

Silva, Flávio Marcus da.

Subsistência e poder: a política do abastecimento alimentar nas Minas setecentistas

Rafaella Basso*

Belo Horizonte: Ed. UFMG, 2008. 293p.

Subsistência e poder: a política do abastecimento alimentar nas Minas setecentistas, written by Flávio Marcus da Silva, makes a significant contribution to the field of historiography related to colonial Minas Gerais, to the extent that it analyzes the dynamics of food supply in the region in the eighteenth century from a political perspective. His proposal is to pay attention to the different strategies used by the Portuguese Crown to guarantee the population access to essential foodstuffs and prevent public disorder. However, we believe that this is not the only importance of his work, since the study deals with various aspects of Minas society, seeking to decipher it and to rethink it not only under the general auspices of politics and the economy, but also in relation to daily life, through the study of eating. Let us see why.

The problem of the instability of the food market, in relation to the regular supply of the population, was frequent in various regions in Portuguese America. Even more so in Minas, where at this time society was primordial and lacking the structure to receive the amount of people migrating there, coming from various other parts, including the metropole, in search of gold and precious stones. Problems referring to scarcity, bad quality, and the absence of foodstuffs were not rare; all of which afflicted the population of this region during the first half of the eighteenth century and caused conflicts with local authorities. These conflicts created an environment propitious to rebellion, actually verified a number of times during the period. The book, therefore, analyzes the question of food supply, whose role was fundamental to guarantee the success of the administration of the region and also to calm the population.

To enter into the depths of metropolitan political culture, the historian revisits works by authors such as Adam Smith, E. P. Thompson, John Bohstedt,

* Master's Student, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp). Departamento de História. Rua Cora Coralina, s/n. 13083-896 Campinas – SP – Brasil. rafaellabasso28@gmail.com

Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth, who also dedicated themselves to studying interventionist policies under the auspices of food supply. This debate provided the author with access to explanatory concepts, such as the *moral economy* taken from E. P. Thompson's work *The Moral economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*. In this work the English historian demonstrates that the interventions of public power in the sale of basic foodstuffs in modern England were the result of a series of rebellions by the population against the generalized famine of the period. According to Thompson, the revolts were caused by a traditional vision "consistent with the social norms and obligations, economic functions particular to various groups in the community, which, when taken together, we can say that they constituted the moral economy of the poor." This posture was related to notions that the community had about rights and the duties of the state, which were legitimated by old traditions.

It should be noted that this analytical category will be re-evaluated by Flávio Marcus da Silva in order to take into account the specificity of the colonial reality of Minas. For him, the concept should be more encompassing in order to examine the balance of forces established between rulers and popular classes, through an implicit agreement to guarantee compliance with social obligations. At this point the corporate theory of the state of António Manuel Hespanha comes into play. According to this theory, Portuguese society – also including its colonial possessions – needs to be understood as an organism where each individual has a function for the proper functioning of the social and political body. Thus, the sovereign occupies the position of the head of the 'body', whose function is to guarantee the compliance of justice maintaining order and harmony within its dominions.

The use of these concepts in his theoretical sketch, allows Flávio Marcus da Silva to analyze the following strategies used by the Crown to resolve problems caused by the subsistence crisis: the granting of land for agriculture, the taxing of basic foodstuffs, the inspection of weights and measures, as well as concern with the maintenance of roads. To develop this analysis, we believe that the author proposes to break with interpretations which, through a political perspective, work with the dichotomy between colonizers and the colonized, as if there were not common interests between both parties. These interpretations came from a vision that see Portuguese colonization only as a vast predatory enterprise, aimed at exploiting the colony to meet the interests of the Crown, whether they are economic, political, or religious amongst others. In turn the historian wants to work in a new manner with the

relationship between colony and metropole, since the research he developed led to the thesis that one of the central concerns of the administration in Minas was to guarantee the subsistence of the people living there.

In this context we cannot leave unmentioned that Flávio Marcus da Silva does not focus only on the actions of authorities, since he allows us visualize the actions of the various historic agents involves, from production and circulation to the consumption of food. What calls our attention is the negotiation of these subjects with the authorities and the social relations between the parties. According to the author, the inhabitants of Minas believed that because the state had been established there, it was obliged to guarantee the subsistence of the population. Furthermore, there was the notion of the vulnerability of the metropolitan administrative apparatus and the fear that the population would rebel because of the lack of food. As a result the authorities spared no efforts to avoid conflicts, since they feared that these would be long lasting, to the point of threatening the stability of control over the area.

What it is intended to show is the actions of various individuals pressurizing authorities through threats, protests and small rebellions, so that attitudes would be taken in relation to the problem of food supply. Even though the majority of cases of actions of residents were not aimed at undermining Portuguese rule in the region, but rather to strengthen the legitimate basis of this dominion, their political posture could not be ignored, since it demonstrated the capacity of the people to organize themselves and to defend their interests. In relation to this, Flávio Marcus da Silva also analyzes the role of individuals who, to a certain extent, represented a hindrance to the efficient establishment of control policies over the dynamics of the food market, such as landowners, *quilombolas*, markets, *negras de tabuleiro* (black women who sold food on the street) and middlemen.

We believe that the book, in addition to providing an innovative look at the colonial policy used in Minas, also make contributions in relation to how it deals with the local economy. The author, influenced by works which seek to rethink the role of the internal economy within colonial society,¹ has relativized some consecrated ideas about the poverty of the Captaincy, which was linked to the exclusivity of mineral extraction and external logic of this economic sector. He, thus, opposes the interpretation that relegates to a secondary role the internal productive structure and the sale of food in the region, concerning himself with accompanying the dynamism of production and internal commerce. For this the dialogue with more recent works on the historiography of Minas Gerais² is also fundamental, since they point to a

diversification of these sectors, through a supply network which sought to meet the growing demand of residents in the gold region. This context had existed since the beginning of the eighteenth century, contradicting the image constructed in other studies, according to which food production would only gain space with the mining crisis at the end of the eighteenth century.

Furthermore, we believe that the importance of *Subsistência e poder* lies in the fact that in it food is used as the key to understand the relations established between the colony and the metropole. The interest of historians for food is not something new. This interest has been developing since the beginning of the last century, though this field is still very recent and little explored by Brazilian historians. We believe that by using the History of Food perspective, Flávio Marcus da Silva's work is one of the contributions that have emerged in recent years to fill this gap.

Drawing on this perspective, the author makes use of various foci to enter into his object of study, such as economic, social and cultural. The presence of the former is manifested to the extent that Flávio Marcus da Silva is concerned with problems referring to the subsistence economy and its internal dynamics, ranging from the production to the consumption of food and its sale to other areas. The social focus is present, since hunger and social disorder are covered in the book, as they arise from supply problems, as is the question of 'state' action, whose objective was to resolve the problem through public policies. In relation to the cultural focus, although it is not a concern of the author, and unfortunately is one of the least explored themes in the area of the History of Food, its, albeit timid, presence can be visualized, since there is some evidence of daily life related to eating. The author supplies us with a panorama of eating habits of that region, showing us the food consumed, as well as some of its uses.

Flávio Marcus da Silva's book *Subsistência e poder* makes various contributions to historical studies of Minas Colonial, to the extent that it reflects on aspects of Portuguese colonization undertaken in those lands. Among these is opposition to the idea of generalized poverty, resulting from the exclusivity of the mining industry. This exclusivity is usually believed to have consumed all the efforts of the colonists and relegated the production of subsistence items to a secondary level. Despite highlighting the importance of this type of production for the internal market, the author presents another face of colonization, different from the intransigent one immune to the problems that affected the population. By seeking to penetrate Minas society by starting with the tensions that constituted it, he constantly moves across the

frontiers of the economic, the political and social, presenting a study that reveals a complex network of relations that permeated this society.

NOTES

¹ Among these works, we can mention the pioneering works of LINHARES, Marie Yeda. *História da agricultura brasileira, combates e controvérsias*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1982; and de LAPA, José Roberto do Amaral. *Economia colonial*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1973, as well as others which came after them, such as FRAGOSO, João. *Homens de grossa ventura: acumulação e hierarquia na praça do Rio de Janeiro 1790-1830*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1998.

² GUIMARÃES Carlos Magno. *Uma negação da ordem escravista: quilombos em Minas Gerais no século XVIII*. São Paulo: Ícone, 1988; FURTADO, Júnia. *Homens de negócio: a interiorização da metrópole e do comércio nas Minas setecentistas*. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1999; and MENESES, José Newton Coelho de. *O Continente rústico: abastecimento alimentar nas Minas Gerais setecentistas*. Diamantina (MG): Maria Fumaça, 2000.

Review received in October 2009. Approved in October 2010.