

Contemporary Slavery and Inequality in Brazil *Pureza's* Complaint and Struggle

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Abstract This article briefly presents the feature film *Pureza*, which is based on a true story, to help analyse the contemporary forms of slavery in Brazil that reveal the permanent movements of capital expropriation, noticeable in the exploitation and oppression of a race-based labour force characterized by patriarchy, that migrates in order to survive. In this sense, we examine regional inequalities, social polarization and the particular aspects of the Brazilian social formation for the discussion of contemporary slavery, which is seen as the most visible expression of superexploitation, as well as the result of the reinvention of hybrid forms of exploitation of the labour force.

Keywords Slavery. Dependent capitalism. Expropriations. Superexploitation. Oppression.

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1 Introduction

The aim of presenting the film *Pureza* in this article is to demonstrate the violence of capitalist exploitation and oppression¹ by drawing on historical and structural concepts of the socio-economic foundations of Brazil, as well as on conjunctural dynamics of the contemporary phase of capitalism. Therefore, as a means to contribute to the analysis of the contemporary forms of enslavement of human beings in Brazil, we present, in the first part of the article, the character and a bit of the film's plot, listing the regional inequalities and social polarization of the Brazilian reality and the countertrends of the contemporary phase of capitalism, which deepen the driving factors of contemporary slavery² and promote the historical-social downgrading of what is understood as dignity. The extreme violence of the exploitation of the workforce has guaranteed the country's economic growth in Brazilian agribusiness, which uses enslaved labour combined with high technology. Demonstrating the great social polarization in the Latin American reality. In the year 2023, 3,151 people were rescued from contemporary slavery. The number is the highest since 2009, when 3,765 people were rescued. Despite this increase, the data shows how the country has regressed in the recent period because the number of labour inspection auditors is at the lowest level in 30 years. Data on contemporary slavery in Brazil (from 1995 to 2023), show that, out of the 63,400 people rescued, rural work leads to the largest number of people rescued, mainly in the harvesting of coffee and sugar cane (Wellton 2023). In the second part, we address the transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of the labour force, as permanence and rupture threads with the colonial slavery, establishing superexploitation, and how those racialized individuals are

1 We do not understand the relationship between exploitation and oppression as if there were an ontological priority of exploitation over oppression or vice versa. We identified that the universal categories of capitalism - as an "articulated and contradictory totality of exploitation, domination, and alienation relations" (Arruzza 2015, 55) - must be analysed in their concrete and historically established forms. In this sense, analysing the working classes requires looking at them at the level of the concrete socio-historical process, where oppressions are constituted as structuring mediations of the exploitation of labour surplus value.

2 The International Labour Organization (ILO), when referring to contemporary forms of slavery, uses the term *modern slavery* based on the Protocol (P029) to the Forced Labour Convention No. 29, 1930 and Recommendation (R203), which provides guidance on the application of the Protocol. In this regard, unlike the Brazilian legislation (according to Law 10803/2003 supplementary to article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code), the ILO does not consider exhausting working hours and degrading conditions as slavery. It is worth pointing out that we characterized it as contemporary slavery and not *labour analogous to slavery*, according to our law, because we consider it a way of emphasizing the permanence and rupture threads of the socio-historical wage-earning process of the Brazilian labour force. Debate opened by Figueira 2004.

the most impacted by the lack of modernization of their labour condition. Neoliberal macroeconomic policies guaranteed the transformation of production processes and, as a result, labour relations, further harming the working class with the increase in informality, precariousness and outsourcing. The neoliberal offensive resulted in greater social polarization. The analytical thread of this text is the founding expropriations of capitalism and its way of maintaining itself through the exploitation and oppression of the working classes, in which contemporary slavery is one of its perverse aspects.

2 **Pureza, Regional Inequality and the Permanence of Slavery**

The preview of the feature film *Pureza* in Rio de Janeiro was on 28 April 2022. I personally met Pureza Lopes Loyola, a potter born in the city of Presidente Juscelino, state of Maranhão. Pureza is today a 76-year-old woman who expresses a lot of candor and extreme strength in her eyes. Over her three-year saga in search of her son from farm to farm in the South of the state of Pará in the 1990s, she told me how her feet, despite often bleeding, endured long and hard journeys. And she told me that she won the battle of having her son back home, and what she could do for others, what she did and what she keeps doing, such as her mobilization with the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*) and her denunciations in Brasília.

The work of fiction *Pureza*, directed by Renato Barbieri and featuring impeccable acting by actress Dira Paes, is a film inspired by the real drama of Dona Pureza, which brings touching elements of the tragic reality of most of the Brazilian working classes. The cycle of exploitation and oppression violence, which the bourgeois society spreads out in our territory in such an unequal way, may seem unreal to many 'privileged' people in large capital cities. The film tells not only the story of her search for her son, but also the lives of thousands of workers who are subjected to contemporary forms of slavery in Brazil.

Dona Pureza courageously visited several farms in search of her son, who she knew was suffering. And, during her journey, she worked as a cook on the farms and saw up close the enticement of *groomers* (also called *gatos*, or cats) and the brutality of foremen to expropriate as much as possible from the rural workers, many of whom were tortured and lost their lives while claiming for the minimum dignity. Therefore, the film features the extreme conditions of contemporary slavery, which generally comprises, besides the violation of labour rights, various types of violence and humiliation, as well as the

shame of returning home with fewer resources, insufficient remuneration for the workers to support themselves, lack of hygiene,

exposure to occupational risks and contagious diseases, and even risk of murder. (Leão 2016, 3931)

On the one hand, the resident of the city of Bacabal, state of Maranhão represents, in this film, many other enslaved women in vital reproductive labour on the farms, and, on the other, the mothers and families who agonize when a relative does not return or disappears when migrating to “earn a living”.

The work of fiction does not directly address the issue of Brazilian regional inequality, but the contemporary forms of slavery are made possible due to the migratory processes of thousands of people in search of alternatives for survival. In this regard, we highlight that life expectancy in the state of Maranhão is one of the lowest in our country (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2020), and such state is known to be the place of origin or birth with the highest rates of people rescued from contemporary slavery in Brazil. Within the Northeast region it accounts for the highest number of rescues. From 1995 to 2021, 3,474 people were rescued from contemporary slave labour conditions (Radar SIT 2021).

A major International Labour Organization survey (2018) carried out in Maranhão estimated that, in 2017, there was at least one person aged 18 or older subjected to contemporary slavery out of 16.2% of the households visited in Maranhão. In 6.2% of the households there was an individual subjected to forced labour, 10.4% in degrading conditions, 3.8% subjected to exhausting working hours, and 1.6% under debt bondage.

The bonds are seen in the “necessity”,³ in the transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of the labour force, such as partnership contracts, the traditional debt bondage or the “new” modality, in which the delivery worker gets into debt to rent a bicycle, or in the online app store, to buy the bag, the vest and, still, they have to hire an internet service to work and, in the end, those companies try to convince that there is no employment relationship.

Between 2012 and 2019, we can affirm that there was an average of one occupational accident every 49 seconds and one death resulting from them every three hours and three minutes nationwide (Ministério Público do Trabalho 2019). The Southeast region accounts for the highest rate of occupational accidents from 2016 to 2018 with the number of 917,043 (total with and without Communication of Work Accident) as opposed to the North region, which is 75,475 (Instituto Nacional do Seguro Social 2018).

The social security expenditure on occupational accident in Brazil from 2012 to 2020 was over BRL 100 billion and, in this period,

3 See Moura 2009.

more than 21,000 deaths from occupational accidents were recorded, which represents a rate of 6 deaths for every 100,000 formal employment contracts. Brazil ranks second in work-related deaths among the G-20 countries, second only to Mexico, with eight deaths per 100,000 employment contracts. In Brazil in 2020, serious occupational accidents reported to the Ministry of Health rose by 40%, and applications for sick leave due to anxiety, stress, depression, among other problems that affect mental health rose by 30% (ILO 2021).

Also in this respect, a survey carried out by the ILO with the World Health Organization (WHO) shows that long working hours increase the number of deaths from cardiovascular diseases. Between 2000 and 2016 there was a 29% increase in the number of people who died from heart diseases and strokes worldwide. The common point in all these deaths was that the weekly working hours of these people exceeded 55 hours (Pega et al. 2021), i.e., their life funds were compromised.

The working hours of the rescued people typically exceed the statutory 44 hours and – something that is increasingly being verified – is that long working hours and lack of sufficient rest between shifts, which characterizes as exhausting working hours, have become commonplace in the lives of the working classes, as the case of female household servants and delivery workers can evidence. Although we see the increase of underemployed people in the Brazilian statistics due to insufficient hours worked,⁴ we see, on the other hand, people who are busy with long working hours and lack of sufficient rest to replenish their physical and mental energies. It is worth highlighting, within Karl Marx's (2017a, ch. 23) understanding of the General Law of Capitalist Accumulation, how investment in increased productivity and intensity, to ensure higher rates of exploitation and profit, but also as a counteracting movement,⁵ promotes the existence of a surplus labour force population, which sets pressure on the overwork of the occupied part of the working classes, and in turn, this overwork increases the ranks of relative overpopulation.

Even though the exhausting working hours is one of the types of contemporary slavery, according to article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code, precisely because it violates human dignity due to the damage to life. Such typification is under dispute and has not been mostly absorbed by the Judiciary Branch, even though the decisions suggest

⁴ “In the 4th quarter of 2021 in Brazil, the unemployment rate was 11.1%, while the compound rate of labour force underutilization reached 24.3%. The consolidated result of such measures by Large Regions points out the Northeast as the region where the highest measures of the labour force underutilization were observed and, in the South Region, the lowest” (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2021, 7).

⁵ Marx (2017a; 2017b) refers to counteracting influences that act on the general law in such a way as to nullify or attenuate the fall in the profit rate, giving it a trend nature.

undignified conditions, even describing the degradation in great detail, it can be seen that the Court is still conservative when it comes to expressly acknowledging the existence of labour conditions analogous to slavery. (Miraglia 2020, 130-1)

It is believed that, just because of the naturalization of the length of working hours and degrading labour conditions, contemporary slavery is masked and, consequently, undignified labour conditions become commonplace, characterized only as violations of the labour legislation and not as a crime, in a country where the working classes have no choice, because the 'need' is stronger to dismiss a work contract and starve to death.

Our cultural melting pot and the objective conditions of the working classes, structured by the specific features of dependent economies, as well as historical and structural expropriations, lead to the naturalization of the violation not only of rights, but also of these people's life fund. Therefore, exhausting working hours is acknowledged by the Brazilian Superior Labor Court as

an offense to the worker's fundamental right [and] does not admit the existence of labour conditions analogous to slavery, characterizing the situation as a breach of health and safety standards. (141)

The naturalization of the vilification in the workplace for the working classes, in particular the racialized and regionalized ones, as the case of the Northeast, with the extension of working hours, with little or no rest, night shifts without weekly rest, and sleeping on the job without any facilities, are recurrent during the inspections carried out by the Special Mobile Inspection Group.⁶

Wages that do not correspond to the historical and moral value of workers, that are unable to ensuring basic rights, and that motivates workers to sleep either on the streets or in their own workplace in order to save money and be able to survive. This is what the manager of a company answered, in a rescue operation in the city of Rio de Janeiro: that the people rescued from contemporary slavery would rather sleep in the company to save money and, as migrants from the Northeast, they had to save money to return to their hometown (Sakamoto 2021).

6 It comprises inspectors from the Brazilian Ministry of Labor and Social Security, Federal Police chiefs and agents, and prosecutors from the Brazilian Public Labor Prosecution Office, (Ministério Público do Trabalho - MPT). In addition, under certain circumstances, it may include Federal Highway Police agents, members of the Attorney General's Office, the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) and the Brazilian Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA).

Another important reflection is that, although the movie *Purezza* represents a fact that occurred in the 1990s, current data from the Brazilian Research Network on Food Sovereignty and Security (2022) show that we have gone back to that decade's starvation figures, because more than half of Brazilian households (58.7%) are under food insecurity status. From the last quarter of 2020 to the beginning of 2022, the percentage of people under situation of severe insecurity rose from 9% to 15.5%, which means starvation, and such condition is even more serious in rural area households (18.6%). However, the quantity of starving people in urban areas is heartbreaking, comprising 27,405 million human beings. The situation is even more worrying in the North and Northeast regions of Brazil, because people with very severe food restrictions live in 25.7% of the households in the North region and in 21% in the Northeast region.

Ethnic-racial inequality is evident in the data on food insecurity, with the difference that, in 10.6% of the households, where interviewees identified themselves as white, there is food insecurity. In the case of households whose residents self-declared as black or brown, the percentage was 18.1%. Likewise, we identified that women-led households have the highest percentage of food insecurity (34.2%) as opposed to 26.4% of men-led households.

Translating it into Brazilian population figures, 125 million people out of a total of 213.3 million inhabitants are facing food insecurity, and approximately 33 million of them are in a situation of starvation, characterized by severe food insecurity, in which women, black, and residents of the North and Northeast regions of Brazil are the most affected.

Such data reveal that this food insecurity scenario can further worsen the working conditions in Brazil, because the need for survival makes people submit themselves to any opportunity that comes along in order to have something to eat. In the current context, after the labour counter-reform and the continuous setbacks legitimized by Jair Bolsonaro's government,⁷ the situation of unprotected and deregulated employment contracts facilitate the submission of people to contemporary slavery.

Relating to the food insecurity data above, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic was just when we had a significant number of 1,959 rescued people, the highest figure since 2013.⁸ The state of Minas Gerais had the highest number of people rescued, followed by

⁷ See the news report "Bolsonaro government program to eliminate 432,000 jobs, say 27 Ministry of Labor auditors". <https://urbsmagna.com/programa-do-governo-bolsonaro-vai-eliminar-432-mil-vagas-dizem-27-audidores-do-ministerio-do-trabalho/>.

⁸ The Brazilian labour inspection staff is lagged, "even given its immense relevance, Labor Inspection has been neglected and weakened. In the last ten years, for instance, there

Goiás, then São Paulo and Pará. Nearly 90% (89%) of the people rescued were in agriculture and cattle work, led by the coffee sector (310 persons), which also had the highest number of children and adolescents. After the coffee sector, garlic production had a high number of rescues (215), followed by charcoal (194), land preparation (151), sugarcane (142) and beef cattle raising (106).

Data on contemporary slavery in Brazil (from 1995 to 2022), show that of the more than 60 thousand people rescued, cattle-raising – one of the activities mostly responsible for the deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest –⁹ leads the general ranking of people rescued from contemporary slavery (31% of the total, MPT 2020) and the values of the labour force in this sector do not allow for decent wages, in constitutional terms. For most Brazilian agribusiness entrepreneurs this does not matter, because the cycle of their capital takes place overseas, so it does not matter if the Brazilian working classes are receiving a salary that does not allow them to survive, or whether they are under exhausting working hours or under degrading conditions. The 2018 Dirty List on slave labour was occupied by almost half of agribusiness economic sectors, and between 2003 and 2014, 80% of the people rescued worked for agribusiness.

During the new Coronavirus pandemic, with the rise of the dollar, Brazilian agribusiness celebrated its profits by prioritizing the foreign market, while more than half of the Brazilian population is facing food insecurity. Agribusiness has benefited both from government tax incentives, such as the Kandir Law, and from the devaluation of our currency, due to our dependence on foreign exchange. Due to that, agribusiness has increased the export of primary products causing a shortage of food for the domestic market, which is one of the causes of the increase in the price of the basic food basket.

In the 2021 rescues in urban activities, 210 people were rescued, mostly in the real estate and civil construction sectors (108), and 27 people were rescued in household work (in 2020 there had been only three). On May 13, 2022, the day Brazil celebrates the Abolition of Slavery, the rescue May 13, 2022, the news reported the rescue of an elderly woman who had been in such conditions in a house in the northern area of Rio de Janeiro, for 72 years!

In 2021, the ‘profile’ of those rescued workers was similar to other surveys and inspection data: 90% are men, 80% are black, 47% are from the Northeast, and 6% are illiterate (Sakamoto 2022). Even though there is a male majority in rescue operations, we have to face structural elements such as the invisibility of reproductive labour and

has been a reduction of about 45% in the number of Auditors and almost 70% of the budget resources of the area” (Sindicato Nacional dos Auditores-Fiscais do Trabalho 2022).

⁹ See Escobar 2020.

its outsourcing to black women, who experience conditions that are very close to colonial slavery in the performance of household work. As well as the inviolability of private property of the so-called “traditional Brazilian family”, which hypocritically claims that such workers are like family to them, to justify the lack of wages and rights.

This information also shows the naturalization of the vilification in the workplace for the working classes, in particular the racialized and regionalized ones, as the case of the people from the Northeast region, with the extension of working hours, with little or no rest, night shifts without weekly rest, and sleeping on the job without any dignified conditions.¹⁰ Under conditions of superexploitation of their labour force, workers are pushed to the limit of compromising their own survival both in the violation of their consumption fund and in the erosion of their life funds due to strenuous working hours, combined with threats and physical and/or psychological violence.

The naturalization, the need of the working and subordinated classes and the escalation of violations to their humanity require the examination not only of the conjunctural dynamics elements of capitalism, but also of the historical and structural components of the Brazilian social formation.

The understanding of the special way in which the socio-economic laws of capitalism are realized in the Brazilian dependent economy allows us to clarify the main aspects of contemporary slavery, outlined by article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code, as the most evident expressions of the superexploitation of the labour force. It is also understandable that contemporary forms of slavery are the result of the permanence and recycling of transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of labour force in the historical process of commodification of labour, in the transition from the Brazilian slaveholding colonialism to dependent capitalism.

Reflection on production chains and the local labour situation goes back to rescuing the tendentious laws of dependence, such as “value transfers as unequal exchange” linked to the “splitting of the phases of the capital cycle”, which are expressed in our export trade policy. For example, data on exports of agribusiness commodities, which in the year to date, between January and October 2022, the sector represented 48.5% of Brazil’s total foreign sales in the period.¹¹ The articles that stand out are soy, meat, corn, sugar and alcohol complex, forestry products and coffee. Many of these crops were and are produced using labour under contemporary conditions of slavery. Proven

10 New report by Sakamoto 2021.

11 See the report on the federal government website: <https://www.gov.br/pt-br/noticias/agricultura-e-pecuaria/2022/11/com-vendas-de-us-14-25-bilhoes-exportacoes-do-agronegocio-batem-recorde-em-outubro>.

in the most recent release of the “slave labour dirty list”, because of the 289 employers, including individuals and legal entities, who are part of the current list of those caught with enslaved labour force, 172 have a National Classification of Economic Activities (Cnaes) of rural activities (Wellton 2023). The production chain of these commodities for export must be well monitored, considering that they historically benefit several corporations at the expense of conditioning workers to contemporary slave labour and violations of environmental legislation.

The discipline of the workforce for Brazilian manual labour has always been very close to articulated slavery, often to the cruelty normalized by the bourgeoisie. Due to our regional inequality and hierarchies, created both by racialization and unequal development, the fringes of the working classes that have been most sacrificed have been black and northeastern ones. We just need to check the profile of the people rescued over these 28 years of Labour Inspection. In 2022, of the 2,575 people rescued, 92% were men, 29% were between 30 and 39 years old, 51% lived in the Northeast, 58% were from the Northeast, 83% declared themselves as black (black and brown), 15% as white and 2% as indigenous (Sakamoto 2023).

A survey (Rossi 2022), carried out in 2022, identified that among the ten large mega cattle ranchers in Brazil, only one does not have environmental and labour problems. Nine of these mega ranchers have at least one farm in the Legal Amazon and one raises cattle near the biome, the majority are heirs to land purchased with incentives from the business-military dictatorship.

If on the one hand we see agribusiness using ‘archaic’ forms of exploitation of the workforce, on the other, according to Fabiana Scoleso (2022), Brazilian agribusiness is completely intertwined with outsourced services from Agrotechs, which make it possible – through Big data, the use of cameras, drones, smart rovers and sensors – climate monitoring and control of sowing operations, irrigation, use of pesticides, soil analysis and harvest time, as well as the connection of agricultural machines to GPS’s, avoiding errors and excessive use of inputs and resources.

In the process of transnationalization and greater control with appropriation-expropriation of capital by hegemonic nations, the expulsion of small farmers, riverside populations, quilombolas and indigenous people is also guaranteed for the expansion of export commodities such as soybeans and corn. Or the integration “of family farming with the cooperative system and digital agriculture, subject to platform systems that are controlled by big capital, by large corporations” (Scoleso 2022, 163).

We identify how our dependent condition deepens the disarticulation of our productive structure with the vital and historically determined needs of the working and subordinate masses, because it

compromises our food sovereignty and deepens the food and nutritional insecurity of the Brazilian working classes (Soares 2023).

3 The History from Slavery to Superexploitation

We understand contemporary slavery in Brazil as the result of conjunctural dynamics, as well as historical and structural components, permeated by the determinants of dependent economies in the world market. From this analytical point of view, in the light of some specific features of the Brazilian reality, we present some structural and systematic characteristics of our socio-economic formation, which explain the condition of the Brazilian working classes.

It was during the transition period from colonial slavery, with the coexistence of free and enslaved people, to the generalization of free labour, that a heterogeneous labour market was established. The transitory forms of exploitation of the labour force with traces of subordination and slavery-like violence, together with the incentive to European immigration and Brazil's eugenics policy, consolidated the permanence of Black people in a labour position of semi-slavery. The eugenics policy ensured lowered wages, which in turn predominantly ensured that the payment of the black labour force did not correspond to its reproduction needs.

The establishment of bourgeois modernization in our country occurred in a segmented and slow manner, and in regions where it was inevitable, in connection to distinct measures of silencing the opposition, either through explicit repression or through co-optation.

According to Florestan Fernandes (2009, 67), when industrialization began in the nineteenth century, only the most dynamic economic sectors and regions managed to adapt and 'normalize' labour relations to the capitalist 'standards' of commodification of the labour force. On the other hand, other economic sectors became "the internal centre of dependence and underdevelopment", for lacking "vitality". They ensured the superexploitation to share the surplus with the dominant external bourgeoisie and the high privileges of the internal bourgeoisie. In an analysis of this historical and structural process, Vânia Bambilra (2019, 77) states that the specialization of the peripheral economies as single commodity producers caused the modernization, and the possibilities for production to become varied through industrial progress, a productive variety directed towards

overcoming the specialization and the international division of labour under hitherto existing forms, thus asserting the law of unequal and combined development. (77)

Even though industrial progress in dependent economies

challenges and opens doors for overcoming the international division of labour, industry needs the export sector as a condition to perform its own process. (77)

In the second industrialization process, just before the post-World War II monopoly integration phase, we can see that a “pattern of capital reproduction” had been established, which enabled autonomous development. As stated by Jaime Osório (2012): an industrial pattern, in its internalized and autonomous stage, established from the second half of the 1930s until the 1940s. Ruy Mauro Marini shows us that, in this period, the possibilities of an autonomous industrial development in Brazil were provided, but this stage was split by the deterioration of the bases that enabled such process, because

the complementariness that had existed until then between industrial development and agribusiness-export activities became a true opposition. (2013, 76)

Therefore, the integration to international capital took place in the industrial pattern that had been started in a domestic and autonomous manner. In the pattern of reproduction process of capital integrated with foreign capital

[T]he dependent industrialization -, which is followed by the subordinate integration of production systems, [reinforces] the separation between the productive structure and the needs of the broad masses. (Luce 2018, 230)

These are some of the historical and structural components that included our country in the global market,¹² as a dependent economy, which clarifies how the superexploitation of the labour force works both as a mechanism used by the Latin American bourgeoisie to make up for the specific trend laws of dependent capitalism, such as the “transfer of value as unequal exchange”, in its relationship with the foreign, hegemonic and imperialist bourgeoisie, and

12 Marini (2013), Bampirra (2019) and Fernandes (2009) had a historical, concrete and dialectical understanding that the underdevelopment of periphery and dependent countries is not an anomaly or a stage to be overcome, but such dependence derives from the expansion of the global market, centralized by the hegemonic countries, in the unequal and combined development of capitalism.

promotes the deterioration of the terms of trade between economies in the global market.¹³

Adrián Sotelo Valencia (2021) recovers Marini's analysis to highlight the specific features of dependent economies, such as the conditions of foreign capital, international trade, technology, and even technical and scientific development, which is the monopoly of the large imperialist centers. Therefore, in the reality of dependent economies, the relative surplus value is established in dynamic branches, with a predominance of large, private domestic and international investments, which reproduce the cycle of structural dependence (monetary, exchange rate, technological and financial). The forms of extraction of absolute surplus value, along with the superexploitation of the labour force, become possibilities for certain bourgeois groups, which do not operate with the exploitation of the relative surplus value, to set pressure on the capitals that operate in it, in order to use superexploitation as a means to obtain, additionally, extraordinary profits.

Thus, to compensate for the transfer of value as an unequal exchange, the local bourgeoisie needs to exploit the labour force to the fullest, by extending the working hours, increasing the intensity and productivity of labour. In addition, they take away part of the workers' consumption fund in order to add it to the accumulation fund, as well as part of their life fund. What does it mean? Part of the labour required, i.e. that which is intended for the reproduction of labour force, is taken away, causing the worker to receive less than their historical and moral value for reproduction, thus compromising their future years of life.

Therefore, the superexploitation of the labour force must be understood as an expropriation that manifests under different forms, but we point out that when superexploitation occurs through the prolongation of the working hours, as well as through the increase of intensity beyond normal limits, we can identify its most brutal forms in the exhausting working hours of contemporary slavery. In such situation, the workers lose their consumption fund and their life fund, also seen in the degrading conditions to which they are subjected.

Such procedures constitute a recurrent practice by employers, legitimized by the legal and formal apparatus to remunerate the labour

13 On this double nature of superexploitation, refer to Leite, Alves (2022, 17, emphasis added): "Because the greater the distance between market prices and value, the greater the transfer of value overseas and, therefore, the more intense must be the action of the domestic compensation mechanism (the superexploitation of labour force), thus increasing the volume of goods sold. Such trend to produce more and more explains the fall in prices of primary products in relation to manufactured goods [...]. Therefore, following Marini's argument in *Dialectics of Dependence*, "the deterioration of the terms of trade is a consequence of the superexploitation of labour in connection with unequal exchange". This seems to be what the author suggests as the secret of unequal exchange".

force below its value, as can be seen in the setbacks caused by labour counter-reforms.¹⁴

When we present the category of superexploitation of the labour force¹⁵ we do not mean to define it as a synonym of degradation of labour conditions or lack of capitalist development, but to see it as an exploitation that impacts the workers' consumption fund and/or life fund and as a structural and systematic trend, as a special categorical content of dependent capitalism. In this sense, we seek to show that contemporary slavery is not simply the result of "archaic" remnants, but it must be understood as a result of the conformation of our process of commodification of the labour force in dependent capitalism.

Thus, it is worth pointing out another previous historical process of expropriation of peoples and bodies when Florestan Fernandes (2009) points out how colonial slavery was fundamental for the emergence and development of the capitalist market and when the "commercial/industrial revolution" accelerated domestic modernization, the predominant labour relationships of colonial origin became an obstacle to the domestic expansion of the market, requiring the commodification of the labour force. However, transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of the labour force have been established, merging under the innovation of "past" forms of conditioning men and women, whether they were black men and women or white immigrants. Even if, in the historiography of labour, we see several cases of white immigrants in conditions very close to those of colonial slavery,¹⁶ it is possible to identify that, in this modernization process, there was a predominance of the permanence of the black working class in the most brutal and subordinate forms of exploitation of the labour force.

Even because the commodification of the Brazilian labour force was engendered amidst the enslaved work of black men and women, who were fundamental for the consolidation process of the world capitalist economy. Until the mid-1850s, the enslaved labour force could be found in export agriculture, ports, overland transportation, trade, and factories. As

in the most diverse activities, from household services to the most specialized crafts, from the heavy work of transporting goods to the varied street trade. (Mattos 2009, 17)

14 Laws 13467/17 and 13429/17 have set back the Brazilian labour law. On this discussion, see Krein 2021.

15 See Luce 2018.

16 See Alencastro 1988.

This period was an important milestone in the transition from slavery to the generalization of free labour.

Clóvis Moura (2020) analyses that the enslaved people – still under the ‘full slavery’ regime (approximately 1500 to 1850) – were in occupations that were, later, ‘reinvented’ during the transition period of coexistence among free, enslaved, and freed people. In the historical course of colonial slavery, the author points out two different periods, the first being the ‘full slavery’ regime aforementioned and, the second, which was simultaneous to the passage to dependent capitalism, identified by the author as ‘late slavery’ (1851-88). It was precisely during this period of capitalist modernization and commodification of the labour force that a Brazilian eugenics policy was established with the encouragement to ‘migratory outbreaks’ from Europe, thus forming a white labour force. Therefore, the condition of semi-slavery was consolidated for black people, in addition to their almost permanent place in the ranks of relative overpopulation. In this process “levels of conditioning and limitation arise that will create gaps in the worker coming in from abroad” (Moura 1983, 133).

In view of the English legislation that prohibited the trafficking of enslaved black African people, which “maintained the classification of crime of piracy for the importation of slaves and established new measures for the repression of the traffic, which had already been prohibited” (Coutinho 2015, 28), since the Law of 7 November 1831, that forbade the importation of slaves. Thus, in 1850, the enactment of several laws that indicated the transition from slavery to free labour escalated, as a product of the external pressure for modernization as well as the result of the struggle and resistance of the black population that fled that hateful situation.

We can note this period of coexistence and transition to free labour in Decree No. 1566 dated February 24, 1855, in its Article 6, Paragraph 6, which provided for the director of the Rio Novo Agricultural Colonial Association in the state of Espírito Santo, when establishing the coffee culture, to import foreign families to inhabit their lands. This director was in charge of:

Paragraph 6 – Engaging or hiring the required national or foreign workers, as possible, to assist in the services of the establishment of the slave forces of the Association, as to the prompt preparation of the deadlines, as per paragraph 2 of art. 3.¹⁷

17 Available at CECULT, in the Database “Legislação: Trabalhadores e Trabalho em Portugal, Brasil e África Colonial Portuguesa”. See: <https://www2.ifch.unicamp.br/cecult/lex/web/legislacao/425.html>.

The historical and structural elements of slavery in Brazil, led from the “late slavery” phase to free labour, as stated by Moura (2020): a “permanent social and ethnic barrier” against former slaves, which establishes, even today, an enormous racial and ethnic inequality existing in our country.

The notorious Land Law of 1850 assured the privileges of the dominant classes, because the law concerned granted and expanded the land as private property only to the agricultural oligarchies, which became bourgeois, thus establishing the current exclusionary *latifundia* system. The Land Law of 1850 prevented

the commoners and the populations that were about to leave the state of captivity from having access to it. It also established dependency mechanisms for the landless people that last to this day. (Moura 2020, 115)

From the 1950s on, former slaves were often absorbed as free labour force on farms in São Paulo. However, according to our regional inequality, in contrast, in the Northeast there was the guarantee of housing and weekly pay at low or no cost (Moura 2020). Practices of exploitation of the labour force are very close to those that we currently find within the types of contemporary slavery, such as debt bondage. Similar to the reality of several black female household servants rescued in 2021, which expresses the movement of expropriations, through the exploitation and oppression connected to the patriarchal-racist-capitalist thread,¹⁸ in the outsourcing of reproductive labour.¹⁹

We can also analyse the Law of the ‘Free Womb’ of 1871 and the ‘Sexagenarian’ Law of 1884, which had an “almost innocuous and even delaying connotation, announcing the radical condemnation that weighed on the slave labour regime” (Werneck Sodré 2011, 123-4). The ineffectiveness of these laws, which led to the gradual liberation of the black people, becomes evident when we consider the life expectancy of those enslaved people, in particular those who worked in hard manual labour. Under State inspection, for five years the former slaves

18 “The node formed by the patriarchal-racist-capitalist system comprises a fairly new reality, which was built in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries, and which is not only contradictory, but also governed by an equally contradictory logic” (Saffioti 2000, 73).

19 Social reproduction “encompasses activities that sustain human beings as *embodied social beings* who need not only to eat and sleep, but also to raise their children, take care of their families, and maintain their communities, all while pursuing hopes for the future” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser 2019, 106, emphasis added).

had to keep service lease contracts to obtain income, because if they lived in vagrancy they were forced to work in public establishments. (Coutinho 2015, 29)

On this path, the ‘Sexagenarian’ Law reveals much more the lack of accountability of the masters towards the slaves with

the granting of freedom, which meant a special kind of ‘freedom’: to die of hunger, as a result of early disability acquired. (Gonzalez 2020, 61)

The purpose of every legislation that came to ‘free’ enslaved people was the “discipline” of the labour force, to banish “vagrancy”.²⁰ Because they forced the freed people to reside in the municipality where they received their freedom,

remaining in the company of their former masters, [to combat vagrancy] by means of the duty to work for 3 more years as compensation for his freedom, rendering services to their former masters. (Coutinho 2015, 31)

Prison was the main instrument of criminalization for the freed black people and expressed the authoritarian State, which condemned the freed ones without occupation or who did not comply with their labour contracts (Coutinho 2015).

Furthermore, in our regional inequality, all those laws for the liberation of black men and women from colonial slavery - in the historical process of commodification of the labour force, passing through the Brazilian Consolidation of Labour Laws (CLT), the Rural Worker Statute of 1963, even reaching the achievements of the Federal Constitution of 1988 - demonstrates, along this trajectory, the permanence of work conditions close to semi-slavery, serfdom, peonage, forms of enslavement of male and female indigenous and black people, varied conditions such as “sharecroppers, settlers, partners, wage earners, day labourers, among others” (Ianni 2005, 127).

This labour heterogeneity can be understood due to the unequal modernization process, which occurred in inevitable sectors, and, in turn, mediated by historical and founding expropriations of capitalism, such as patriarchy²¹ and colonial slavery, which structured our socio-sexual and ethnic-racial division of labour, evident in the data of labour and income conditions in contemporary Brazil.

20 See the discussion by Moura 2020; 2021.

21 See Arruzza 2015.

Lélia Gonzalez helps us analyse that

gender and ethnicity are manipulated so that, in the Brazilian case, the lowest levels of participation in the labour force, ‘coincidentally’, belong exactly to women and the black population. (2020, 27)

In view of these arguments, in the case of contemporary slavery in Brazil, 80% of the victims rescued between 2016 and 2018 are black people and 90% are men. In spite of this, we have to question the invisibility of reproductive labour, both because it is not recognized as labour and, in turn, the devaluation and naturalization of its performance by being carried out by women, and because household work is trivialized as being done in degrading conditions and, generally, with exhausting working hours.

We identified that we must face the non-recognition of reproductive labour as work²² and the performance of such labour in degrading conditions and/or with exhausting working hours, as it can be seen: Firstly, in the invisibility of reproductive work carried out by women, especially in rural endeavours as a guarantee of food, among other vital aspects for the daily labour of rescued workers; and secondly, the difficulty of inspecting the working conditions of female household servants, who ensure all the social reproduction in the residence of the ‘traditional Brazilian family’.

In this sense, the superexploitation of the labour force is a fundamental category, but it is not

sufficient, to reflect upon the economic and social formations of dependent capitalism, whose more complete understanding must also incorporate the power and oppression relationships. (Ferreira 2018, 228)

Because the subordination of the working classes under dependent capitalism is that of expropriation of both the means of subsistence and the living conditions, without guaranteed rights, which put them in a position of selling their labour under the worst conditions, mediated by ethnic-racial, gender, and sex oppressions.

22 It is of fundamental importance to point out that the tasks performed mostly by women to ensure the social reproduction must be recognized as labour; however, it is not necessarily productive labour. What we can see is, by platforming the work of female household servants, it is reinforced so that, when such work is performed mediated by algorithms, it becomes work on demand and paid per piece, thus ensuring the extraction of surplus value and turning it into productive work. On the “industrialization” of the services sector, see Antunes 2018.

Under such perspective, we point out that labour precariousness, structural racism, and patriarchy make up these constituent elements of the dynamics, which permanently re-establish themselves as an “ontological node”, renewing themselves even with the constant advance of the productive forces. It is a remarkable fact that today, under algorithmic control, and in a broad historical consolidated ground of precariousness and mystification of precariousness, it is easier to break the rules of employment relationship and deepen the superexploitation (Soares 2022).

Therefore, identifying how the expansion, expropriation and the search for capitalization of all spheres of life with the ceaseless productive restructuring, are realized mediated by the particular socio-historical features of dependency, is crucial for our analysis.

We can identify some specificities of the Brazilian workforce in the long trajectory from Brazil-Colony to Republican established through the extermination and expropriation of indigenous peoples and the enslavement, restriction and control of black African bodies. These were condemned after Abolition - or already during the delaying policies, which reduced the supply of enslaved black labour - to semi-slavery due to eugenic policies of extermination and purposeful lowering of wages for black labour; encouraging white European migration to “whiten the nation”; to the Land Law of 1850 and the absence of agrarian reform.

In this sense, we highlight the particularities of the dependent relationship established in Brazil’s insertion in the international division of labour, in its Imperial to Republican period, which engendered formal independence and relative autonomy that constituted an autocratic state essence, as well as shaped the dominant classes-dominated their fascist expressions. Explicit situation in the need to condition the working classes to super-exploitation, with the deepening of the hierarchies of the social division of labour with evident racism and misogyny and with the use of force or co-optation, to restrict speech and the struggle for rights, manifesting in a extreme the fundamental elements that capitalist accumulation requires

We have elucidated²³ that capitalist expropriation is not limited to means of life and territories, it affects bodies by racializing them and, in turn, hierarchizing them in the social division of labour through the social construction of a supposed sub-humanity, legitimizing enslavement. Or in the control over the female body to generate lives or not and guarantee the development and maintenance of the workforce, in an invisible way and, therefore, not paid for their

23 Fontes 2018 and Boschetti 2020 primary and secondary expropriations; in reading oppressions as expropriations we have the authors: Bhattacharya 2017; Arruzza 2015; Vogel 2022.

reproductive work. The ‘splits’ between production and reproduction, between manual and intellectual work, among others, engender hierarchies, modify the social division of labour, form branches of knowledge²⁴ and apparently fragment reality, clouding the apprehension of the capitalist social totality.²⁵

In this sense, misogyny, as well as eugenic standards, materialize

both in the white-Western aesthetic and cultural use as a parameter of humanity and in the exclusion or inequality of access to informational technologies. (Lippold, Faustino 2022, 71)

In Brazil, from the legal-parliamentary coup to the government of Jair Bolsonaro, an ultra-neoliberal “agenda” was implemented with an authoritarian and reactionary bias, with an open anti-social, racist, patriarchal and fascist policy, which deepened the process of deregulation and financial innovations to continue the subjection of capitalist dynamics to the logic of fictitious capital. Driven, even, by the use of technological innovation, through algorithms and artificial intelligence with their bots disseminating fake news and class, misogynistic and racist hatred.

However, it was in the nineties of the twentieth century that the destructive neoliberal “model” was initiated in our country, for the restructuring and reordering of capital on a global scale, which even today aims to roll back, with more intensity, the system of social protection, established in the Federal Constitution of 1988.

The neoliberal offensive, during the 1990s, promoted a fall in real wages, due to the decrease in formalized employment in companies and public services and the increase in small and precarious enterprises, micro-enterprises, home-based work, and work self-employment on the street, among other survival strategies in a context of extremely high unemployment produced by neoliberal counter-reforms.

With the promulgation of the Federal Constitution of 1988, through the establishment of fundamental labour rights, the aim was to homogenize the limits of the working day, in order to regulate it and define guidelines for the length of the working day in the 44-hour week, as well as guaranteeing intra-day and inter-day breaks. In this sense, it was believed that a “standard day” would be ensured for all Brazilian working classes.

24 See Lukács 2020.

25 The analysis of the Theory of Social Reproduction helps us to interpret the capitalist social totality of exploitation, expropriation, oppression and alienation. In addition to reflecting on socially determined hierarchies that subordinate people and condition them to superexploitation.

However, the discourse of the so-called State management reform brought the alleged “modernization” of labour legislation and the Federal Constitution, which aimed to destroy rights not accessed by a large part of workers. Because for our bourgeoisies with a predominantly fascist, racist and patriarchal profile, the most impoverished fringes of the working classes never fit into the Brazil they seek to build.

Therefore, in this decade, changes to the regulation of working time began, seen in the progressive release of work on Sundays, the incorporation of the time bank, the extension of the working day to up to 12 hours for certain segments, and in agreements to reduce intra-workday time, such as reducing the lunch break. In other words, there was already a deconstruction of rights that had never been accessed by a large part of the working classes,

to give companies greater freedom to manage working time according to what is most convenient for the dynamics of their economic activity. (Krein, Abílio, Borsari 2021, 254)

Along this path, the political-ideological apparatus of neoliberal macroeconomic policies guaranteed the transformation of production processes and, as an effect, labour relations, with the increase in informality, precariousness and outsourcing, reducing the forms of hiring the workforce with guarantee of labour rights and expanding temporary and/or intermittent contracts. This entire offensive against the working classes focused on encouraging self-employment, voluntary work, and the increase in cases of contemporary slave labour, in addition to the weakening of trade union organization.

4 Considerations

The feature film *Pureza* highlights the importance of studying the theme, by showing the regional inequality and social polarization in our country through the understanding of how the characteristics of dependent economies reveal structural features of labour precariousness, in an endless recycling of transitory or hybrid forms of exploitation of labour force, which are expressed in contemporary forms of slavery, mostly experienced by Brazilian racialized and/or gendered migrants.

Furthermore, the movie and data demonstrate how Brazilian economic growth is expanding at the expense of the enormous destruction of the rights of the working classes, increasing super-exploitation, that is, new forms of violation of the workers’ consumption fund and living fund, as well as ‘new’ contemporary forms of enslavement.

Pureza's love for her son turned her into a symbol of the fight against contemporary slavery in Brazil and worldwide, which was expressed through the Anti-Slavery International award she received in London in 1997. The movie and her history inspire us, as well as the histories of so many other fighters who are engaged in this battle, and motivate us to not only research the topic, but also to unite in the defense of the rights of the working classes in their heterogeneity and diversity.

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