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SLAVERY AND POWER: THE ROLE OF SUGAR PRODUCTION IN THE FORMATION OF BRAZIL

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RESUMO: Este ensaio procura entender o papel do açúcar (produção de açúcar) no sentido de como a sociedade e política brasileira desenvolveram-se durante o período colonial. Como pôde a escravatura sustentar o poder das elites nordestinas, e como as elites nordestinas contribuíram para perpetuar a escravatura até a abolição? Que pontos de vista diferentes autores tinham da instituição das grandes propriedades açucareiras? Examinaram eles o problema de diferentes ângulos e chegaram a diferentes conclusões sobre ele? Ou similar?

Palavras-chaves: Produção de açúcar; período colonial; escravatura; elite nordestina.

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to understand the role of that sugar (sugar production) played in the way in which Brazilian society and politics unfolded during the colonial period. How did slavery sustain the power of the northeastern elites, and how did northeastern elites contribute to perpetuating slavery until abolition? How is the establishment of large sugar estates viewed by different authors? Do they examine the issue from different angles and come to different conclusions about it? Or similar?

Keyswords: Sugar production; colonial period; slavery; northeaster elite.

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Introduction

Sugar production is known to have played a major part in the historical, political, socio-economic, and cultural development of Brazil. Though we still perceive remnants of this fact in Brazilian society today, particularly if we visit the northeast region and the vast sugar fields still in existence there, the depth with which sugar production has permeated throughout centuries requires a closer examination of its beginnings in colonial Brazil. This paper seeks to understand the role of that sugar played in the way in which Brazilian society and politics unfolded during the colonial period. Slavery played a huge role in this, producing a system of stratification that had solid roots in the *engenho* system. How did slavery sustain the power of the northeastern elites, particularly the sugar planters, and how did northeastern elites contribute to perpetuating slavery until abolition?

Although the critical role of sugar production in the Brazilian economy has been well-documented by historians, a comparison of the past and most recent works is warranted if one want to gather a more complete understanding of the causes and consequences of sugar plantations during the country's colonial period. Inevitably, these studies are bound to have different research approaches and most likely lead to different conclusions about the economic, social, and political effects of the establishment of large sugar estates, particularly in the northeast. In fact, several authors within this literature focus on similar issues. Rather than look at each author one by one, which runs into a problem of repetition, I have decided to divide this paper into the general themes running through the literature, and discuss how the different authors treat each of these themes. Thus, this paper first takes a historiographical look at the conditions that enabled sugar cultivation to be established so solidly in the Portuguese colony, particularly in the northeast region.

Foremost among the factors that contributed to the solidity of sugar in the economy were the Portuguese entrepreneurs who became entrusted *donatários* of the Crown, the interests of the Crown itself, and the easy access to slave trade. An elaborate picture of the sugar mills themselves and their evolution into a social structural system encompassing much more than its core location is then presented. Within this structure, slavery took on a position and character of its own, hence its examination as a third general theme of the literature. The abolition of this system of forced labor and its

consequences fits naturally into the last of the issues covered in this examination of the historical literature on the development of sugar industry in colonial Brazil.

Beginning Of Sugar Cultivation In Portuguese America

It is a well-documented fact that sugar production stood at the forefront of economic growth during the colonial era in Brazil. What is less known is the details about the process through which it became so dominant. Celso Furtado (1963) provides a general account of the reasons why cultivation of sugar cane was introduced to Brazil during the initial colonial occupation. The principal reason for its success in the region was the production expertise that was brought by Portuguese entrepreneurs. Sugar provided the economic base for Portuguese occupation in 1500. The production system heavily impacted the formation of influenced the ethnic and class stratification system, with the transporting of Indian slaves from the southern regions (where many Indian groups were acculturated by the Jesuits) and then black slaves from Africa to the agricultural regions of the northeast.

Schwartz (1985) gives us a more detailed historical account of the process through which sugar production came to dominate colonial Brazilian economy. One of the factors that contributed to the rapid development of sugar plantation in Brazil was the experience that the Portuguese had previously gathered in this type of industry in its Atlantic island-colonies, like Madeira, Cape Verde, and São Tome. Portuguese officials had grasped every opportunity for profit in these colonies in the fifteenth century, skillfully integrating the elaborate system of sugar production with the slave trade they were simultaneously fortifying in West Africa. As Schwartz points out, the transfer of plantation techniques and technology, the commercial interests, *and* the social relations accompanying the whole system of sugar production occurred without much trouble, almost as if transposed across the Atlantic (Schwartz 1985).

This ease of transposition was in part facilitated by the Crown, as is pointed out by several of the authors. Schwartz (1985) explains that the Crown had a very specific goal of recreating a profitable sugar industry in colonial Brazil so that it could profit from the taxes leveled on the private sectors in exchange for the granting of land concessions. Along this vein, Coelho Filho (2000) makes, in my eyes, a significant contribution to the study of Brazilian colonial history, as he delves into historical

archives in Portugal and Brazil to gather an understanding of the growth of the Capitania of São Jorge into a prosperous sugar industrial complex starting in 1545 and lasting until 1559. Though the founding of this captaincy (and the several sugar mills), which composed it) happened toward what other historians. They deem as the *end* of the so-called Sugar Decade (1541-1550), the author finds that the private sugar conglomerates that grew there was more of an apex of the effort by the crown to develop the sugar industry in the coastal areas of the northeast. During this time, the Crown willfully assigned *sesmarias* to wealthy Portuguese willing to invest their money in the newfound lands. This was the case of one of the heads of the captaincy, Jorge de Figueiredo Correa, who grasped the opportunity by also gathering another three fellow countrymen and investing lots of time and money into making it in the sugar business in a new land.

Schwartz (1985) also gives us a good sense of the dominance of sugar plantations (they extended south all the way from São Vicente – what is now São Paulo) in the first decades of colonial Brazil, the most success was achieved in the northeast by the 1530s. This was due in part to the terrain and climate, which was for the most part humid and close to the coast. Another big part of the success was the work of the *donatários* themselves, for it was in their best interest to seek investors to sustain at least the initial years of their enterprise. It is clear from the vivid description by Schwartz that the *donatários* poured their hearts and souls, bringing the entire family to the new world to begin what basically became the basis of a social structure system that extended way beyond the limits of the engenho itself.

In effect, the engenho became the center of a very elaborate and hierarchical system dominated by the *donatário*. Not only did this chief figure become the master of the enslaved Indians and African blacks, they also were responsible to see that the business worked as profitably and prosperously as possible. Thus, the *donatários* distributed lands to other tenants or sharecroppers who would operate under heavily guarded set of fees. The central thesis of Schwartz's study (1985) is that the production system strongly ordered society (p. 26), with the *donatarios* possessing the top portion of the hierarchy scale in the colony. The ambition of the owners was for recognition of their position as noblemen, an unofficial title, which they very much embodied through the extensive power that the *sesmarias* bestowed upon them in their respective regions.

The book by Coelho Filho (2000) describes in great historical detail the process through which one captaincy (São Jorge) became a model for the sugar industry in a short span of time. By examining the *sesmarias* documents that specified the responsibilities and property rights of each investor (*donatário*), the historian uncovers much about how the administration of each community (*vila*) was established. The administration of the vila headed by one Dom Jorge Correa was functionally respondent to the growth of the sugar industry, even to the minute details of who would take care of the judicial, police, and notary public aspect of the business. Moreover, through an examination of documents from the General Indies Archive in Seville and correspondences of the investors, the author is able to map out the manner in which the investors arranged the shipment of materials necessary to begin the plantation of sugar canes, as well as the labor force to till the lands.

The description of the way in which the investors managed to build the sugar industry (he calls it a business consortium) into a success is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of Coelho Filho's book. This consortium, defined as an association of independent people who operate in conjunction with one another to achieve a determinate end (p. 69), is built on the principle of trust and common interest between the investors, and carefully delimits the actions that can be taken by each investor with respect to the land appropriated for them. What is uncovered is a very systematic way of handling this enterprise, particularly with respect to the use and amount of water allocated to each investor, as well as the oath of loyalty taken by each investor to the main donatário, Dom Jorge Correa. The author finds that the entrepreneurial spirit of the investors was so marked that this capitalist venue was successful despite the interference by the Crown (through the establishment of the General Government in the colony) to have greater control over the sugar industry and profit. Despite the acceptance by the investors of the royal tithe, there was some conflict with the state over the interpretation of the exemptions from other financial obligations imposed by the Crown. Much of these duties were established to pay for the maintenance of the General Government, but despite that, the enterprises still managed to profit.

As Coelho Filho describes, much of this ability to profit had to do with the abundant access to lands and to the low costs of labor, which was mostly achieved by forced labor, with the donatarios resorting to kidnapping the Indian population who had

been cathecized in the south (Santa Catarina), since the local tupiniquins and tupinambas were belligerent. Although this was an essential component to the success of the sugar enterprises, the author focuses very little on how this resistance came about, or what led to the final decline of the sugar complex in the captaincy of São Jorge after the war with the tupiniquins began in 1559. He also has no mention of what the conditions of slavery were. This we will get from other authors, described below, but first let us examine a bit more in depth the issue of the great resistance by the local indigenous populations and what that represented to the functionality of the engenho system.

Within the first five decades of colonial rule, *donatários* were petitioning the crown for the right to import labor that was not accessible through the native Indians. Schwartz (1985) argues that his was largely due to the strong (and negative) imposition of European values upon Indians without much concern for indigenous values and traditions, particularly in terms of land and subsistence cultivation. Although Indians initially resisted, many ended up subdued either by disease, enslavement, or just the sheer power of the labor demand in the *engenhos.* The latter played perhaps the most critical role in the massive shift to African slaves as source of labor, particularly because of the availability and experience of slaves in the sugar industry already, within the European sphere.

Slavery system and consequences

Slave labor was the principal means with which to support the installation of a profitable sugar cane enterprise, and this facilitated the coming about of an aristocracy (or an elite group of people who were favored with privileges) and a significant stratification of the different social classes. Furtado (1963) elaborates on the slavery system in colonial times in detail than Coelho Filho, although still maintaining a more structural or economic perspective. The slaves were forced to work in the huge plantations, and treated as commodities, or machines. Thus, the payment they received for their work was many times the mere maintenance of their bodies, "as with the maintenance of machines" (Furtado 1963, 55). Even at times in which sugar prices were low in Europe (due to competition), the slaves would still be working, to try to maintain

production at a strong level. The maintenance of the sugar industry even during times of decline was a key factor in its rebirth once again in the nineteenth century.

Lockhart and Schwartz (1983) also paint a vivid picture of the brutality of slavery. Because the Indian population forcefully resisted domination, the importation of slaves became the main way in which these landowners could sustain production. They find that the flux of slavery to the northeastern *engenhos* amounted to 2.5 million between 1500-1800 (p. 216). With profit as the sole interest, their treatment of the slaves was bleak: the slaves were minimally fed, and most times had to fend for their own food (manioc) in their "free" time. Although the slaves had common contact with the slave-owners, the most privileged positions (say as servants inside the "big houses" -casa grande- of the landlords) were left to the lighter skinned workers. Although toward the late eighteenth century there were many orders of manumission or slaves who fleed, the practice formed the basis for the success of the patriarchal system in colonial times.

Schwartz (1985) gives us an even harsher picture of the heavy tasks that had to be performed by the slaves. In Chapter 5, he points out that sugar making involved a very labor intensive process that began with the clearing of virgin fields (in which weeds grew with ease) to the almost-primitive planting, cutting, and transporting of the cane under conditions that included fast paced production, humidity, and lack of irrigation. In the next chapter, Schwartz (1983) describes the great pains endured by slaves, who mostly went hungry despite their strong forced labor. The extensive control by masters of every aspect of slaves lives meant that slaves would be prohibited from engaging in many of the fundamental aspects of human life, including forming families, marrying, and being able to develop their own faith systems. These rights were only gained with time, and even then very partially. To be sure, this treatment was an extension of the type of conditions in which slaves were initially brought to the new world. Martin (1993) describes the fact that slave trade was a logical and necessary step in the process of investing in the sugar production system. To the entrepreneurs of the slave trade, it barely mattered that 30-40 percent of the slaves died in the ships, which attests to the massive amounts of slaves that must have been brought in the sixteenth through the eighteenth century.

There is however, some evidence that throughout the years the slaves were slightly better treated by their masters, particularly with respect to their health. As Martin points out, foreign visitors to plantations in the 1800s observed the "mild" nature of slavery, which the author attributes to the desire to keep their value up if for some reason they should be sold. Though an instrumental decision, Martin says that it is possible to affirm "on the whole slaves in Brazil were treated with kindliness and forbearance by their masters" (1993, 171-172). Abolition, however, was not something that the masters sought at all, but something that came upon them by other means. Before we discuss explanations and consequences of abolition for the sugar plantations, let us turn to a more detailed look at the complexity of social relations created by the system of *engenhos.*

The *engenho* at the center of colonial life

Lockhart and Schwartz (1983) describe the structure of the *engenhos*, emphasizing the manner in which social relations occurred within and outside the *engenhos*. At the top, of course, were the mill owners who, by virtue of their position as land grantees (in most cases due to their positions as soldiers for the crown, became the patriarchic figure in the countryside. Sugar planters preferred to live on the estates and manage operations, though they often went to the cities where they could do their operations with bankers, lawyers, and notaries. Many often were eager to become council members or run for municipal offices. In the cities, they also connected with the export merchants responsible for taking their goods abroad. Schwartz (1985, Chapter 5) elaborates further on this point about the dependence of an entire social structure of towns on sugar making: planters, merchants, state officials, clergymen, all had their lives defined around the harvesting of sugar cane.

Lockhart and Schwartz's (1983) most illuminating points with respect to the descriptions of the *engenho* is the presence of the sharecroppers and other free workers who also formed part of the engenho. The sharecroppers were usually white workers who rented lands from the mill owners, and paid for this land by surrendering a large portion of the sugar produced in the lands. There was a significant degree of subordination to the mill owner, and resentment for having to give up so much of the product of their work. Schwartz (1985) describes how these sharecroppers were

required to surrender between one fourth and one third of his half of the sugar production, a heavy obligation that many had no way to fight against. The sharecroppers owned slaves themselves, and treated them terribly. Also important in the maintenance of the engenho were the herdsmen, woodcutters, skilled artisans, chaplains, and masons who worked for wages in the engenho. Sugar processing involved a highly technical and complex system, requiring labor not only before the sugar crop could be harvested but also way after. The lands surrounding the engenho were also occupied with production for the engenho itself, particularly the raising of oxen to pull the carts for harvesting.

Ferlini (2003) further discusses the "machine" of collective enterprising that drives the *engenho* as a capitalist venture, with all of its pieces operating simultaneously and coming together to produce the final product, sugar. This venture depended heavily on the slave, for he was responsible for the entire process of sugar processing: from the grinding to the drying of the product. This required tremendous amounts of strength from the slaves, as very few were operated with water pumps. Her description of the processing of sugar is based largely on the account of Andre Joao Antonil (1968). The work led slaves to exhaustion. One of the most specialized aspects of the production of sugar was the cooking process that required attention to minute details. Even the later innovations, for instance, in the type of melt pots (*fornalhas*) that were used, required exactness in the intensity of the fire (p. 173).

Ferlini (2003) describes how this process of specialization required other free workers to have skills that are more technical and managerial responsibilities than others. The *feitores* were in charge of the financial aspects of the *engenho,* and were responsible for executive orders to the slaves, so that the machine could be kept running constantly, as in a modern-day factory. Although he occupied a position of superiority to that of the slave, Ferlini poses that it was not uncommon for slaves to "tell" on the *feitores* to the owners, and for them to be reprimanded, away from the slaves. It was also not uncommon for *feitores* to use violent methods to reprimand slaves for their slow work or other problems. It was very difficult for the *feitores* and other master sugar craftsmen to organize collectively in any way, reason for which these positions started being fired easily, or their roles disappearing once and for all, as in the case of those responsible for the cooking process. In many cases, the slaves ended up learning

the trade and replacing these paid workers, in accordance with the main objective of the mill owner, profit. One of the main ideas that Ferlini gets across in her book is the hierarchical nature of the different roles between slaves and the other workers inside the *engenhos*.

This hierarchical system is also elaborated on by Schwartz (1985). One of the most central arguments of the book is the fact that sugar plantations and the forced labor required to sustain it resembled a seigniorial system in which everyone fit into differentiated categories based on color, race, and occupation that, at the same time that they formed clear demarcations between groups, were all just one extension of the other.

> Plantation societies cannot be reduced to relations between masters and slaves but must be studied with some attention to the political and social contexts in which they exist at a given historical moment (Schwartz 1985, 260).

Though the owners represented the top leadership within the sugar conglomerate and the administrative structure formed around the *engenhos*, there is also evidence that not everything was under his control. Schwartz (1985) discusses the difficulties inherent in the business, particularly the need to maintain production even in face of adversity. This adversity came mainly from two sources: competition from the Caribbean sugar market that deflated the price of sugar and the imposition of greater control by the Crown, particularly in the seventeenth century. Competition and low sugar prices put severe financial pressures on engenho owners, because they needed to pay the debt on the capital borrowed to sustain production (Schwartz 1985, 195).

The author describes the numerous foreclosures on mortgages, moratoriums on debt, and the discords that this brought between planters and merchants, and planters and financiers. Interestingly, one of the ways in which planters fought back was through influence in local decisions, particularly in terms of controlling the local price of sugar through negotiations with municipal councils. Ultimately, though there were pressures from state and private officials regarding financial deals, this interference was limited to just that. In fact, the author points out how rare it was to have the state intervene very much in the internal affairs of the plantation. For instance, if there ever were questions that came to the courts about matters of labor mistreatment, the courts would often tend

not to act too forcefully to not "disrupt the social fabric of the colony" (Schwartz 1985, 261).

Financing became difficult over time, in large part due to the fluctuations in the global price for sugar. In this matter, the presence of the Dutch, though it imposed a certain degree of foreign domination of the area that is now Pernambuco, also represented (at least initially) a much-needed financial boost to the sugar economy in the colony. Furtado (1963) discusses in more depth the significance of the presence of the Dutch in the second half of the sixteenth century (1630-1654). The Dutch enabled the re-expansion of the sugar industry during this period, since they financed and built many sugar mills, and opened up the huge market for sugar in Holland. At the time, the Dutch were heavily in control of the sugar trade in Europe, and even at war with Spain over this. The Dutch occupied important regions of Brazil and implanted an elaborate and well-maintained system of plantation in the town of Olinda, for instance. When they were expelled in 1654, Brazil lost a bit of its hegemony in the production of sugar, mainly due to the loss of capital to finance the sugar mills. However, one of the things that many of these works do not describe in detail is the initial reaction of the Portuguese planters to this domination by the Dutch. How was it that the Dutch became so prominent in the colony?

To be fair, some of the literature does address some of the reasons that this prominence suddenly vanished, leaving behind only a slight influence (particularly in the layout of Dutch-dominated cities). Lockhart and Schwartz (1983) do the best at explaining this era. The reading talks about the desire of the Crown to impose greater control of the sugar industry in the 1650s, at a time of production and price fluctuation problems. One of the reasons for such push by the Crown was the domination by the Dutch in the 1620-1654. In 1630, the Dutch seized Pernambuco and the port areas along the Atlantic coast, and profited the most from the sugar trade. Socially and culturally, they had a small impact though, especially because they used the Portuguese to produce sugar for them. These Portuguese planters rebelled in 1654 because they were in debt to Dutch West India Company. The battles caused major destruction to the *engenhos*, resulting in a slump in the sugar industry at a time in which competition from nearby countries was intensifying.

Abolition and effects

Schwartz (1985) focuses more of the discussion of the Crown's decision toward the end of his book. The Pombal reforms in the 1750s brought a new set of challenges to the planter class. The nobility resisted the desire for greater control and royal absolutism, and the Portuguese administrators responded with repression. The shift of the capital from Salvador to Rio de Janeiro was not a felicitous event for engenho owners, just as the seizure of Jesuit properties, the educational reforms and the agricultural diversification measures adopted. There was a resurgence of sugar in 1790s-1800s, which reinforced the demand for slave labor and necessity to continue slavery, but several issues conspired toward abolition measures. For one, as Schwartz describes, slaves seized the moment, and began rebellions. Though defeated by government forces, these rebellions eventually had a strong impact, as it left "Brazilians increasingly considering other alternatives [of nation building and socio-economic composition]. The war, perhaps, had not been in vain" (Schwartz 1985, 488). There are strong indications that foreign pressures were at play in the abolition process.

Martin (1993) argues that the British government and merchants did not want to have so much competition as they were building the sugar market in the West Indies, and grasped onto humanitarian discourse to push the Portuguese government and the Prince Regent to sign the *alvará* decrees in 1813. Since the decree meant nothing in terms of actual end of slave trade, the British continued to press through diplomatic means, even after independence. These works on the impact of sugar production in the colonial period point to various recurrent themes, and they each emphasize different aspects of the effects of sugar on political, cultural, and socio-economic patterns in Brazil. Elite power derived from the organization of *engenhos*, slavery being one part of the whole conglomerate of social relations between different social groups. Different authors pinpoint the strengths and limitations of the engenho and its social structure system.

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