to the municipal chambers of his province, presumably to help him decide how to vote on the Dantas Bill. The following reply to Godoy's questionnaire from the municipal chamber of Franco do Imperador typified the thinking of planters of that province on the Dantas reform and the problem of agricultural labor. These local leaders opposed freeing sixty-year-old slaves because to do so implied the government's right to free any slave without compensation, regardless of age, and it was thus a violation of the right to property.

Source: J. Floriano de Godoy, *O elemento servil e as camaras municipais da provincia de São Paulo* (Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Nacional, 1887), pp. 155-160.

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