

DISPOSABLE PEOPLE

New Slavery
in the Global Economy

KEVIN BALES

REVISED EDITION
UPDATED WITH A NEW PREFACE



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to slaves, thousands more could achieve a sustainable freedom. If food aid and development projects were refocused in order to set freed slaves on the path of self-sufficiency, only the largest of slaveholders would fail to benefit from the general economic growth.

But whatever power and resources the Western governments bring to bear on the problem, they are not going to be the wellspring of freedom for these slaves. Every day, members of the Mauritanian organizations SOS Slaves and El Hor work to help slaves into freedom. The story they bring to slaves, the example they set, shows the way out of bondage. Though their leaders are arrested and imprisoned, though their meetings are broken up and their publications censored, they are not giving up. Many of the leaders and members of both these organizations are ex-slaves, and like Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman they are in the fight to the end. But most importantly and most powerfully, the slaves of Mauritania are learning of their rights: the ineluctable urge to become free grows in them, and once it takes root they will not be stopped.

4

BRAZIL

Life on the Edge

THE NEW SLAVERY FLOURISHES WHERE old rules, old ways of life break down. The much-publicized destruction of the rain forest and the rest of Brazil's dense interior creates chaos as well for the people who live and work in those areas. Much of the slavery in Brazil grows out of this social chaos. Think of the way in which serious flooding or an earthquake can destroy sanitation and spread disease. In even the most modern countries, when natural or human-made disaster demolishes a city's water system and sewers, killer diseases such as dysentery or cholera can erupt and infect the population. Similarly, environmental destruction and economic disaster can cause an existing society to collapse—and the disease of slavery can grow up in the wreckage.

But destruction is never stable; no place or people ever slides into chaos and remains there forever. Economically driven destruction is sweeping like a tidal wave across Brazil. Before it are the scrub forests of the *cerrado* or the rain forests of the Amazon; behind it are the eucalyptus plantations and the new cattle ranches, planted with alien grasses, emptied of native animals, and providing meat for the markets of the cities. At the location of the wave itself is turmoil. The space between the old forests and "civilization" is a battle zone where the old rules are dead and the new rules are yet to come into force. As the

native ecosystem and peoples are uprooted, displaced workers, even the urban unemployed, become vulnerable to enslavement. The people caught up and forced to carry out the destruction of the forests live without electricity, running water, or communication with the outside world. They are completely under the control of their masters. The wave is carrying slavery with it. The land ahead is still exploitable, the land behind is stripped, and when all the land is stripped the slaves will be discarded.

We tend to picture environmental destruction as huge bulldozers gouging their way through pristine forests, crushing life under their steel tracks, scraping away nature in order to cover the land with concrete. In fact the process is more insidious. In this case, the people who live in the forest and rely on it are usually the ones forced to destroy it. Tree by tree, the hands of slaves wrench the life out of their own land and prepare it for a new kind of exploitation. The slavery of Brazil is a temporary slavery because environmental destruction is temporary: a forest can only be ruined once, and it doesn't take that long.

Sometimes a forest is destroyed when something of value is taken out; at other times the destruction yields nothing of value. In Mato Grosso do Sul both have happened. Twenty-five years ago when the *cerrado* was cleared to make way for the eucalyptus, the wood was simply dragged into great piles and burned. Today, as the final wave of destruction sweeps across the Mato Grosso, the *cerrado* and now the eucalyptus are again being burned—but this time they are being turned into money. The wood is made into charcoal, just like the kind we use in our barbecues. This is a special kind of charcoal because it is handmade, by slaves. But perhaps it is not so special, after all—slavery has a long history in Brazil.

For the English to See . . .

When Europeans, mostly Portuguese, first came to Brazil, they brought large-scale slavery with them. Eight years after Columbus “discovered”

America, a Portuguese sailor named Pedro Alvares Cabral “found” Brazil, and soon the explorers began to realize the riches they could make from growing sugar there for the European market. The native Indians were quickly conquered and enslaved to serve the new masters, but they proved neither numerous nor durable enough to supply the labor needs of the growing plantations (the Europeans carried diseases that exterminated many tribes). This wasn’t a crisis for the settlers, since the Portuguese had already begun capturing slaves on the coast of Africa. Shipping them to Brazil was easy, a shorter trip than sending them to the Caribbean or North America. Soon all the settled parts of Brazil were practicing legal slavery, and a national economy grew up on the backs of slaves.

From the beginning of colonization until late in the nineteenth century slaves were transported from Africa to Brazil in huge numbers. As many as ten times more Africans were shipped to Brazil than to the United States: something on the order of 10 million people. But because the death rate on the sugar plantations was so high, the slave population of Brazil was never more than half that of the United States. In the eighteenth century the discovery of gold helped carry slavery deeper into the interior and the Amazon. By the nineteenth century Brazil was locked in a struggle over slavery, but unlike the United States, it did not suffer a civil war. For Brazil the key antislavery forces were the British, on whom the Portuguese had become increasingly dependent for economic support and protection. From 1832 the British navy patrolled the oceans off Brazil, intercepting and freeing African slaves. Inside Brazil the slaveowners worked constantly to whip up the racism and fear necessary to preserve slavery; the government enacted laws *para Inglês ver* (for the English to see), a phrase that is still used to mean doing something by subterfuge. In 1854 the importation of slaves and the international slave trade were abolished, but not slavery within the country. The power of the British had its limits, and in the end it was the Brazilian antislavery movement, led by Joaquim Nabuco, which forged a coalition of nationalists, anticolonialists, and

liberals that defeated the landlords and slaveholders after twenty years of political conflict. Full emancipation came in May 1888, when Brazil became the last country in the Americas to abolish legal slavery.

It is hard to know if slavery ever completely disappeared in Brazil. The great plantations of the coastal regions, the areas nearest government inspection, converted from slavery within a few years, but in the remote areas of the Amazon and the far west enforcement was lax. Those distant parts of the country were relatively untouched until the 1950s, when exploration and exploitation began in earnest. Bigger changes began when Brazil experienced an economic boom in the 1960s and 1970s, which affected Brazil much as we saw the boom of the 1980s and 1990s affected Thailand. Lower infant mortality and immigration led to a population explosion, the cities grew and filled, industry expanded, and the pockets of poverty grew deeper and deeper. The military government courted foreign investors with promises of cheap labor and loose environmental and tax laws. But mechanization drove more people from the countryside to the cities than the new industries could absorb, and enormous slums (called *favelas*) ruled by gang lords grew up in Rio and São Paulo. The military rulers also borrowed heavily to support nuclear power and mining projects. A return to elected governments could not forestall the bust of the 1980s, and the uneven development of twenty years crashed. Hyperinflation wiped out savings, and servicing the foreign debt, now \$120 billion, crippled the economy.

The economy slowly improved in the 1990s, but the underlying problems of inequality were never fixed. Today, Brazil (along with its neighbor Paraguay) suffers the greatest economic disparities of any place on earth. On one end of the scale are the 50,000 Brazilians (out of a population of 165 million) who own almost everything, especially the land. At the other end of the scale are 4 million peasants who share 3 percent of the land. Most of them, of course, have no land at all. In the cities and the slums are millions more without work. The austerity programs that brought the hyperinflation under control all but shut

down the health and education systems. And in the times of instability state corruption, already serious, grew worse.

"A Breast of Iron . . ."

We have already seen how government corruption goes hand in hand with slavery. In Brazil it also fosters environmental destruction. The advent of eucalyptus plantations mentioned at the beginning of this chapter was part of an immense tax-avoidance scheme cooked up in the 1970s by the military government and multinational companies. The exact origins of the scheme are lost, but its gist was clear: the government allowed large companies and multinational corporations to buy up federal land, at a very low price, in blocks of hundreds of thousands of acres. If the companies would then strip away the native forests and plant eucalyptus, the government would allow them to take the cost of the land and the replanting off their corporate taxes. Ultimately, the eucalyptus was to be cut down and fed to a paper mill that the government promised to build. Handed vast tracts of land on a plate, the big companies—including international giants like Nestlé and Volkswagen—then received over \$175 million as tax relief.¹ By the 1990s the paper mill remained unbuilt, and many of the owners began to contract local firms to clear the land and make charcoal.

When an exploring geologist combed through the land north of Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he said the country had a "breast of iron and a heart of gold."² This area of rich mineral deposits became the state of Minas Gerais (in English, "General Mines"). Today the state is a mining and industrial center producing large quantities of iron and steel. To make steel requires charcoal. And the modern industries of Brazil, whether they are making cars or furniture, are using steel produced with the help of slaves. Many of the plants and smelters are efficient and up-to-date, but the charcoal they use still comes from denuded forests and the hands of slaves.

After the forests of Minas Gerais and the neighboring state of Bahia

were cut down, new sources of charcoal had to be found; thus we return to the western state of Mato Grosso do Sul, more than a thousand miles from the steel mills of Minas Gerais. As the frontier moved west, roads penetrated into the *cerrado*, providing a way to haul out the charcoal. And with millions of acres standing in native wood or eucalyptus, charcoal making is a quick way simultaneously to squeeze more money from the land and to clear it for cattle ranching. The only ingredient lacking in this remote area is the workers.

There is an art to making charcoal; it is a skill that must be learned and practiced before charcoal of good quality can be consistently produced. With the forests gone in their home states, charcoal workers congregated in the cities hoping to find work. They found, as have millions of other displaced workers in Brazil, that there was none. Whole families in the eastern cities teeter on the edge of starvation: some live in the public rubbish dumps gleaning scraps of metal to sell, others beg, and some turn to selling drugs. These families are trapped and are willing to do anything to bring in food for their children. When recruiters arrive in the cities of Minas Gerais promising good work at good pay, they leap at the chance.

"They Come with Their Beautiful Words . . ."

From the early 1980s, as the wave of development swept into Mato Grosso do Sul, recruiters began to appear in the slums of Minas Gerais seeking workers with some experience of charcoal making. These recruiters are called *gatos* (cats) and are key players in the process of enslavement. When they drive into the slums with their cattle trucks and announce that they are hiring men or even whole families, the desperate residents immediately respond. The *gatos* will go from door to door or use loudspeakers to call people into the street. Sometimes the local politicians, even local churches, will let them use public buildings and help them recruit workers. The *gatos* explain that they need workers in the ranches and forests of Mato Grosso. Like good salesmen, they lay

out the many advantages of regular work and good conditions. They offer to provide transport to Mato Grosso, good food on site, a regular salary, tools, and free trips home to see the family. For a hungry family it seems a miraculous offer of a new beginning. In a charcoal camp in Mato Grosso I spoke with a man named Renaldo who described being recruited:

My parents lived in a very dry rural area and when I got older there was no work, no work at all there. So I decided to go to the city. I went to São Paulo but that was even worse; no work and everything was very expensive, and the place was dangerous—so much crime! So then I went up to Minas Gerais because I heard that there was work there. If there was I didn't find it, but one day a gato came and began to recruit people to work out here in Mato Grosso. The gato said that we would be given good food every day, and we would have good wages besides. He promised that every month his truck would bring people back to Minas Gerais so that they could visit their families and bring them their pay. He even gave money to some men to give to their families before they left and to buy food to bring with them on the trip. He was able to fill up his truck with workers very easily and we started on the trip west. Along the way, when we would stop for fuel, the gato would say, "Go on into the cafe and eat as much as you like, I'll pay for it." We had been hungry for a long time, so you can imagine how we ate! When we got to Mato Grosso we kept driving further and further into the country. This camp is almost fifty miles from anything; it is just raw cerrado for fifty miles before you get to even a ranch, and there is just the one road. When we reached the camp we could see it was terrible: the conditions were not good enough for animals. Standing around the camp were men with guns. And then the gato said, "You each owe me a lot of money: there is the cost of the trip, and all that food you ate, and the money I gave you for your families—so don't even think about leaving."

Renaldo was trapped. Like the other workers, he found he could not leave the camp and had no say in the work he was given to do. After

two months, when the workers asked about going home for a visit they were told they were still too deeply in debt to be allowed to go.

The mother of three sons who later escaped from bonded labor explained, "When things are bad here [in the slums], it is as if the gatos can guess things are in such dire straits, and then they come and trick the poor. . . . They come with their beautiful words and promise you the length of their arm, and then when you get there they won't even give you the tip of their finger."³

When the workers begin their trip, the gatos ask them for two documents: their state identity card and their "labor" card. These are crucial to life in Brazil. The identity card is essential for any dealings with the police or government and is proof of citizenship; the labor card is the key to legal employment. By signing the back of a person's labor card, an employer creates a binding contract and brings the job under government employment laws such as the minimum wage rules. Without a labor card, workers have difficulty obtaining their rights. The gatos say that they need the documents to update their records, but in fact this may be the last time the workers ever see them. By keeping these cards the gatos gain a powerful hold over the workers. However bad their situation, the workers are loath to leave without their documents. Meanwhile, since the labor cards have not been signed, there is no proof of employment and little legal protection. As one Brazilian researcher put it, "From this moment the worker is dead as a citizen, and born as a slave."⁴

For the gatos, their method of long-distance recruiting has great advantages. Taken far from their homes the workers are ignorant of the surrounding countryside and cut off from friends or family who could help them. Even if they are able to escape, they are penniless and in debt. They have no way to pay for the trip back to their own state. They will often keep working in the most horrific conditions in the hope of getting some cash that they can use to get home. And if they do flee from the charcoal camps, the local people often resent and fear them as outsiders. Without identity cards they can be locked up by the

police as vagrants or suspected criminals. Without their labor cards they cannot work; moreover, they remain unregistered in their new workplace and the government labor inspectors and the trade union organizers will have no idea they exist.

In the charcoal camps the workers are isolated, like the young women brutalized and held in the brothels in Thailand: we can see in Brazil another example of the "concentration camp" method of enslavement. The charcoal camp is its own world. The gato and his thugs have complete control and can use violence at will. What they want are workers who have given up, who will do anything that is asked of them. At the same time they want their captives to work hard, so they constantly promise payment and more food and better treatment. Balancing hope against terror, they lock their new slaves into the work. Like the young women forced into prostitution, the charcoal workers are not enslaved for life; in fact, their stay in the camps is usually shorter than the women's in the Thai brothels. The gatos and their bosses don't want to *own* these workers, just to squeeze as much work out of them as possible. The workers I spoke to had been held in debt bondage for anywhere from three months to two years, but rarely longer than that. There were several reasons for the brevity of their employment. A charcoal camp lasts only two or three years in any one location before the forest around it is exhausted, and workers are rarely moved from one camp to another. Also, the workers themselves become ill and exhausted after a few months' work in the ovens. Rather than keep on those who can no longer work at full strength, it is more cost-effective to discard them and recruit fresh workers to take their places. Since they are usually penniless when they are thrown out of the camps, many of the workers never make it back to their homes in Minas Gerais. More often than not they hang around in the towns of Mato Grosso, and many are ultimately drawn back to the charcoal-making camps (called *batterias*).

A charcoal-making camp is called a *batteria* because it has a battery of charcoal ovens (called *fornos*). The batteria may have from twenty to

over a hundred ovens, with between eight and forty workers. The heat, smoke, and desolation of the batteria makes it seem like a little bit of hell brought to the forest. The charcoal ovens are round brick-and-mud domes about seven feet high and ten feet wide. They are built in long straight lines, with twenty or thirty ovens standing about four feet apart. A little peaked opening in the oven about four feet high is the only way in. Through this door the workers pack the oven completely full of wood. The wood has to be stacked up from the floor to the rounded roof of the oven very carefully and very tightly so that it will burn down properly into charcoal. After the wood is loaded, the door is sealed up with bricks and mud and the fire is set. Charcoal is made by burning wood with a minimum of oxygen. If too much air gets into the oven, the wood is consumed by the fire and only ash is left. If there is not enough air reaching the oven, useless, half-charred chunks of wood are produced. To control the flow of air, small vent holes in the side of the oven are opened and closed by digging them out or sealing them off with mud. The burn lasts for about two days and the workers have to constantly monitor the oven, day and night, to make sure it is burning at the right temperature. When the burn is finished, the oven is left to cool; then the charcoal is taken out.

All around the camp for a mile or so the land has been stripped and gouged. The exposed earth is red and eroded. The tree stumps, the great patches of burned-over grass and wood, the trenches and holes, and the ever-present pall of smoke turn it into a battleground. The wreckage of the forest is everywhere. Covered with black soot and gray ash and shiny with sweat, the workers move like ghosts in and out of the smoke around the ovens. All the workers I saw were just muscle, bone, and scars; every bit of fat had been burned off by the heat and effort. The overpowering, choking smoke colors and flavors everything. The eucalyptus smoke, full of the sharp oils the tree makes, is acrid and burns the eyes, nose, and throat. All the charcoal workers cough constantly, hacking and spitting and trying to clear lungs that are always full of smoke, ash, heat, and charcoal dust. If they live long enough most will suffer from black lung disease.

Most of the ovens are oozing and belching smoke and the heat is tremendous. As soon as you enter the batteria the heat bears down. This part of Brazil is already hot and humid; take away any protection from the sun that the trees might offer and add the heat of thirty ovens, and the result is a baking inferno. For the workers who have to climb inside the still-burning ovens to empty charcoal the heat is unimaginable. When I got inside an oven with a man shoveling the charcoal, the pressure of the heat had my head swimming in minutes, sweat drenched my clothes, and the floor of hot coals burned my feet through my heavy boots. The pointed roof concentrated the heat and in a few moments I was addled, panicky, and limp. The workers hover on the edge of heatstroke and dehydration. Sometimes in their conversation they were confused as if their brains had been baked. The workers who empty the ovens stay almost naked, but this exposes their skin to burns. Sometimes standing on the piles of charcoal they will stumble or the charcoal will give way and they will fall into red-hot coals. All of the charcoal workers I met had hands, arms, and legs crisscrossed with ugly burn scars, some still swollen and festering.

In front of the ovens are great stacks of wood cut in four-foot lengths ready for loading. Behind the ovens are the piles of charcoal waiting to be shoveled into huge bags for transport to the smelters. The line of ovens is the last step in the destruction of the forests, which disappear in an ever-widening circle around the batteria. At the far edge of the ruined fields surrounding the ovens, workers are burning through the undergrowth and cutting down more trees, pushing the edge of the forest further and further back. Hauled up to the ovens on trailers pulled behind tractors, the cut wood will soon be turned into charcoal.

Two Hundred Years in Two Thousand Miles . . .

It was spring when I visited a number of batterias in one part of Mato Grosso do Sul. I was traveling with Luciano Padrão, a young Brazilian expert on poverty and employment from Rio de Janeiro. Our journey seemed to cross not only a large part of the country but also

from this century to the last. Brazil has one foot in the first world and another squarely in the third world. We began in Rio de Janeiro, a city that would be at home in the United States. With its McDonald's, subway system, strings of condos facing the beach, and drug gangs, it could be an upmarket city in Florida. Though, to be fair, Rio is more spectacular than any city in Florida: the lushly forested volcanic mountains that range through the city and drop to the ocean make a stunning backdrop. To reach the batterias we flew from Rio to the even larger city of São Paulo. Everything in Brazil is just so *big*, and flying over a city of 16 million people was a mind-boggling experience; the towering buildings stretched to the horizon. In São Paulo we changed planes and flew a thousand miles west to Campo Grande in Mato Grosso do Sul.

To go from São Paulo to Campo Grande was to make the first shift across time and culture. Campo Grande is a cow town full of stockyards, cowboy supply stores, battered farm trucks, and dusty, ragged streets where people seem to move at half speed. In the late afternoon the beer bars open, and young men in work clothes sit outdoors and drink and sweat. It was so much like a half-baked, half-broken-down county seat in Oklahoma, where I grew up, that I felt I had been there before.

The next morning we pulled out of Campo Grande in a four-wheel-drive pickup truck. The roads were paved and so straight that I couldn't understand why Luciano had insisted we needed both a heavy-duty truck and a driver. For a couple of hundred miles it was as if we were driving through east Texas. The land was broad and rolling. Clumps of trees broke up the vast pastures where cattle grazed, and everything was a deep green under puffy white clouds. Where it had been cut into, the soil was a harsh red and quick to erode. The watercourses spoke of heavy rains and flash floods. Miles and miles from anywhere we'd pass a man or sometimes a boy in ragged clothes walking along the highway, a bundle on his back. Occasionally a patch of *cerrado* would show what had been there before.

After a few hours we reached the town of Ribas do Rio Pardo and shifted cultural gears once more. Now we were in the recent past, in the slow molasses of a town that simply marked where a number of farms had coalesced. There were tractors and livestock in the street, and it was clear we were a long way from where world events or national politics mattered to anyone. A few miles out of town we turned onto a dirt track into the countryside. Now I understood why we needed the special truck and driver: we crawled through ravines and up and down washed-out streambeds, bottoming out in great ruts and bogging down in pits of sand. Here the open pastures became more and more patchy as we drove deeper and deeper into the *cerrado* forest. Even with the four-wheel drive it took us almost four hours to travel the fifty miles to the first batteria. During that time we passed only two other vehicles; one was a small old car driven by a man, probably a gato. The other was an equally old and ramshackle truck heaped high with bags of charcoal. It was inching its way along the track at a speed slower than a walk.

When I asked Augusto, our driver, what kind of animals lived in the *cerrado* before the clearances began, he said, "Nothing ever lived here." But as we drove deeper into the forest I saw amazing fauna, especially birds. In the golden afternoon light, we passed a small tree with dark green leaves that was full of bright green parrots. Regularly along the track were snakes—big snakes, sunning themselves in the dust. Once as we came up out of a streambed we startled a flock of about thirty birds from the track. This flock was like nothing I have ever seen: about a third were shiny jet black, another third were also black but with very bright yellow stripes on their wings and bodies. The rest, mixed among these, were a luminous light green with red flashes. At another turning we stirred up a great bird of prey with a wing span of five or six feet. And then, a mile or so down the road, with a double take I realized I was watching a five-foot tall emu watching me.

When we arrived at the batteria we had reached the back of beyond. The camp had been carved out of the dense and tangled forest next to

the track. Now I began to understand the control the gatos have over the workers. The batteria is completely isolated; the only link to the outside is the truck that carries away the charcoal and the car that brings the gato. Any worker who tries to leave faces a fifty-mile walk back to the nearest town. Since no police ever come out here, and the workers' families have no idea where they are, it is easy to see how a troublesome worker can just be killed and dumped in the forest. Remarkably, the very isolation that traps the workers opened up their lives for us. In batterias as remote as this one, the gato doesn't bother to stay around all the time. He knows that the workers can't escape and that they are dependent on him to bring food to the camp. Every two or three days, the gato brings supplies to the batteria and checks up on production. We came to this camp because we knew from contacts in Ribas do Rio Pardo that its gato was still in town.

"My Tail Was in His Trap . . ."

At the batteria the workers were surprised and wary when we arrived. Soon, however, Luciano, with years of experience working with poor and bonded laborers, overcame their suspicions and got them talking. As they showed us around the camp, we found it hard to imagine that this was a place where people lived. Poles and branches cut from the forest, but still with their bark, were tied or nailed together to make a crude frame. More scraps of wood were loosely fixed to the frame, making walls that you could see through in a hundred places; over the top was a sheet of black plastic. This was where the workers slept. It was so insubstantial that it couldn't even be called a shack. As shelter, it was markedly inferior to a tent. The floor was just the dirt, and chickens, dogs, and snakes came and went freely. Inside another rough frame of poles had been knocked together so that the men could sleep up off the ground. On this were the small bundles of clothes and a blanket or two that made up the men's possessions. There was only one woman

in the camp and no children; they had been driven off, as will be explained below.

Cooking was done over an open wood fire, and the toilet was the forest during the day or a bucket at night. The gato had left behind a tank of water and another tub collected any rainwater. It was a hungry, thirsty, and dirty place for the workers. Although they were working with sharp tools such as axes and with burning charcoal, there were no medical supplies. Several of the men were clearly suffering from infected burns and cuts; others looked weak and sick. I was told that many had internal parasites.

Speaking through Luciano I began to talk with the workers. At first I just asked one man a few questions about where he was from and if he had a family. He asked me why I had come to Brazil and what I thought about it. After a little while I asked him if he had heard about slavery:

Yes, I have, I know a lot about it.

How so, what is this slavery?

Slavery is what is happening right here to us. We're enslaved here, I understand that. Look, I cut the cerrado and haul it to the ovens for making into charcoal. I was told that I would be paid 2 reais [pronounced "re-eyes"; about \$2] per load. But I get nothing. According to the gato all the work I do just covers the cost of my food and my debt. He charges us much more than the real price for the food he brings out here. We have to pay for everything we get, but we receive nothing. Everything we do counts for pennies and everything we use or eat is very expensive.

You've been here three months; how much pay have you had in that time?

I haven't had anything, absolutely nothing. See, with this gato my debt is always running ahead of my earnings.

So, if you've been here three months and you've been paid nothing, why do you stay? Why don't you just leave?

I can't just run off and stop working. I have to talk to the gato and see how things are and see if I can get ahead of my debt. A man has to leave in the right way with his debts settled. It is necessary to have your debts paid off, so I have to keep working till then. If I didn't do that then tomorrow or later I would need a job and I would go to other places and the gato would send word: "This man worked for me and didn't settle his debt." Then I would never be able to get work. Today I can't leave, because of my debts; I just have to work hard. If every way I try I don't succeed, then I have to just talk to the gato face to face and say, "Look, what can I do; I've been working and working and still I owe you the same amount. What can we do to make this right?" Sometimes then the gato just says "forget it."

Another worker spoke up:

This kind of thing has already happened to me. At the last batteria where I worked I was a woodcutter. I had my own chain saw and I cut and hauled the wood. When we were going to settle up after three months working there, the gato turns to me and says, "You owe me almost 800 reais." Since I don't want to be in debt to anyone I had to leave my chain saw with him. My tail was in his trap; it was the only way to get free.

A third worker added:

I've been here two months, but I don't know if I'll get anything, we haven't settled up yet. No one says anything about money, the gato only wants to talk about work, about how we have to work harder and make more charcoal.

I asked him if he knew how much he should get when they did settle up.

No, I have no idea, I have no way of knowing this. We don't even know the name of this batteria or where we are. All I know is the name of the gato.

It seemed pretty obvious to us that the gato was tricking these men into working for nothing, and stealing their possessions as well. But these workers, isolated and illiterate, were too honest to perceive how they were being entrapped.

Dishonesty feeds on honesty. The very rules of trust and honesty that guide most of these poor Brazilians in their dealings with each other are key to how the gatos enslave them. All the workers I met had a very strong sense that debts *must* be repaid, that a person who did not pay his or her debts was the lowest of the low. The sly manipulation of this belief achieves the gatos' ends more effectively than violence: the drawbacks are fewer and the workers' productivity greater. Indeed, once a gato does resort to violence, the workers realize that they can never work their way out of debt and their sense of pride can no longer be used against them. For that reason the gato will keep appealing to their sense of "fair play" for as long as possible. They are trapped, believing that trust *might* pay off and knowing that running away is of no avail. A charcoal worker explained the situation to me:

The charcoal always goes to the smelter but the money never comes back. So we have to wait and see. Maybe we decide to wait for two more months. From time to time we ask the gato; he always says that he is not paying us because we all owe him so much money, but in fact no one owes him anything. Sometimes we have to borrow money from our friends and everyone is left like this. We are all in this situation and don't know what to do. Sometimes [I think] I'll run away without getting paid. Sometimes I stay because I think the gato will pay me. We never know what to do—go or stay, maybe we get something, maybe not.

In fact, the gatos will pay some of the workers some of the time. At a few of the batterias I visited the workers were being paid, though usually late, and below the agreed rate. The fact that they *might* get paid (or are paid even a little bit) keeps them working, especially since the alternative is no work, no money, and a walk home of a thousand miles. Alfeo Prandel is a priest who works with families in the charcoal camps.

He told me this story:

It is not always the case that there are people with guns holding workers in the camps. They use something that the poor Brazilian people have: the feeling that they must pay their debts. We had a case of one family that were told that they owed the gato 800 reais. They were able to hitchhike with one of the charcoal trucks back to Minas Gerais to go to a funeral. And then they came back! I asked them, "Why did you come back?" And they said, "Because we owe the gato 800 reais, we had to come back and try to pay him." So I told them, "You know you are being robbed of much more than 800 reais." But they just said, "A debt is a debt and we have to pay."

Of course, the gatos cannot always rely on the goodness and honesty of the workers. Eventually, it becomes obvious to them they are being cheated, and when that happens the gatos are ready to use violence. Many workers told us of being threatened or beaten and of knowing people who had disappeared. At another charcoal camp I met a man who had been a guard at a batteria, who recalled:

The very first job I had when I came here from Minas Gerais was as a guard. I thought I was going to be making charcoal, but the gato thought I looked tough or something. The gato gave me a gun. It was a huge batteria and my job was to stop any workers that tried to leave. I told him I had never had such a job and that I didn't want to be a guard, but he just said I would do it or I would suffer. I had to do it. It wasn't so hard to be guard so I did it for a while. After three months of working at the batteria I still hadn't been paid anything. I didn't like being a guard and pushing people around, so after these three months I told the gato I wanted to quit and to settle up. The gato got really mad and said, "You came here to work. I don't have to settle up with you." So I said, "All right, I'll keep working, but I don't want to be an armed guard, I don't like it." The gato said, "Right, I've got another job for you, get into the truck." Then the gato drove me seventy miles into the deep countryside, to this little shack

that was completely remote; when we got there he just said, "Get out and stay here," and then he drove off. So there I was, no food, no water, nothing, and seventy miles to the nearest town. But I decided that I just had to run away immediately, so I set off through the forest, not on the road in case I met the gato coming back. After two days I saw someone I knew from another charcoal camp. This person told me that the gatos were looking for me, that they said they were going to kill me when they found me. My gato had left me at the shack and had gone to get the other gatos to help him get rid of me—so it was lucky I ran off when I did. After a few more days I got up close to the road and watched for a car or truck that didn't belong to a gato. Finally I saw one that had a priest driving and I was able to hitchhike into the next town; that was my escape.

Though he had escaped, the man was penniless and more than a thousand miles from home. His only choice was to sign on with another gato and hope that this one would not enslave him.

At the same camp a worker told me this story while we sat with his co-workers:

Six months ago we were all working in this camp, but we had a different gato. This man was very bad. [The other men all murmured their agreement.] He has run away now with all the money. When we got here from Minas Gerais he taught us how to do the work by beating us. We were scared to say anything, as it was clear he would do anything he wanted to us. Very soon we realized that he wasn't going to pay us. When we asked for money he would beat us. Some of my friends from Bahia ran away, but the gato chased after them with dogs and caught them. He brought them back at gunpoint and beat them in front of us. He kept the dogs around us at night so that they would bark if anyone tried to leave. Finally my friends from Bahia managed to slip away at night and escape. Not long after that the gato disappeared, then in a few days the emprietero [the man who had subcontracted the charcoal making to the gato] came and it turned out that this gato had stolen his money as well.

"I Used to Be a Gato . . ."

So far it would seem that the villains of this piece are the gatos. They exploit whole families and children, entice and trick workers into slavery, abuse them, and sometimes kill them. There is no excusing their crimes. Nevertheless, not all gatos are slaveholders. Some pay their workers and treat them well. I would estimate that 10 to 15 percent of batterias are run relatively fairly. Unfortunately, these are not the gatos that last in the charcoal business, because gatos are just subcontractors answerable to the big companies that own the land and the timber. This is easier to understand if we take a quick look at the economics of charcoal.

We can understand how profits are made in charcoal if we look at one small batteria of twenty-five ovens with just four workers. In one month, a batteria this size can make ten truckloads of charcoal, which are sold to the smelter in Minas Gerais for 18,750 reais (around \$17,000). Take away the cost of trucking the charcoal to the smelter, and about 12,000 reais are left. If the workers *are* paid, instead of enslaved, it really doesn't eat into the profits. At most a charcoal worker makes between 200 and 300 reais per month. So the whole workforce costs 1,200 reais a month in wages, plus another 400–500 for food. Throw in some tools and fuel and extras, and the monthly profit is still 100 percent. Setting up the batteria in the first place is very cheap: it only costs about 100 reais to build a charcoal oven, and the workers' shacks are mostly made from free wood. About 3,000–4,000 reais gets the batteria into production, and those costs can be made back in the first month with some profit left over. So, this one little batteria can potentially net a profit of 100,000 reais (\$90,000) per year. True, a batteria can only produce for two or three years before all the nearby forest is cut down, but it is easy to move the charcoal camp when the time comes.

The very healthy economics of charcoal making raises an obvious question: if the labor costs are so low when compared to everything

else, why bother to enslave workers? A wage of 300 reais a month isn't very much, but there are plenty of Brazilians who are ready to work for that. Just as easily workers can be hired for 10 reais a day, or at piece rates of so much per cubic meter of charcoal, or by the number of ovens loaded or emptied. Paying the going rate for workers barely touches the bottom line at all, so why use slaves? The answer to this question has two parts. First, and more important, the people who actually run the batterias, the gatos, don't own them. The owners or their agents, the *empreiteiros*, have the whip hand and set the rules. Workers are cheap and easy to trick because there is high unemployment, and the same is true of gatos. The owners can squeeze the gatos hard, offering a small percentage of the total profit and setting minimum quotas for charcoal production. If the gato doesn't like it, there is always someone else ready to try running a batteria. The owners make the deals with the smelters, and payment for the charcoal goes directly to them. Some of the gatos I was able to speak to were on wages linked to production. At one small batteria the gato told me he was paid a salary of 420 reais as long as they produced 500 cubic meters of charcoal a month (this was confirmed by another source). If output dropped below that amount, he got 336 reais—approximately the same pay as any charcoal worker. One charcoal worker told me, "I used to be a gato, but I couldn't make the required quotas, so I lost my truck and chain saw and now I just work like everyone else."

The small shop that sells food at grossly inflated prices near some of the charcoal camps is owned by the *empreiteiro*; he supplies tools and fuel to the gato, also at a large profit. Often the gato is expected to invest in the batteria as well, or at least put up his truck or chain saw as collateral against the profits. The owners keep the gatos on the edge of going under, pulling every penny they can out of their operations. And why not? There will always be another gato willing to take a chance, willing to be a little more ruthless when it comes to their one source of potential profit: the workers. The only way gatos can win is to cut their labor cost to the bone. The gato is normally expected to pay the

workers out of his share of the profits, and while no one is going to give away gasoline or food (the other primary expenses), sometimes the workers can be tricked or forced into giving up their labor for free. To get ahead in the charcoal business, the gato must cheat or enslave workers.

The second reason that charcoal workers are enslaved is simply because they can be. For the gato there is virtually no downside to enslavement; unless he has moral scruples, slavery is a good business strategy and easily accomplished—we've already seen how trust can be abused and used to trick workers. The landowners certainly have no objections; slavery allows them to increase their income without risk. Government inspectors have no clout, and the police are not interested in enforcing the law. Their complete indifference to slavery clearly demonstrates who is paying the bills. Far from the batterias and the slaves, in the office buildings of the state capital, or even in Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo, the businessmen who own or lease the forests chalk up the po-lice as just one more overhead expense.

While a few of the gatos are actually small-time owner-operators of charcoal camps, most of the land is owned by big corporations. Sometimes the multinationals that originally bought into the government forest giveaway scheme still own the land; in other cases, they sold or traded it off after the tax rebates were used up. Other large Brazilian corporations concentrate in this sort of forest "management" and buy up or lease land from the multinational owners. These land and timber companies actually control most of the charcoal production. One medium-size company that I looked at closely in the town of Águas Clara owned a vast tract of forest. The land supported fifty batterias. In addition, the company owned the charcoal trucks, the timber trucks, all the tractors, a garage for repairs and fuel, and an office building for managing it all. The gatos that subcontract from this company are required to use company trucks, have them serviced and repaired at the company's garage, and buy all supplies from the company store (at company prices). The two men that own this company are rich and re-

spected members of the local community. Their hands are never dirty, because they are careful to distance themselves from the operation of the batterias.

Although they own the land and keep most of the profits from making charcoal, these companies insulate themselves from any charge of slavery by arranging the work in a series of subcontracts. The company, for example, subcontracts to a middleman (the *empreiteiro*) to clear a certain large acreage of forest, large enough to support perhaps twenty or thirty batterias, and to turn the wood into charcoal. The middleman gets a percentage of the income when the charcoal is sold to the smelters. In turn, the middleman will subcontract the running of the batterias to different gatos. The gatos will then be responsible for finding the workers and meeting the quotas for charcoal. Though perfectly aware of what is happening on their land, the owners are able to deny all knowledge of slavery or abuses. If central government inspectors or human rights activists find and publicize the use of slaves, the companies can express horror, dump (temporarily) the guilty gatos, tighten up security to prevent further inspections, and go on as before. Like the Japanese and Thai businessmen who invest in brothels that use slaves, these Brazilian businessmen can focus on their bottom line without ever having to know what really supports their excellent profit margin. It is a perfect example of the new slavery: faceless, temporary, highly profitable, legally concealed, and completely ruthless.

For the Americans to See . . .

The power of these companies and their links with government are clearly shown by events that dramatically altered the use of child labor in the charcoal camps in 1995–96.⁵ Beginning in the mid-1980s a number of researchers and human rights campaigners had exposed the horrific conditions and the use of slave labor in the charcoal camps of the Mato Grosso. At that time gatos were recruiting and enslaving

whole families, and children were commonly seen loading and unloading the ovens. A number of children died of burns and other accidents. By the end of the 1980s the main human rights organization in Brazil, the Pastoral Land Commission (or CPT), had published a number of reports, picked up by the national press and television, that denounced the situation in the batterias. In spite of this publicity no government action was taken. In 1991 further pressure from human rights lawyers and the churches impelled the government to set up a commission of inquiry. Again, time passed and nothing changed; the government commission never reported. Trying to keep up the pressure, the CPT joined with other nongovernmental organizations and set up an independent commission in 1993 that fed a stream of reports and documentation to the media. Yet two more years passed before any action was taken. By now a decade had passed since unmistakable and ongoing violations of the Brazilian law against slavery had been clearly documented, but national, state, and local governments remained paralyzed.

Suddenly, in August 1995, several things happened at once. First, the governor of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul went to New York to drum up investment. While he was there the BBC showed a film about charcoal making in his state, and the *New York Times* ran a front-page story on the use of slave labor in Mato Grosso.⁶ The American investors balked at such clear evidence of slave labor, and the governor was told there would be no investment until the problem was resolved.

Back in Brazil the governor blasted the CPT and the activists for bringing shame on the state, threatening them with investigations and injunctions. But at the same time, and undoubtedly as the result of another series of unpublicized meetings among the governor, landowners, and businessmen, all the gatos in Mato Grosso do Sul abruptly came out against child labor. This universal change of heart surely came at the orders of the *empreiteiros* and owners, but however it occurred the results were dramatic. Women and children were expelled from over 200 batterias, and hastily printed signs were nailed to trees at the entrances to charcoal camps: "No women or children are allowed to work

here." As the threat to foreign investment percolated up to the large corporations, the federal government—with admirable coordination with the *empreiteiros* of Mato Grosso—introduced a system of education grants that paid 50 reais a month to every child of a charcoal laborer not working in the batterias.

For the families the outcome was both good and bad. On one hand, some families were able to flee enslavement in the batterias altogether and return to Minas Gerais. On the other hand, about 3,000 women and children were trucked into the town of Ribas do Rio Pardo and dumped there. Destitute and with nowhere to go, they now live in a shantytown built on wasteland at the edge of Ribas. Without help from the church and the "education grants," they would starve. Nevertheless, about 1,000 children are attending school for the first time. I found children still living at several of the batterias I visited (and so not attending school), but there was no evidence at all that any of these children were working. One CPT worker told me that child labor can now be found at only the most remote of batterias.

Nor did the Brazilian government's public relations campaign end with the education grants. There had always been some government workers who had agitated for reform and now a small group of these were given a special assignment: to set up a special demonstration camp for charcoal workers (and foreign investors). I visited this project, and it is very impressive. Located between *cerrado* and eucalyptus forests, it has the largest batteria I saw, with over 400 ovens. Near the ovens is a mill that extracts the oil from the leaves stripped from the eucalyptus trees. For the workers it is close to a paradise: electricity, plumbing, flush toilets, a school with teachers, vegetable gardens, large communal kitchen and dining hall for the workers, and playing fields and toys for the children. Here the families live in neat brick-and-stucco houses with tight tile roofs. It is the only place in all the charcoal camps I visited where the workers were animated and told jokes, the only place I heard anyone singing, the only place where everyone had shoes. The families who lived there couldn't believe their luck—and they were

indeed very lucky, for they were the only families, out of thousands in the state, to live like this.

The demonstration project is window dressing. Using money from foreign charities, the government has set up an island of good treatment in an ocean of exploitation. It wasn't easy to separate the charcoal workers from the ever-watchful government officials, but when we did we learned a great deal. Though they were extremely happy with their living conditions, the workers explained that their relations with the landowner and *empreiteiro* were unchanged. While not enslaved, they continue to work for a pittance, in the same dangerous conditions, and without any say in the work they do. From what they understood, the landowner was laughing all the way to the bank: he had his workers making charcoal at the usual high profit; the government was paying him rent and building roads, houses, and barns on his land; and the foreign charities were providing food and medical care for his workers. All he had to do was meet with groups of foreign visitors occasionally and talk about how this new system was *so* much better. There are no plans to extend this demonstration project to other batterias; it is just another case of *para Ingles ver*, this time aimed primarily at American investors. All it really demonstrates is that a government subsidy to a token group of workers can significantly protect the profits of the landowners and large corporations.

On the subject of the economic development of this rural state, the last word has to go to the state secretary of agriculture. When asked about job creation in the region, he replied with stark honesty: "There's nothing left there, just the charcoal and the slaves."⁷

A New Antislavery Movement?

For all the hypocrisy evident in the swift end to child labor in the charcoal camps and the setting up of the demonstration project, there are important lessons to be noted in what happened. The sudden reversals and changes in government policy after years of inaction suggest tac-

tics and strategies that can be brought to bear on slavery. The first key point is the very real power of the media. The combination of a BBC documentary and a *New York Times* front-page article alerted those who had the power to influence Brazilian officials. The second key point is more important: it was *economic* pressure that brought about the rapid and demonstrable improvements in the charcoal camps. If we are looking for ways to bring people out of bondage, we have to recognize that money shouts where pleas for human rights go unheard.

But the connection between media exposure and economic pressure is by no means firm. The outrage generated by today's big story fades quickly as tomorrow's takes its place. The discovery of slavery and abuse is sensational; the deep analysis of the long-term social and economic development needed to end slavery is a yawn. The media, especially the Western media, are enormously powerful in confronting slavery, but their impact tends to be short-lived. In much the same way, business interests can have profound effects on the practice of slavery but rarely sustain them for long—and we should not fault them for that. The development companies that refused to invest in Mato Grosso until the labor situation improved acted admirably, but long-term human rights monitoring is not their job. They want to see the improvements that make business possible and then get back to work. The link that must be forged is between government and business. Purely political or economic attempts to end slavery in the developing world rarely work. When human rights compete with profit, profit wins. If North American and European governments are going to make a dent in slavery, they must work through tight controls on the businesses that are involved, even indirectly, in the use of slave labor.

In Brazil these questions of economics and government action are extremely complex. The slavery in the charcoal camps of Mato Grosso do Sul is just one example of many, many kinds of bondage in the country. Slaves cut down the Amazon rain forests and harvest the sugarcane. They mine gold and precious stones or work as prostitutes. The rubber industry relies on slavery, as does cattle and timber. Indians are

especially likely to be enslaved, but all poor Brazilians run the risk of bondage. Yet unlike Thailand or Mauritania, Brazil is a reasonably modern and democratic country. There is a large and educated middle class, the press is free and vociferous, and there are well-organized action groups such as the CPT freely lobbying and working against slavery. Admittedly, these activists run risks. Human rights workers, trade union leaders, lawyers, priests, and nuns have all been murdered while working against slavery and abuses. Eight antislavery campaigners in the small town of Rio Maria in the state of Para had their names circulated on a "death list," and six are now dead. Rio Maria is now known as "the town of death foretold."⁸ This is ominous but it doesn't stop the reformers; all of the activists I met in Mato Grosso faced these dangers with a calm resolution.

The activists, however, can only react to the problems they confront. Proactive enforcement of human rights law and economic controls must come from the government. Now that democracy is reestablished in Brazil, the citizens have to ask themselves how long they will tolerate slavery in their country. Foreign newspapers and investment banks can have an influence, just as British policies did in the nineteenth century, but putting a real end to slavery—now, as in 1888—is a job that only the Brazilians can do.

5

PAKISTAN**When Is a Slave Not a Slave?**

IN THE SOFT MORNING LIGHT, IN AN AIR still thick with the night's dew, children are mixing water and soil and kneading it into lumps that look like loaves of bread. They chat and laugh as they work. For the moment the work is easy; the sun is low and the day is still cool. It's just after six in the morning and the Masih family has been at work for almost two hours making bricks. The work of the children—two boys, age eleven and nine, and a girl, age six—is crucial to their family's survival. They mix and prepare the mud that will be shaped into bricks by their parents. Using a hoe to hack at an earth bank in the pit where they work, the children then break up the soil by hand. Fortunately this Punjabi soil is not too rocky or hard. The little girl has hauled a two-gallon water can from the well, and the children work the water into the dirt, making the smooth mud needed for bricks. When the mud is mixed they toss a loaf-sized lump across to their mother. She is squatting next to a long line of bricks formed by her husband. She kneads the lump again and dusts it with dry earth. Now it is ready for the mold and she pushes it over to her husband, who picks it up and slams it down into a wooden frame. Beaten into the frame the lump makes a solid block of clay; the excess is trimmed off, and a new raw brick is flipped out onto the ground to dry.