

Souza, Robério S.

*Trabalhadores dos trilhos:*

imigrantes e nacionais livres, libertos e escravos na  
construção da primeira ferrovia baiana (1858-1863)

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Labour history has long been written exclusively from the perspectives of wage labour, “proletarianization” (or the shift to wage labour) and the organizations of wage labourers. While these aspects have been conflated with “modernity” and the emergence and expansion of capitalism, slavery and other coerced labour relations have been marginalized as “backward” and non-capitalist. In this convincing and well-written book, Robério S. Souza turns these traditional approaches upside down and showcases a more inclusive labour history based on new conceptualizations. He deals with the construction of the Bahia and San Francisco Railway in 1858-1863, but rather than viewing it as a symbol of technological modernity, “progressive” foreign investments and free labour, he points to the compatibility of capitalism and coerced labour, indicates multiple entanglements between British capital and the worlds of slavery, and highlights the presence of slaves among the workforce, against the letter of the Imperial legislation of 1852. Similarly, the author addresses the European – and especially “Italian” – migrant workers, but instead of subscribing the standard narrative of them being vectors of free skilled labour, he foregrounds the precariousness of their freedom and compares it with that of the *nacionais livres* and with the conditions of those enslaved. More generally, Souza insists on the complexity of the composition of the workforce, rather than searching for the ideal-typical wage labourers within it: from this perspective, he is able to address the concrete relationships among workers across legal status and labour relations, pointing to their shared experiences and moments of solidarity, as well as the conflicts that arose among them.

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These key arguments are brightly presented in the introduction, the structure of the book is well designed, and the style nicely blends accurate quantitative overviews, reflexive moments and detailed descriptions of events and individual biographies. The first three chapters guide the reader through the world of the “senhores dos trilhos” and its connection with the slave economy of the province of Bahia (ch. 1), sketch the “social demography” of the workforce of the railway (ch. 2), then engage in the reconstruction of the materiality of the tasks, including details of the works in each of the five different sections in which the construction site was divided (ch. 3). The last two chapters zoom into the workers’ experiences and agency. Chapter 4 centres on those who migrated to Brazil from the Kingdom of Sardinia, describes the strike they organized in 1859, and discusses its broader connections with the mobilizations of other workers (including the slaves) and the practices of repression and social control implemented by the authorities. Chapter 5 looks inside the apparently disconnected and disordered multitude that made up the workforce and addresses the “lógicas internas que forjaram ou dificultaram a experiência e o processo de conformação de identidades” (pp. 34-35). Accompanying the written words, one historical map visualizes the territories crossed by the railway (p. 116) and nineteen beautiful historical photographs – most of them from the Collection Vignoles of Institution of Civil Engineers, London – make workers, sites and works more concrete. Indeed, rather than just being a passive visual support, especially in chapter 3 the photographs are directly integrated and discussed in the text. The bulk of primary sources are drawn from various sections of the *Arquivo Público do Estado da Bahia* (Apeb), and include the correspondence between various authorities, lists of passengers entering the port of Bahia, and documents produced by the police and the port authorities that proved key to understanding both the dynamics of social control and the lives of individual workers.

Like his previous book on the entanglements of labour relations in Bahia in the period immediately following the abolition of slavery, Souza’s latest work is deeply embedded in the ground-breaking new Brazilian labour historiography.<sup>1</sup> The author especially acknowledges his intellectual debt to the works of Sidney Chalhoub and Henrique Espada Lima (p. 30). Yet, precisely because of the quality of this book, one might have hoped also for a broader engagement of its author with the international scholarship on comparable contexts and related issues. Such a move might have strengthened his interpretation on several points and simultaneously enhanced the impact of this volume among a larger scholarly community. For example, the studies on the equally complex

but differently assembled workforce employed in the construction of the Cuban railroads before the abolition of slavery on the Caribbean island (1880) could have provided useful comparative references on the key question of the connection between freedom and unfreedom.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Souza's volume is a significant complement to recent explorations in the history of transport labour, with which it shares the critique of the "standard binaries between coercion and freedom" and to which it contributes indirectly by expanding the focus from "labour in transport" to the labour that made the infrastructures of transport.<sup>3</sup> This work is also a precious contribution to a renewal of the history of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian migration, beyond the limitations of those traditional studies that tend to view the Italian labourers in isolation from the rest of the workforce, and particularly as separate from coerced labour. In turn, the new scholarship on the Italian diaspora, with its awareness of the importance of translocal connections and multi-sited archival research, might have made Souza's suggestive link between the demands of the *sardos* workers in Brazil and the political turmoil in Italy on the eve of national unification (pp. 188-190) more concrete.<sup>4</sup>

At a different level, the author's central argument on the compatibility between capitalism and unfree labour resonates, among others, with the findings of Alex Lichtenstein's pioneering study on the political economy of convict labour in the post-emancipation US South and with a recent volume on coerced labour after chattel slavery edited by Marcel van der Linden and Magaly Rodríguez García.<sup>5</sup> More generally, Souza's contention about the fluid boundaries between freedom and unfreedom coincides with the key issue in the long-standing debate on free and unfree labour; it also stands in continuity with the reconceptualization of the working class proposed by global labour historians, by pointing to the need to go beyond the standard focus on wage labour, to study all types of labour relations that have been imbricated in the process of labour commodification.<sup>6</sup> Finally, and similarly to other Brazilian works in labour history, especially chapters 4 and 5 showcase the importance of the simultaneous study of labour relations and the agency and organization of the workers – a combination that has been particularly rare in Global labour history so far. Indeed, the adoption of the concept of "experience" – explicitly borrowed from E.P. Thompson – provides Souza with a tool to enter the contradictory formation of class identity among those workers who were "juntos mas não misturados" (p. 237), and thus constantly caught between unity and division across national, ethnic and legal boundaries.

These entanglements between Souza's work and the broader labour historiography foreground its potential to intervene in yet larger debates, while in turn benefiting from them on some interpretative points. In no way are these critical remarks that overshadow the merits of this book. Indeed, this volume is one of those precious empirical studies that can inspire and shape research on other sites and times, beyond its specific topic and chronological scope. For this reason, multiple translations of this book are highly desirable.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> SOUZA, 2011. See esp.: CHALHOUB, 1990; LIMA, 2005; CHALHOUB, 2012; FORTES et al., 2013.

<sup>2</sup> For example: OOSTINDIE, 1984; FADRAGAS, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> BELLUCCI et al., 2014. Citation from the editors' introduction, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> GABACCIA; OTTANELLI, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> LICHTENSTEIN, 1996; LINDEN; RODRÍGUEZ GARCÍA, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> BRASS; LINDEN, 1997; LINDEN, 2010.

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