

A feather-shaped gold pen for the Abolition: the May 13th Law and the popular participation

Uma pena de ouro para a Abolição: a lei do 13 de Maio e a participação popular

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RESUMO

A abolição da escravidão no Brasil, em maio de 1888, não envolveu apenas literatos, políticos, jornalistas e a família imperial, mas também, trabalhadores, abolicionistas e moradores dos subúrbios da província do Rio de Janeiro e de locais mais afastados. A participação desses foi marcada, por exemplo, pela subscrição popular realizada nas vésperas da Abolição e apoiada por um jornal, *O Paiz*, no intuito de comprar a pena de ouro a ser utilizada pela princesa regente no momento da assinatura da lei. A oferta do dinheiro foi feita por meio de doações individuais ou coletivas em que se depositaram também as expectativas em torno do fim da escravidão e os sentidos de liberdade mais amplos associados à Abolição. Os outros festejos promovidos pela imprensa são fundamentais para entendermos a mediação desses sentidos feita por ela. Palavras-chave: Abolição; imprensa; festa.

ABSTRACT

The abolition of slavery in Brazil on May 1888 not only involved writers, politicians, journalists, and the imperial family, but also workers, abolitionists, and people from peripheral neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, and even other more distant places. The participation of these people was highlighted by the popular subscription supported by *O Paiz* newspaper just before Abolition. The purpose of this was to purchase a gold pen to be used by the Princess Regent to sign the law. Individuals and groups donated the money. These donations also involved expectations about the end of slavery and deeper senses of freedom associated with Abolition. The other celebrations promoted by the press are essential to understand the explanations it offered about those meanings.

Keywords: abolition of slavery; press; festivities.

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Sunday 13 May 1888 began with an important commitment for residents of Rio de Janeiro. They had been summoned by the mainstream newspapers to gather in front the Senate for the final debate on the bill to end slavery, saluting the senators from there. The call was answered and the nearby streets were occupied by a crowd who heard first hand that the bill had been passed. Enthusiastically, the multitude gathered around Largo do Paço to wait for Princess Isabel to sign the bill into law. She arrived there around 3 pm.

Within the *Paço* the princess listened to a speech by Senator Dantas and afterwards spoke, lamenting her father's ill-health which had prevented him from taking part in that act. Afterwards she signed the law, using for this a feather-shaped gold pen offered to her by Luiz Drago, who also spoke after she had signed. After this the princess went to the window to see the entire Largo do Paço filled by a crowd who called her name and cheered her lots of times. Following this and some speeches made by Joaquim Nabuco, João Clapp, José do Patrocínio and Senator Dantas, the crowd followed the procession of the Abolitionist Confederation which marched to Rua do Ouvidor.

This was just a rapid description of the ritual which marked the final moments of slavery in Brazil and the beginning of liberty. In these two paragraphs it is not possible to understand if there was popular participation in this ritual. It seems as if the people participated only in the festivities, and even then were directed by the abolitionists. However, looking closely at the Abolition festivities and its antecedents, the participation of a much greater number of people in the entire ritual can be perceived.

The study of the festivities and the commemorations of a historic date or mark, as is the case of Abolition, is a path to analyze the strategies for the establishment and settling of a past in a collective memory and for future generations (Almeida, 2006). In May 1888 this occurred through the endeavors of the Rio de Janeiro press in the description of the rituals involved in Abolition and in the convocation of the city's residents to participate in a specific manner in the principal ritual, the signing. In both these aspects the press was involved. In the former a newspaper, *O Paiz*, was committed to the ritual of signing. Its editors involved themselves with the popular subscription for the purchase of the feather shaped gold-pen which would be used to sign the law. This happened shortly after the presentation of the bill to the Chamber of Deputies and the perception that the end of slavery was near. The second aspect referred to the press of the capital which, organized in a commission, only decided on the eve of the final vote in the Senate to organize the commemorations of Abolition, practically decreed at that moment. The ritual of the signing and

the commemorative moment were ideal situations for the mediation of the meaning of the end of slavery for those who accompanied the voting, contributed money to buy the gold pen, and afterwards took to the street to commemorate. What is interesting is to perceive how this ritual and this festive life perpetuated values through the intermediation of the press and created ties of identity between those who contributed in a material manner to the end of slavery (Davis, 1990, p.87).

The movement to purchase the gold pen has still not been studied in the historiography of the Abolition period. A hypothesis for this gap is the privilege given by historians to questions involving the participation of government parliamentarians and abolitionists, and among the latter only those who played a significant role in the development of the movement, such as José do Patrocínio, André Rebouças and Joaquim Nabuco. However, the Abolitionist movement involved people from different social sectors who had thought about Abolition and its outcome and wanted to participate in it. Men and women, educated and illiterate, rich and poor, around three thousand people in total contributed some sum of money to buy the gold pen and did not want to be mere spectators in the signing ritual. The subscription to raise funds for the purchase of the pen showed how much Abolition was plural and diverse and involved aspirations and dreams which went far beyond the simple freeing of slave. Before their liberation, the principal point and which occurred immediately after the bill was signed, there was an expectation that the freedom arising out of the law would be a victory for all Brazilians. Abolition was for everyone, and they all wanted to participate in the ritual. For this reason the study of the signing ritual, taking this to be a civic moment as it involves the presence of state representatives and the entire population of the capital, is an opportunity to perceive the formation of collective identities at the same time that it reveals what different social subjects thought of that moment (Kraay, 2007, p.9-36) in letters and notes sent to *O Paiz*. At the same time other newspapers in the city mediated the interpretation of that ritual for their reading publics and also indicated forms of commemoration.

THE BILL IN THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES BILL AND THE PUBLIC SUBSCRIPTION

On 8 May 1888 the Abolition bill was presented to the Chamber of Deputies by the deputy and minister Rodrigo Silva. In the *Diário de Notícias*

of the same day, those living in the capital were called on to appear in front of the Chamber to greet the deputies and members of the ministry. The following day *O Paiz* received a request for support for the subscription started by Luiz Pedro Drago, professor of mathematics in the Imperial College Pedro II, to purchase a gold feather-shaped pen which would be offered to the princess to sign the Abolition Law. This initiative, fed by the expectation that the end of slavery was near, arose out of how the bill was presented to the Chamber, in a short and simple manner, and also because of the government's intention to resolve the problem through the parliament, according to speech given by the Princess Regent at the beginning of the parliamentary session in May 1888.¹

On the same day that the bill was presented, the leader of the Chamber of Deputies, Joaquim Nabuco, created a commission to discuss it. It was rapidly approved without any alterations being proposed. A small change would be made the following day, 9 May, date of the second reading of the bill. Deputy Araújo Góes Júnior inserted "the date of this law" after the phrase "is declared extinct." This alteration was accepted by everyone and the bill was approved after the second reading. In addition, this inclusion further highlighted the urgency of the implementation of the law to prevent any prolonging of slavery.

The two days spent debating the bill and the expectation of its rapid approval was reflected in the adhesion to the proposal to purchase the golden pen. On 10 May, *Cidade do Rio* announced its adhesion to the initiative and published some of the names of those who had signed a list drafted within the newspaper. Amongst the signatures were those of the following abolitionists: José do Patrocínio, Ernesto Senna, Coelho Neto, Osório Duque-Estrada, Brício Filho and one anonymous person, just to cite some of them. The anonymity of donations was not exclusive to this first list of *Cidade do Rio*. Although there was much euphoria related to Abolition, many preferred not to make their opinion known publically, despite having contributed financially to purchase the pen.

However, even before the pen, there another was another symbolic object of the beginning of the work of Abolition. On 10 May, *O Paiz* announced that the pen Rodrigo Silva had used to sign the bill he had presented would be exhibited. This was the first attempt by the newspaper to gather the 'material monuments,' as they were called by the editor, of this period of history of the Brazilian nation. The other monument, the pen with which the law was signed had received 105\$500 réis of donations by that day. As well as the names of some of the donors, this figure was published by the newspaper.

The final day of debate in the Chamber, 10 of May, was one of debates and commemoration. At the same time while the Chamber was full of deputies and spectators, with the latter being anxious to witness a further stage in the abolition process, there were also those who were against the end of slavery as proposed by the government. *Revista Ilustrada*, in the detailed description it gave of the parliamentary proceedings, cited the speech against the bill given by a deputy of Rio de Janeiro which was applauded by another seven deputies. Andrade Figueira was the deputy who wanted to discuss the bill on the final day of its presence in the Chamber. For him, the opinion of the country could not be measured by the press, nor by those who occupied the Chamber, who were mostly supporters of Abolition. In relation to the public present in the session, they were classified as people foreign to the Chamber, who ended up creating a “merry-go-round” in the place (Mendonça, 2001, p.20, 21). In addition to Andrade Figueira, another deputy, Pedro Luiz, insisted on declaring his vote against Abolition in the final session in the Chamber. Among his arguments he highlighted the disorganization of agricultural labor and criticized the bill, which did not involve any modernization for slave owners, giving them no *prazosinho* (short deadline) to collect the harvest of that year. The speech of these deputies and the support received within the parliament demonstrated that it was not easy and simple to approve the bill. Although admitting that the majority were favorable to the bill, they wanted to leave their dissatisfaction with Abolition marked in the records of the Chamber. This is an example of how the end of slavery was subjected to harsh debates and with arguments which were shared by a sphere of imperial society. Despite this, the newspapers, all favorable to Abolition at that moment, called on the public every day to appear in the Chamber and around it every day so that they could witness the parliamentary debates. In the Chamber the presence of the public on the final discussion was facilitated by its president, Appeal Court Judge Lucena. The presence and the testimony of the population of the capital was perhaps a form of pressurizing those responsible for passing the bill at this parliamentary stage and to avoid a repetition of prolonged discussions previous laws had faced.

The newspapers on 11 May enthusiastically described the presence of the public on the previous day and the festivities held outside the Chamber and on Rua do Ouvidor in order to commemorate the passing of the bill. The end of slavery was near, and in an attempt to anticipate the fact, Deputy Afonso Celso Júnior proposed that this day be considered a day of national commemoration. This was accepted by the Chamber. One stage had already been

completed. Now all that was left was for the people to commemorate and wait for the actions of the Senate.

Before this, let us return to the gold pen. Since the end was near, funds had to be raised to purchase the pen which would soon be used. The increase in the crowd which occupied the streets to commemorate was similar to the increase in funds raised to purchase the pen. Although many lists and notes sent to *O Paiz* were undated, it can be stated that the Chamber's passing of the law resulted in a significant increase in the funds raised. The following day, 11 May, *Cidade do Rio* reported more than 407 donation of 500 réis each and published the names of all the donors.

Part of the donations were paid using a type of standard form, with a header stating the theme of the subscription and a space shortly below for signatures. Other lists were formed with various headers. It is in this diversity that we can perceive the details of those who contributed to Abolition with this small sum.² On 10 May a list had arrived from Juiz de Fora with 96 signatures and the money for the pen to be used to sign the 'Abolition' decree. The authors of this list did not mention any more details of their expectations for their law. The abolitionists of Porto do Cunha, who sent their donations the next day, did the opposite. It is worth reproducing the note they sent in its entirety:

To the Editor of *O Paiz*

Porto Novo do Cunha, 11 May 1888

In this place where it is almost a crime to be an abolitionist, where the police chief, forgetting his origin, intends to *throw in jail all those who demonstrate strongly in favor of the ending of the captivity of the dark race*, [original emphasis] we are obliged to guard the unknown, with the greatest caution, in order not to give the man-machine [sic] the pleasure of falling on us with all the weight of his authority...

We also give you our offering for the pen for the new era that it will indicate in the joy of the history of our patria ...

We are Mr. Editor, your constant readers.

Three abolitionists.³

The note exemplified the tension existing in the region on the eve of the signing of the law. It witnessed the importance attributed to the act and its celebration by those who still knew the hard way that slavery was far from being a simple spectrum of the past, as the ideologues of the press believed on

the eve of Abolition. A sign of this was the clear denunciation that being an abolitionist was a crime and the way that local authorities were engaged in their punishment. Despite the movement and the debate in the capital, on 11 May it was still not safe to declare oneself to be openly in favor of Abolition in the proximities of the plantations which were dependent on slave labor. Slavery, far from parliament, still seemed strong and defensible – which explained the reasons why these men did not sign the letter, preferring to contribute anonymously to the end of slavery through the money sent to purchase the pen.

Nor was the anonymity of these abolitionists from the interior of the province rare in the list of donors of money for the pen. Despite their anonymity, and explaining their political positions, many of the donors insisted on identifying themselves only as ‘a republican,’ ‘a freedman,’ ‘a liberator from Ceará,’ ‘an abolitionist from all times’ or ‘an abolitionist not from the last minute.’ While donations were a form of joining with the general joy for Abolition, the lists showed that they were part of a form of affirming the specificity of each subject or group which took part in it. At the same time, individual donations, marked by a note, was another form of making oneself present at the celebration of Abolition. Participating in the signing ritual was also an object of desire of those who saw only its individual value and did not intend to share this with other groups, signing other lists. This was possibly the case of Simplício Luiz da Cunha de Sant’Ana from Pirapetinga, in the Province of Minas Gerais, who sent the editor of the newspaper only his offering of money. The origin of the note also highlighted the reach of this newspaper, which almost exclusively publicized the reports about the gold pen.⁴ Another example of the recognition and respect for the newspaper can be seen in this note sent the same day:

To the distinguished editor of *O Paiz*

I have the honor of sending to you a small list and 35\$000 offered by the residents of this place to be given to the Subscription to offer a gold pen to Her Highness the Imperial Princess for signing the Abolition law.

Patrício and *Constant Reader* [emphasis added]

Moisés Augusto do Valle.

Estação do Macuco, 11/5/88

The two transcribed notes show how the newspaper *O Paiz* had an impact beyond the limits of the readers of the capital and how it was representative of a responsibility for the promotion of an important ritual. Those wanting to

participate in the ritual addressed themselves to it. Nevertheless, this determinant function of the newspaper in relation to these abolitionists most removed from Court perhaps was due to the critical position assumed in relation to the government which had supported slavery and now wanted to abolish it. Although it did not assume a republican tendency, it seems to have been very influenced by its editor, Quintino Bocaiúva.⁵ However, the possible abolitionist view of the newspaper only appeared on the eve. Until then the newspaper also followed, like the majority, the line of denouncing the excesses of slavery, despite the request for prudence by everyone, in order to avoid attitudes which could be considered 'barbarous' (Machado, 1991, p.164-165). In other words, the abolitionist intellectuality which militated in the press at the same time that it demanded that order be maintained, despite the constant and increasingly threatening conflicts between abolitionists and slavocrats, presented contradictions around something greater, Abolition. On the eve of its approval and during the daily debates and votes, *O Paiz* and other Court newspapers were becoming increasingly abolitionist.

THE SENATE – THE LAST STEP TO FREEDOM

While the newspapers on 11 May were still talking about the festivities and spontaneous commemorations occurring in the city due to the passing of the law by the Chamber of Deputies, another battle was announced: the debate in the Senate. This day was a mixture of euphoria, due to the news of the previous day, and expectations about the expected attitude of the upper house with its lifelong senators in judging the urgency of the bill.

The Senate was presided by Cruz Machado, Viscount Serro Frio. As had occurred in the Chamber, the bill in the Senate went to a commission set up to discuss it. However, in just a few minutes, Senator Dantas gave a favorable opinion and asked that the bill be debated the following day, 12 May, a Saturday, "a dead day for the houses of parliament," according to the editor of *Revista Ilustrada*.⁶

Despite being a Saturday, on 12 May the streets around the Senate were filled by those who had answered the summons made by the newspaper the previous day. As had been done during the debate in the lower chamber, the press of the capital asked that the Senate debates be witnessed by everyone. The second debate on the bill was not as quick and tranquil as the first. Baron Cotegipe asked to speak against the bill. Nor was he the only person to vote against it. According to the note published in *Revista Ilustrada*, another five

voted with the baron. Despite this the bill was passed on its second reading. The end would be the following morning, 13 May.

During the two days of debate and voting on the bill, there was mobilization both around the Senate itself and also to guarantee an important element for the celebration of Abolition. Donations for the gold pen did not stop. The newspaper *O Paiz* sought to continue publishing the names of donors, despite the increase in the flow of donations as the bill was being passed. However, the approaching end of slavery and the will to contribute resulted in a problem for those raising the money: what to do with those who were too late to buy the pen? This note contained 131 signatures and was dated 12 May, in other words the eve of the signature:

To the Editor of *O Paiz*

Adhering to the patriotic idea of Mr. Luiz Pedro Drago, of acquiring with popular donation and offering to Her Highness the Princess Regent... the subscription below, which produced 65\$500, which we are sending to you.

We would ask you in the event that the subscription is closed, if you could with great gallantry and kindness, if you deem to open this in your newsroom, in support of the idea of Dr. Drago, *to invest the sum we are sending for some humanitarian purpose.* [emphasis added]

We would like to take the chance to congratulate you on the noble and selfless attitude you have taken for the redemption of captives, making this idea the principal weapon which has been used since the foundation of this worthy *paper.* [emphasis added]

With all due respect and consideration.

The possibility of the money reaching the hands of those responsible for the purchase of the pen somewhat late did not discourage these donors, who believed in this case that the money should be used for another purpose. What was important for the abolitionists who raised this high sum was to be recorded in the gallery of those who directly contributed to the end of slavery. Being an abolitionist was not enough, it was necessary to participate, even if the money did not arrive in time. The alternative given for the use of the money, however, was not a simple tribute to the princess. By speaking about the humanitarian purposes of the initiative, these subjects sought to associate their act with the effective improvement of the lives of former slaves.

It is also interesting to observe in this note, that *O Paiz* was treated as a reliable newspaper to receive and use the money. It was the newspaper which

for those who subscribed to the proposal, effectively fought against slavery, and at its end synthesized this struggle with the support given to the subscription. In fact, no other newspaper so widely publicized this collection as *O Paiz*.

While the bill headed to the final debate, the newspapers in Rio de Janeiro met in a commission on 12 May in order to decide about the commemorations that they would lead to commemorate Abolition. Among those who sent representatives to the meeting held that night were: *Jornal do Comércio*, *Cidade do Rio*, *Diário de Notícias*, *Revista Ilustrada*, *Gazeta da Tarde*, *Época*, *Estação*, *Rio News*, *Gazeta de Notícias* and *Diário Mercantil* from São Paulo. Another six newspapers communicated their support of the idea: *L'étoile Du Sud*, *Itália*, *Sportsman*, *Jornal dos Economistas* and *O Paiz*.

While the majority of Rio de Janeiro newspapers only organized on the eve, *O Paiz* was well ahead in relation to the intended tribute to Abolition and to all those who supported it. By 12 May, the newspaper, according to what was published, had raised 831\$400 and published a large part of the names of those who contributed. Space was not sufficient for all the names, and the editors promised to publish the rest the following day. On a single day the newspaper recorded four hundred donations of 500 réis each. For those who contributed, the publication of their names was necessary as a form of leaving their participation in this signing ritual marked for posterity, principally in a vehicle with a large circulation. The quantity of donors was so great that the newspaper had to rectify more than once some of the names published incorrectly in previous editions.⁷ In other words publication of names was awaited by those who made donations. This generated an observation at the end of a list sent on 11 May. The author of one subscription came from Mendes, in the interior of the province, and asked: “the 26 names should be published, since I have to render accounts to each of them.” For other donors, military workers, the contribution and the publication of their names was a mark of love to their Patria:

Dear Editor

Greetings of peace and joy and what we most desire in the company of your dear family.

Sir, we the undersigned cannot and should not go without contributing to this glorious gold pen! And thanks to our illustrious editor for having this grandiose idea!

And if we proceed this way, we will be seen as men who have no love for their patria.

Sir, forgive the small sum we are sending to you.

Your servants

Military Worker Álvaro da Câmara Pinheiro

2nd Sergeant, Manoel Gomes Ferreira

Rio de Janeiro, 13 May 1888.

The subscription was the opportunity that they had to contribute to the law and leave their participation marked in it. The sum sent by the soldiers was not stated in the note, nor in any other annotation. However, what mattered to them and perhaps for those responsible for the initiative of the subscription, was more the gesture than the sum involved. Everyone wanted to participate in the mobilization and leave this registered, which led the crew of the Battleship Javary to write a small text with errors of Portuguese, with 26 names transcribed in the same handwriting – as if the others did not know how to sign their own names. This shows that the celebration of the signing of the Law, or a certain sympathy to it, was not restricted to journalists, writers, and politicians who directed the festivities for its celebration – since various others insisted on participating at that moment to the extent of their possibilities and specific points of view, something which they insisted on leaving marked.

12 May, the eve of the last day of debate, was for *O Paiz* the moment of a great collection of funds. The total collected that day was 859\$400, including subscriptions made within *Revista Ilustrada* and *Cidade do Rio* (the only periodicals in the Fluminense Press Commission to adhere, as well as *O Paiz*), individual contributions sent to the newspaper, and lists published in the same papers with names. In order to set a final deadline for the collection of the money, the newspaper announced that the subscription would be closed at midday on 13 May.

Finally, on Sunday morning, 13 May, the bill was debated for the final time. Around 11.30 am one further debate began and more senators spoke against the bill. Senator Paulino de Souza, from the Conservative Party, was responsible for the opposition speech. His argument criticized the 1871 law. The Senator's speech was heard by a crowd who, as had happened in the Chamber of Deputies, had their entry to the Senate facilitated. The public also listened to the speech of Senator Dantas, favorable to the project. The speeches of the two senators demonstrated that the Abolition was not something definitive and unanimous, principally for the slavocrats who, in the figure of Baron Cotegipe, would ask for compensatory measures later.

After the speeches the bill was voted on for the last time and was passed. The report on the bill sent for government sanction along with the law says

much about the urgency of its implementation and the specificity of the law for the Empire: “The general assembly sends the enclosed decree to the Emperor, which it deems advantageous to and useful for the Empire, and asks His Imperial Majesty for his sanction.”⁸

The utility of the project and its advantages have been discussed in the historiography for years. Abolition through means of a law was a form of liberating whites from slave labor, according to Emília Viotti da Costa, and not the contrary (Costa, 2008). Nevertheless, the same historiography closes its eyes to what surrounded the entire discussion of the Abolition bill and its signing. It closed its eyes to those who mobilized outside the abolition movement and the parliament. Both the press commission for the commemorations and the initiative of a professor from the capital to purchase the gold pen supported by a large newspaper were measures for the inclusion and participation of those outside the parliamentary debates, the only people who could bring an end to the slavery that had gone on for centuries. Through the subscription lists created in various parts of the capital and its environs, we can see that those who signed it saw more than utility and advantage in the implementation of this law.

According to the lists, the individual quota of 500 réis was to be donated by those who wanted the “extinction of the servile element” through “immediate Abolition.” The gold pen would be used to sign “the Abolition decree declaring all Brazilians equal” – or, as written on the notes of the less well educated, “to sign the ‘bolition law” (sic). In the headings of various lists, the law was described as the “great decree of liberty,” or the “great law for the Liberation of slaves in Brazil – one of the most glorious acts of our history,” “the deed of the liberty of our Patria.” All these expressions reveal for us various meanings for the same act: the signing of the law. The donated pen was, thus, not only an instrument for signing the law. It represented the dreams and aspirations of various subjects, assuming numerous meanings for those who participated in the subscription: equality, glory, liberty of the patria, redemption, and the end of captivity. In other words, while the law was advantageous for the Empire, for those who lived at that time and participated in in process, it represented the beginning of a new stage in their personal lives and of the country itself.

However, these various meanings created and experienced by different subjects in the Court were mediated on a daily basis by the press in its publicizing of the final moments of slavery and in the publication of the ritual of the law. The creation of a commission to hold the festivities had the clear purpose

of mediating the manner and place where Abolition would be commemorated: one published by newspapers which had not taken part in the initiative to purchase the pen and for this reason they did not emphasize the handing over of this object to the princess; another published by *O Paiz* which, as well as highlighting the pen, published the speech given by Luiz Pedro Drago when he handed it over.

Anyone who read about the signature ritual in *Gazeta* or *Diário de Notícias* would not have found out about Luiz Drago's initiative, nor the way the money to purchase the pen was collected. The newspaper *Diário de Notícias* did not reproduce the signing ritual of the law, only the moment it was passed in the Senate. *Gazeta de Notícias* was more descriptive, mentioning the pen rapidly:

The President of the Council passed the signed papers to the Minister of Agriculture, who wrote the following underneath – *The Imperial Princess Regent in the name of His Highness the Emperor, consents* – then he handed it to Her Majesty, who signed it as well as the decree, using the rich and delicate good pen offered to her by the people for this purpose.

Although he stated that the pen had been offered by the people, the journalist did not state how this was done. A diametrically opposing position was adopted by *O Paiz*, which even described the speech made by Luiz Drago after the law had been signed. In this Drago stated: “Your Imperial Highness, the grateful people have asked me to me to implore you to graciously accept this pen, as a glorious historic instrument, and an entirely popular historic instrument, which shall be used to sign Law 3353 on 13 May 1888, which eliminated the name slave from the Brazilian nation!”⁹

This ‘grateful people’ to whom Drago refers corresponded to almost three thousand signatures, each of whom donated 500 réis in approximately five days, between the presentation of the bill to the Chamber of Deputies on 8 May and 13 May, when it was signed into law.

The end of slavery became official, the pen was used, and everyone could commemorate.

The streets were the first places of commemoration. Largo do Paço, where the law was signed, and Rua do Ouvidor, where the principal newspapers in the capital were located, were full of those who saw Abolition as being something to commemorate. The buildings on Rua do Ouvidor were illuminated during the night and the celebrations were animated with musical bands.

The following days, 14 and 15 May, involved the publication and summarizing both of the signing ritual and the festivities which occurred in different regions. *O Paiz* rapidly announced the total collected to purchase the pen, 2:174\$300, and promised to rapidly publish in the following days the names that were still missing. Probably due to the great demand for news about Abolition and everything which had happened in the capital, the newspaper also announced on 15 May an increase its print-run, from 25,000 copies per day to 30,500. A significant increase, considering the low level of literacy in the capital. The lists received by the newspaper allow us draw the conclusion that it was not consumed solely by these region and it extrapolated the limits of the capital and the province of Rio de Janeiro.

The other newspaper occupied their pages with the festivities and interpretations about the future of the country without slaves. *Gazeta da Tarde*, in the middle of the commemorations in the capital, asked for how long people would talk of slaves and abolitionists. Its editors predicted silence about the slave past. For them with the end of slavery, “all Brazilians could turn their back on the past,” and with eyes on the future could cheer the patria in which now all men would be free. The slave past, therefore, did not need to be returned to constantly. Those who had fought against slavery – abolitionists and slaves– would be remembered by posterity. No names or positions were cited, only the position of each was differentiated. At the end the role of the head of state, the parliament, and the government in the ending of differentiation between men was acknowledged.

In its explanation of the anguish of the final moment of slavery and the importance of the festivities, *Gazeta de Notícias* stated that the patria had been a giant with a heart crushed by three centuries of slavery. With the “magic word of a Princess” slavery “had disappeared.” And now the free heart could be “perceived in the joy of the people.” Therefore, the commemorations should be glorious because they celebrated the divine right to say that one is free. So striking was that act that it would serve as the beginning of a new time, capable of affirming a new history for the country – since if the future of Brazil was made without slaves, its history and past would also be retold to wipe away the stain. This is what the editors of the newspaper *Treze de Maio* argued, a unique publication specially produced to commemorate the date, who stated: “we have torn from our minds that fatal word – slavery ... we have used the great sponge – forgetfulness – over (sic) this past which has made us contemptible among civilized nations.”

While these witnesses were concerned in marking a rupture with the past, equally striking in the press during those days was the concern with the future. According to *Diário de Notícias*, for example, what was important was perceiving that what was to come, the social and political change, was more difficult than the past, slavery. The greatest problem, according to the author of this text, was that 13 May, by limiting itself to only affirming the end of slavery, did not say what should be done with slaves. While before they had been brutalized by their condition as slaves, without social lives and without families, following the passing of the law they would have to adapt themselves to a legal world which they did not know and which they would be unable to understand. For this reason the state would have to invest in moral and material work with former slaves. The texts of *Diário de Notícias* and the other publications on the eve of the beginning of the festivities highlighted the doubts of the editors of these newspapers about the future of the country and these new citizens – which explained the attempt sponsored by these newspaper at the actual moment of the celebration to point to paths capable of guaranteeing the future desired for the nation. At the same time these editors emphasized that the reform of the labor system and the ending of slavery was not enough for the future of the country. Other reforms would have to be made after Abolition.

Among the various interpretations of the past and future of the country, the newspapers who were part of the so-called Fluminense Press Commission announced their commemorations which began on 17 May with an open air mass, and ended on Monday 21 May with the publication of a single issue newspaper, *Imprensa Fluminense*. These festivities included horse races, parties, popular dances, fireworks in various parts of the city, and processions which took over many of the capital's streets.

In its reports *O Paiz* remained quite differentiated from the other newspapers. While the main newspapers in the commission announced the parties and their repercussions in texts that were almost similar, this newspaper still privileged the initiative of purchasing the pen. After raising a grandiose sum and the use of the pen to sign the Abolition law, it was necessary to exhibit it to those who had contributed and had not seen the details of the object. The newspaper thus would exhibit the pen after 20 May in the hall in the newspapers office on Rua do Ouvidor. It was described by the editor as follows:

the entire pen is made from gold. It had 48 jewels along its spine, the grandeur of which increased from the top to the base of the principal rib, from where there is a beautiful emerald surrounded by jewels, forming the central knob of an artisti-

cally formed knot, below where there stand out two ovals, containing an imperial crown in one and the coat of arms of the Orleans house in the other. On the body of the pen, and almost on the lower extremity, there is also a dragon studded with jewels, the emblem of the House of Bragança; with the space between the two cited emblems being occupied by the following inscription. 'To D. Isabel, the redeemer, from the thankful people' – with the number and date of the law being on the opposite side.

The exhibiting of the pen was a form of rendering accounts to those who had helped purchase the object: "we believe that those who have contributed to this popular demonstration to Her Highness and the public will find the offering worthy of the people and the Most August Regent."

The pen was exhibited in the newspaper's offices which enthusiastically announced the strong great presence of the public who were able to 'witness' a 'work of art.' According to what was published about the exhibition, it can be concluded that the pen remained there until 30 May, when a new exhibition was announced. Furthermore, the newspaper promised that the names of those who donated funds to purchase the pen would be published by 1 June.

The following month was a time of rendering of accounts and the gathering of material for the history of Abolition. The first signal of this was the interest of the director of the National Library, Saldanha da Gama, in gathering for the institution all the material referring to the Abolition commemorations. He intended to collect everything "from the most valuable to the most insignificant" and which could later serve for the "study of the future writers of the history of the servile element in this empire." The first material obtained was the draft of the speech given by Luiz Pedro Drago at the signing ritual. This intention of the director of the National Library perhaps explains the existence in the institution of the originals of the subscription lists sent to *O Paiz* for the purchase of the pen.

After the principal use of the pen, the signing of the law, and its exhibition for those who had contributed to its purchase, the object which had brought an end to slavery had to be kept as a relic. It was treated in this form by those responsible for it in *O Paiz*, who collected funds for the purchase of an iron safe where it would be kept as a material monument, in the words of the newspaper's editors. In July 1888 the value of 121,300 réis was given by the newspaper's treasurer to João Saldanha da Gama, responsible for the purchase of the safe.¹⁰

While the newspaper rendered accounts for the popular subscription to its readers, the Fluminense Press Commission also published in all its newspapers, including *O Paiz*, the accounts of the commission to organize the festivities. The balance sheet appeared on 5 June, many days after Abolition and some of the capital's newspapers, *The Rio News* and *Carbonário*, for example, questioned the destiny of the free population and the use of money intended to free slaves in the festivities.

On 15 May *The Rio News* asked questions about the money which had been in the hands of some associations and had been used to purchase the freedom of slaves. Its editors argued that this money should be used to create conditions to allow former slaves live in freedom and with dignity. Its solution was the construction of public schools in order to prevent former slaves from ending up in bad working conditions, perhaps similar to slavery. Shortly after Abolition and even before the press commemorations, *Carbonário* was already concerned on 16 May about the money collected by the Municipal Council for liberation in the neutral municipality [Rio de Janeiro]. According to the editors, the money was in the safe and should be donated to charities.

The Municipal Council of the capital contributed an important sum for the festivities organized by the Fluminense press. A sum of 5:000\$000 was donated on two different dates to the treasurer of the commission, H. Villeneuve, representative of *Jornal do Comércio* – the writer Artur Azevedo was also treasurer. The money was donated before the festivities on 16 May, and afterwards on 21 May. Use of the balance of the money for the commemorations was once again demanded by the editors of *Carbonário* on 23 May, shortly after the ending of the festivities, mentioning the situations of old and invalid former slaves who had left plantations following the 13 May law. It was argued that the money should be used to construct asylums for this people and not, they said, for the holding of new banquets by the Municipal Council.

Perhaps as a response to this criticism and seeking to provide news about the money, the press commission, using the balance sheets signed by its treasurers, released details about commemoration income and expenditure. The commission had received monetary donations from some of the places in which the festivities were held, such as the Derby Club and Sport Club, from some urban transport companies, and from the owner of a bar in Passeio Público. Income had also been obtained from the sale of *Imprensa Fluminense*, the only paper to circulate on Monday 21 May, with the value of 100 réis. However, the greatest revenue had come from the Municipal Council. Between income and expenditure the commission had obtained a positive balance of

6:317\$300 which was donated to the Municipal Council. Despite this donation, it was still the greatest contributor to the festivities. However, it is important to emphasize that the commission made no contribution to the purchase of the gold pen. The analysis of the balance sheet demonstrates that the subscription organized by *O Paiz* had no relationship with the objective of the Fluminense Press Commission.

The release of these numbers by the press commission after some delay allowed some points be highlighted in the relationship between the Abolition commemorations and the idea of holding festivities as a pedagogical and civic ritual involving the entire population. In the commission's receipts there are no records of any contribution in the name of the imperial family. The commemorations organized by the press had an official nature due to the simple fact that no one else in the Empire had made any effort to hold them, only to participate in those organized by the press. Possibly there was no effective presence of the imperial family in the festivities for two reasons. Due to illness, the Emperor was still travelling in order to treat his health, and the news of the debates of the Abolition bill had to compete with news of the Emperor's health, who at that stage was in Milan. The princess herself highlighted the absence of her father as the reason for that moment not being a completely joyful one. However, Pedro II's health improved as the date came closer. Nine days after the end of slavery, the Emperor received news through a telegram sent by the Princess and he would return to Brazil in August 1888 (Schwarcz, 1998, p.444). The second factor was the fact that the Brazilian royalty simply did not have the money to hold festivities of this magnitude. The 1880s were marked by the impoverishment of royal rituals, and also by a change of paradigm in relation to the cultural life of Court. According to Lilia Schwarcz, new groups were forming in the culture of the capital and were disconnecting from the glory of the imperial family. Writers linked to newspapers formed these new groups and thus felt responsible for promoting commemorations in accordance with this new dynamic, very much commanded by them, of life in the capital. Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that the same capital was dynamic and held its own festivities and interpretations of Abolition, irrespective of the press. A mark of this was the great adhesion to the subscription to buy the pen. Anyone who contributed money also participated in the commemorations, but saw this contribution as much more than simple spontaneous and immobile participation.

The relationship which involved the money and festivities, from the purchase of the pen to the holding of free festivities in the capital, permeated the

actual meanings and purposes that these commemorations had for the different subjects. Therefore, by way of conclusion, two different situations involving Abolition should be emphasized. The first was the collective and more long-lasting mobilization involving different sectors of the Empires in order to participate in the ritual of the end of slavery: the purchase of the object which was used by the princess. For this reason, lists were organized in public offices and in various workplaces, showing that it was the fruit of the mobilization of various categories of workers. The teachers in *Ginásio Fluminense*, the employees of the underprivileged boys' home, the stokers of the Battleship Javary, the staff of the Imperial Observatory, the workers of the Navy Arsenal, the staff of the Blacksmith's Workshops of the Arsenal in the capital, managers and workers from the Gas Company (*Sociedade Anônima de Gás*), the Military School, office and manual workers from the bricklayer workshops, carpenters from the civil and military construction board of the Navy Arsenal in the capital, and the employees of the Rabeca de Ouro musical instruments factory are examples of these groups of workers. Similarly, lists were also organized in the peripheral districts, where these workers lived, such as Cascadura, Penha, Irajá, and more far off places – Macuco, Barra do Pirai and Juiz de Fora. Even the members of the Quilombo do Leblon insisted on sending their contribution, showing that they insisted on taking part in the festivities, not to mention numerous abolitionists, whether or not they were anonymous, republicans or monarchists, who saw in the contribution to the pen, no matter that it was a small amount, a way to mark a point of differentiation in the abolitionist movement. This movement was more heterogeneous than can be imagined, and its cause was the cause of numerous workers in the Empire. The contribution lists for the purchase of the pen are a sign of the creation of an identity of these groups who can and should be called abolitionists.

However, the second situation appears in the enthusiastic reports of the newspapers which formed the press commission for the commemorations. These reports intended to highlight the participation of everyone in the festivities, constructing for them a univocal meaning. The idea of 'official commemoration,' assumed by the commission, was an attempt to spread a clear homogeneous message among the population (Kraay, 2001, p.63-90). For this reason the commission ignored those who wrote about Abolition and who donated money, nor reported the participation of different subjects in the signing ritual. The silence which some newspapers imposed on the many voices which were part of the significant subscription expressed the attempt to control the meaning of the celebration. However, this silence was at the same time contested by

other newspapers, *The Rio News* and *Carbonário*, which although they supported the festivities, intended to obtain more from the mobilization of the mainstream press. The abovementioned newspapers wanted to see an immediate change in the social condition of those being liberated. Perhaps this was also the objective of the numerous workers and residents in the peripheral districts, who hoped that freedom would come for everyone, even to them.

The anonymous subjects who were part of the lists and who signed the notes which made up the subscription, even with their Portuguese mistakes and low financial capacity to contribute, showed that for them the Abolition festivities could assume different meanings, which they left marked in their rapid testimonies.

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NOTES

¹ This speech was given on 3 May 1888, and the Princess Regent cited, amongst the challenges faced by the Empire that year, the extinction of the servile element as a national aspiration and the disposition of the government to wipe out what she called the 'exception' in the law of the land which was antagonistic to the Christian and liberal spirit of the country's institutions. *Diário de Notícias* and *O Paiz*, Rio de Janeiro, 4 May 1888.

² According to Luiz Drago, the sum was low in order to facilitate the collaboration of everyone. By way of comparison, it was the same value that needed to purchase a copy of *Revista Ilustrada*, a weekly publication.

³ All the notes and letters cited in this text refer to the following material: *Subscrição popular feita por iniciativa de Luiz Pedro Drago*. Seção de Manuscritos da Biblioteca Nacional – II – 32, 10, 01.

⁴ *Revista Ilustrada* and *Cidade do Rio* also provided information about and created subscriptions, but they were not responsible for raising money like *O Paiz*.

⁵ A Republican newspaper founded in 1884. It was edited by Quintino Bocaiuva until 1899. The idea of the editors of this newspaper was to be impartial, but over the years the republican tendency became more obvious, although its editors did not publically state this, unlike the *Gazeta Nacional* (PESSANHA, 2008).

⁶ *Revista Ilustrada*, 2 June 1888. The magazine delayed its report on the history of abolition, but it is still the best description among the Court newspapers at the time.

⁷ *O Paiz*, 11 May 1888. The newspaper highlighted those whose names were changed shortly after published the list of the day.

⁸ "Princesa Isabel – autógrafos do decreto de extinção da escravidão no Brasil". BN-digital: mss 49 – 4-4.

⁹ Speech given by Luiz Drago to the Princess after the signing of the law. The draft of the text was found in the manuscript section of the National Library and was published in *O Paiz* on 14 May 1888.

¹⁰ "Códice escravidão" – 6.1.7, Arquivo Geral da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro. Currently the pen is on exhibition in the *Imperial Museum of Petrópolis, along with other relics from the time of the Empire. The original copy of the law is held by the National Archives, while the public subscription documents belong to the National Library.*