

Deaths of Despair.
Brief Notes on Suicide and Alcohol Consumption among Brazilian
Slaves in the 19th Century.

Alexandre F. S. Andrada*

Abstract

Recent works in mainstream economic literature have attempted to explain social problems such as suicide and drug use among workers as a consequence of income loss, job loss, status loss, and alienation. This last concept is important in the Marxist tradition, so much so that Marx and Engels also addressed these social and psychological issues of the working class from an economic perspective. Based on this literature, this paper seeks to present an overview of the issues related to the physical and psychological health of enslaved workers in Brazil during the 19th century. Using archival material such as newspapers from various provinces, reports from the Executive and Legislative branches, we show some aspects of these “deaths of despair” among this group of workers who represented the maximum of labor super-exploitation on the periphery of global capitalism. Suicide and substance abuse, as expected, were not uncommon among this group of miserable workers whose basic aspects of humanity were denied.

Keywords: Slavery; Suicide; Alcohol; Deaths of Despair.

Jel-Code: N3

Área Temática 2 - História Econômica

*Professor at the Universidade de Brasília (UnB) - afsa@unb.br.

Introduction

In the book co-written with Anne Case, titled “Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism”, the 2015 Nobel Prize winner in Economics, Angus Deaton, investigates the increasing mortality rate among non-college educated white men in the United States. The authors identify “suicide, drugs, and alcohol” as the underlying causes of this phenomenon, which they partly attribute to economic factors such as wage stagnation, job deterioration, and detachment from the labor force. (Case & Deaton, 2020, p. 37). Similarly, Rodrik (2017) points to economic reasons when examining the recent surge of right-wing populism. He contends that globalization has led to winners and losers within countries, resulting in job destruction and changes in the remuneration of productive factors, in accordance with the Stolper-Samuelson theorem. These are just two fairly recent examples of works from traditional economic theory that link unemployment, financial insecurity, worker’s alienation, with large waves of social malaise.

In the Marxist tradition, the ideas of alienation and fetishism are fundamental theoretical pillars for understanding these issues. When analyzing the situation of the English working class in the mid-19th century, Friedrich Engels stated:

The consequences of improvement in machinery under our present social conditions are, for the workingman, solely injurious. . . Every new advance brings with it loss of employment, want, suffering. . . To escape despair, there are but two ways open to him; wither inward and outward revolt against bourgeoisie or drunkenness and general demoralization. And the English operatives are accustomed to take refuge in both. The history of the English proletariat relates hundreds of uprisings against machinery and the bourgeoisie; we have already spoken of the moral dissolution which, in itself, is only another form of despair. (Engels 1993[1845], p. 149)

In the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, Karl Marx states: “On the basis of political economy itself.. we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities” (Marx 2007[1844], p.67). He also writes: ”Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation” (ibid., p.69)

Marx even cites the physical and psychological effects of this alienation, this estrangement, caused by work itself:

”...that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. [...] As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.”. (Marx 2007[1844], p.72)

Mutatis mutandis, Marx and Engels’ words can be used to explain the situation faced by slaves in Brazil and elsewhere.

There were various forms of revolt against slavery; from the formation of *quilombos*, to the murder of slave owners, as well uprisings, such as the famous case of the Malês in Bahia in 1835. However, there were also more disorganized, self-destructive forms of revolt against oppression, with suicide and abusive alcohol consumption being the most common in this category.

In this article, using press materials from various provinces from north to south of Brazil, as well as official documents from the Executive and Legislative branches, we present some points about “deaths by despair” among those individuals.

1 Life and Death of the Enslaved People

Serfdom and slavery are human institutions that have existed in different times and places. However, the emergence of commercial capitalism from the European maritime expansion of the 15th and 16th centuries will bring about a quantitative and qualitative change in the importance of slavery for the functioning of the global economy. What was a residual trade at that time became one of the central "commodities" of capitalism until the 19th century. It is impossible to calculate how many Africans and their American descendants died as direct and indirect victims of this process, whose scars still persist on both sides of the Atlantic today.

As Europeans conquered territories in Africa and increased their demand for enslaved workers, wars and conflicts between different peoples on that continent were initiated, aggravated, and taken to extremes. An environment of instability, distrust, and the need to escape to increasingly remote regions was created, in an attempt to avoid that fate. As a contemporary observer noted, "the effect of the Slave Trade in gradually moulding to its own purpose all the institutions and habits of the country in which it prevails" (Wilberforce 1807, p.30).

The disruptive action of Europeans also caused long-term problems, forging exploitative economic, political, and social institutions that still impede the development of that continent today, as demonstrated by scholars such as Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson (2005) and Nunn (2009). Thus, both the slave trade and the racist ideas of European supremacy that underpinned it, and which served as a justification for neocolonialist policies from the mid-19th century onwards, are at the root of the deaths of millions of Africans to this day.

Of those embarked on slave ships, around 10% died during the crossing of the Atlantic. The distance between the ports of Recife and Angola, for example, is 2,912 nautical miles. The journey took between 20 and 30 days during which the captives were kept in uncomfortable positions, in an unhealthy environment, with almost no water or food. In the account of Mahommah Baquaqua - one of the few, if not the only, documents in which we can know the life of an enslaved African from his own account - there is a description of the journey between Africa and the port of Recife, where he disembarked in the 1840s. According to the author, the hold of the ship "was so low that we could not stand", and "sleep was denied us because of the confinement of our bodies." He also speaks of the "repugnance and filthiness" of the place. Moreover, "[t]he only food we had during the journey was old corn cooked. [...] We suffered greatly from lack of water, which was denied to us in proportion to our needs. A quart a day was all they allowed us, and nothing more" (Baquaqua 1988 [1854], p.272).

Of the survivors who disembarked at Brazilian ports, at least one-third of them were estimated to have died within the first five years¹. The daily life of nineteenth-century Brazil shocked foreign visitors who were unaware of the vivid images of slavery. In her travel diary from the early 1820s, Maria Graham says that she and her children were "completely disturbed by the impression of a slave market" when they walked through Recife, where "about fifty young people... with all the appearances of illness and destitution, resulting from scarce food and long isolation in unhealthy places, were sitting and lying in the street, amidst the filthiest animals" (Graham 1956 p.114). Another traveler who passed through the same city stated that slaves were on the streets by the hundreds, "groaning and sweating beneath their burdens, and wearing out their miserable lives in the performance of those heavy labours that are done by the horses in Scotland and England" (H.S.D.M. 1825, p. 115). While horses were given shoes, enslaved people performed these tasks barefoot. In fact, walking barefoot made suffering from chigoe flea (*tunga penetrans*) common among Brazilian slaves; "[t]his disorder is universal among negroes, and the poorer classes who walk through dust or sand without covering to the feet" Walsh (1831, p.404). And this was just one of the many diseases that attacked and decimated free Brazilians, especially enslaved people, such as various epidemics of diseases like smallpox, cholera, and yellow fever.

Figueira de Mello (1979[1852], p.42), when discussing the illnesses that attacked the population of Pernambuco, especially Olinda and Recife, reveals the harshness of the life of captives. He says that "intestinal anemia... greatly

¹For a more detailed discussion on the mortality of slaves, see Klein et al. (2001).

attacks the black slaves of the plantations”. They would also be the main ones affected by “endemic diseases... which are commonly called boubas.”

Tollenare (1905, p. 78-9), who lived in Pernambuco in the late 1810s, asserts that “during the four or five months that the sugar harvest lasts, the work of the black slaves on the plantation” could extend, through rotation, to 18 hours a day. Receiving only a handful of cornmeal and jerked beef as food.

The situation of the captives was so alarming that the governor of that province himself, in a report from 1850, stated:

The slaves’ diet remains poor, and the treatment they receive has not improved... There are owners who, when beef jerky is expensive, only choose the cheapest, sometimes buying already spoiled meat; and as if the poor diet wasn’t enough, they subject their slaves to work that consumes all hours of the day and much of the night... These unfortunate people, poorly nourished, poorly dressed, and forced to work beyond their capabilities, cannot live for long, and therefore, the mortality rate among the slaves on the plantations is high; not to mention that many succumb to the barbaric punishments they suffer. (Cunha e Figueiredo 1855, p.14).

Recent historiography has also focused on the topic. Amantino (2007) used information from runaway slave ads published in the *Jornal do Commercio* (RJ) to analyze the physical condition of enslaved people in the capital of the Empire in the 1850s. From her sample of just over 200 individuals, almost 35% had infections (parasitic, viral, or bacterial), 30% had some trauma (burns and fractures), and 18.4% had some malformation (such as strabismus and “defects in general,” as the author classifies them). Dias (2011) presents an essayist text in which he analyzes and discusses the diseases of enslaved people in Paraíba between 1850 and 1888, based on selected ads. Lima (2015) conducts exhaustive research on the causes of death of enslaved people in Capivari (SP) between 1821 and 1869. The author shows, for example, that during the sugarcane harvest, a time of cold weather in São Paulo, there was an extraordinary peak of deaths among individuals over 50 years old.

Among Africans and their descendants who survived the first five years of life - a critical period of infant mortality - life did not go very far. Subjected to exhausting workdays, poor nutrition, diseases, and violence of all kinds, enslaved people had a life expectancy below the already low average of those times. At 40 years old, an enslaved person was generally considered elderly. And even with the end of slavery in Brazil in 1888, with the majority of the Black and mixed-race population completely unsupported and detached from the formal political process of the elitist regimes that ruled, the standard of living for this group remained below that of whites. Even today, Black and mixed-race individuals have a lower life expectancy, higher chances of being victims of homicides, among other negative data, whose roots, again, date back to slavery and the institutional and structural racism that existed and still exists in the country.

Thus, if we consider the deaths that were directly and indirectly caused by the capture of slaves in Africa, it becomes clear that we are talking about a true holocaust of these workers and their descendants in the Americas.

2 Mental Health Issues

We begin with the premise that every human being yearns for freedom. However, in order to circumvent the intricate philosophical complexities that arise in defining the abstract concept of liberty and measuring the extent of one’s desire for it, we assert that no individual aspires to the status of slavery. This is especially true in the context of the servitude prevalent in Brazil, where both Africans and Brazilians subjected to this condition had two avenues to attain freedom: manumission and escape.

Manumission could be granted either by the owners themselves or through the captives’ purchase of their freedom. It is worth noting that owners’ promises of manumission were not always motivated by benevolent intentions, but

were often influenced by economic factors. It served as a tool to stimulate obedience and discourage escape attempts. Despite the apparent challenges of accumulating the required resources, manumission by purchase occurred with some frequency in the country.

Escape, on the other hand, could be either physical or metaphorical. Physical escapes were a continuous occurrence, as evident from the numerous “runaway slave” advertisements that appeared in national newspapers throughout most of the 19th century. Nevertheless, the likelihood of success was low. Punishments for fleeing were excessively brutal. For instance, Henderson (1821, pp. 72-3) recalls the severe punishment of 100, 200, or 300 lashes inflicted upon fugitives in Rio de Janeiro, an experience that he labeled “deeply afflicting.” Another common punishment was “sale outside the province,” which resulted in severing all emotional and social ties that the individual had formed in that location.

The symbolic escape, on the other hand, is one that results in the “deaths of despair,” which in the case of enslaved people were alcohol and suicide. It is known that in small doses, alcohol has anti-depressant and anxiolytic effects. In this process of “self-medication,” many people end up developing addiction. It is not by chance that excessive alcohol consumption is a common comorbidity among people who suffer from depression. And this, in turn, is associated with a higher likelihood of the person taking their own life.

Mahommah Baquaqua (1988[1854]) describes what appears to have been the usual ordeal of those who were disembarked: the strenuous work, physical punishments, depression, escape through alcohol, homicidal and suicidal thoughts. He tells us that his “fellow captives” were “very fond of drinking.” As an abstainer, he believed that by being more profitable to his master, he would be able to avoid physical punishments. Therefore, his initial strategy was to be “helpful and very obedient.” But this was not enough to avoid the beatings. Reporting a discouragement that may indicate a depressive state, Baquaqua reveals that he soon began “drinking like the others.” Later on, after a striking episode, the idea of death came to him.

...I became so angry that the idea came to my head to kill him [his owner] and then commit suicide. Finally, I decided to drown myself. I would rather die than live as a slave. I then ran to the river and threw myself into the water, but as I was seen by some people who were in a boat, I was saved. (Baquaqua 1988[1854], p.275)

There is a significant recent literature on the phenomenon of suicide among slaves. Ferreira (2004) analyzes cases that occurred in Bahia between 1850 and 1888. Using judicial/police documents and news published in newspapers, the author finds 451 cases of suicide in which the condition of individuals can be determined. The percentage of slaves and free individuals is statistically equal: 46%. However, it should be noted that the fraction of free and enslaved individuals was not the same in Bahia during this period, so the latter are over-represented in the sample. An important fact presented is that in the 1850s (actually between 1850 and 1859), 65.56% of the suicides were Africans. The author draws attention to the weaknesses of the data, including under-reporting of suicides, suicides of captives that were actually homicides, among many other factors.

For the same period, 1850-1888, Canario (2011) analyzes cases that occurred in different parishes of Recife and its surroundings. For the city of Recife, the author finds a total of 188 suicides, of which 100 occurred among free individuals, 80 among slaves, and 8 among freed slaves. Again, an important disproportion is noted, as according to data from Figueira de Mello (1979[1851]), in 1849, there were 49.3 thousand free people in Recife and 18.8 thousand enslaved individuals.

Oliveira & Oda (2009, p. 386), for example, analyze cases that occurred in Campinas (SP) during the last two decades of slavery in Brazil. The authors draw attention to an extremely important fact: “captive suicide can also be seen, but never solely, as a form of protest or escape from the captivity situation”. That is, excessive economism must be avoided. Costa (2019) analyzes the case of Rio de Janeiro between 1830 and 1850, using police reports from the court and also material from the press, notably the *Jornal do Comércio* and the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*.

In the analyzed period, 80% of the suicides reported in that periodical were by African and Brazilian slaves. The most commonly used method by captives was hanging, which occurred in 70% of cases reported in the *Diário* and 76% in the *Jornal*. While among whites, the use of firearms predominated.

Muniz & Ferreira (2020) analyze the case of Maranhão between 1834 and 1888. The authors count 262 suicides and attempts, of which 165, or 63%, involved slaves. Such a disproportion suggests some problem with the data, perhaps with underreporting of cases among non-slaves. Among captives, men are the majority, accounting for 78% of cases. The low number of cases, for such a long period, leads the authors to affirm that “Maranhão is an exception compared to the other slave regions in Brazil” (ibid. p.30).

2.1 The Issue of Suicide

Suicide is a phenomenon that, like all human decisions, is difficult to reduce to a single factor. It is certain that not every enslaved person’s suicide was solely and directly caused by their captive condition. However, given the harshness of life imposed by servitude, it is reasonable to suppose that a good part of these suicides had, as one of their causes, the emotional consequences of slavery.

As an example of a suicide apparently unrelated to the condition of enslavement, we have a case reported by the newspaper *Diário do Maranhão* in 1876, where a slave “perhaps driven by jealousy” stabbed his “mistress” and a fellow slave whom he suspected of being her lover, and then committed suicide by “shooting himself with a rifle”². There were cases in which the reasons were some form of psychiatric disorder. The *Publicador Maranhense* reports the suicide of Joaquim, who was a slave at the “Recolhimento de Nossa Senhora da Anunciação e Remédios”, which was attributed to the fact that he was “delirious as a result of a fever that had attacked him” (PM 1849, ed. 766). It cannot be certain that the case was due to a bout of madness, but it should be noted that mentions of suicides derived from feverish hallucinations were not uncommon. References to this type of act are abundant, for example, during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. The *Jornal do Recife* reports that “at Engenho do Meio, owned by Major Antonio de Brito Bastos, a slave named Felipe committed suicide, hanging himself, and such an act of desperation was attributed to a bout of madness”³.

There were also “passive” suicides, in which the depressed individual - or one afflicted with “banzo” - let themselves die, for example by refusing to eat. An example that approaches this case appears in the *Gazeta Mercantil da Bahia*, which published a frightening story in 1849 under the title “Doente do meu hospital”.

An African slave of Mr Rios e Almeida, so well treated by me, died today at around two o’clock in the afternoon. This patient could have been 14 years old, coming to the clinic to be treated for two large and deep wounds on his buttocks, he had such a perverse temperament that he would stick his nails into the wounds to make them bleed. His hands were tied with cloths and, unable to continue with his endeavor, he decided not to eat anything. (*Gazeta Mercantil (BA)*, June 6, 1849, ed. 126, p.2.)

It is not difficult to imagine that such wounds were the result of a whipping. Perhaps the young man “stuck his nails” in his wounds to prevent them from healing, which would make it impossible for him to return to captivity. Or worse, the act may be what is called self-mutilation in medicine, when an individual inflicts non-fatal injuries as a way of dealing with the emotional pain they are going through. Such behavior is not uncommon among people with depression. The decision to take one’s own life was so firm that the young man from Bahia carried his hunger strike to this limit. The person responsible for his care says, “I can assure you (because the wounds were almost healed) that this slave committed suicide by not wanting to eat” (ibid.).

When describing the supposed qualities and flaws of Africans of different origins present in Recife, Tollenare (1905, p. 157) asserts that “the Gabons are ferocious and bad; one insults a black person by calling them a Gabon.”

²Diário do Maranhão (MA), ed. 947 de 1876.

³Jornal do Recife (PE), ed. 192 de 1869, p.1

Henry Koster (2015[1816], p. 420) also gives a negative highlight to this group. He says that they were “sold at a reduced price,” and there were even people who claimed they were cannibals. “They appear to be in a still more savage state... and much given to despondency and consequent suicide. According to the Englishman, speaking of enslaved people in general; “A negro will sometimes tell his master that he is determined to die, and too often the effects of his resolve being shortly afterwards to be perceived; he becomes thin, loses his appetite, and dies almost a skeleton” (ibid., p. 423).

Another case of suicide through “hunger strike” appears in 1885. A slave named Daniel, who worked for rent in the palace of the Presidency of the province of Espírito Santo, had “ingested a large quantity of copper arseniate.” The enslaved person himself told the authorities that he had taken verde-paris” and died the following day⁴.

In the report of the government of Bahia in 1877, then under the leadership of Henrique Pereira de Lucena, it is read that among the causes of one of the suicides registered there was one derived from “displeasure arising from the condition of slavery.” There is also talk of an attempt in the parish of S. Pedro; in which the “unfortunate” person threw himself “from the window of the mansion, due to dissatisfaction originating from slavery”⁵.

One of the triggers for suicide was related to the sale - or just the possibility - to another owner. Silveira & Oda (2009) report a case of collective suicide in Campinas, in which 4 women - two mothers and two daughters - died after throwing themselves into a tank, because they did not want to accompany their new owner.

In 1870, the *Jornal do Recife* reproduced a note from the *Diário do Grão Pará* that said;

Yesterday morning, a mulatto named Firmina, a slave of Mr. Antonio de Padua Coimbra, hanged herself... We were told that Mr. Coimbra’s wife had reprimanded the slave for not obeying an order she had received. To terrify her, Mrs. Coimbra threatened her... that she would have her sold. The wretched woman thought that the threat might become a reality and committed suicide⁶.

Another episode that may have had a similar cause appeared in the *Jornal do Recife* in 1871, when it was reported that a “slave named Raymundo” had committed suicide by “hanging himself with a strap”, and that this individual belonged “to the estate in liquidation of the Portuguese merchant, Francisco Rocha Pinto”⁷.

The fear of being sold, even to someone in the same region, could be justified by the fact that, even though the treatment given to slaves was generally very poor, some owners were even more ruthless. In 1882, the *Jornal do Recife* cited two suicides that occurred on the Canna Brava estate, owned by Lieutenant Colonel Joaquim José Gomes de Oliveira. In March 1882, a captive named Nazário had fled with his wife, “both being captured in the southern province and taken into the power of their master.” However, “when they reached the gate of the estate,” Nazário drew a knife and “gave a horrendous blow to his belly.” Convalescing, he would have said that he did that because “not wanting to kill his young master, who mistreated him so much, he preferred to commit suicide to rest.” The newspaper warned that “Nazário was a partner in the slave quarters here, and another one who committed suicide in Nazareth in the same way, as reported by this newspaper”⁸.

In Cachoeira (BA), a slave named Alexandrina had run away and “was hiding in the house of her lover, the Creole Vicente.” Discovered and with the house surrounded by guards, she “drank a dose of solimão,” dying. According to the text, Alexandrina’s owner believed that Vicente had obtained the poison she used. Vicente would have said that “it was better to die than to go to jail and suffer beatings and lashings.” That same day, “Januária, a slave of Lieutenant Egas de Castro Lima, poisoned herself with arsenic in the village of Muritiba”⁹.

The Report of the President of Rio Grande do Sul, published in 1860, documents the case of Manoel, a slave belonging to Antonio José de Campos, who had absconded but was subsequently apprehended and conveyed to the

⁴Assembleia Legislativa Provincial do Espírito Santo, 1885, p. 19.

⁵Relatório dos Trabalhos do Conselho de Governo, Bahia, 1877, p.8.

⁶Jornal do Recife, January 17, 1870, ed. 12, p.1

⁷Jornal do Recife, 1871, ed. 173, p.1

⁸Jornal do Recife, April 26, 1882, ed. 94, p.1

⁹Jornal de Recife, 1871, ed.237(1), p.1.

Police Secretariat. In the report, it is stated that Manoel, while in custody, managed to evade confinement and seek refuge in a nearby dwelling. From the attic of this building, he apparently jumped onto the street below, leading to his demise¹⁰.

2.1.1 The Methods

Due to the restricted access to firearms, enslaved individuals commonly resorted to hanging as a means of committing suicide. The year 1842 saw a report in a Rio de Janeiro newspaper, wherein a police officer “of the Santa Rita district stated that he had conducted an inquiry into the body of the enslaved black man Antonio, who had taken his life by tying a rope around his neck”¹¹. A few days later, a similar piece was published regarding the deceased enslaved man Antonio from Mozambique, “who had committed suicide by the same method of using a noose around his neck”¹². In December of that same year, “an African who have committed suicide”¹³, but the available details were scarce.

In 1845, the following note was published: “Bento, a sickly mulatto slave, committed suicide by throwing himself into a well, presumably due to delirium”¹⁴. The following year, a similar report detailed the arrest of “Affonso, a slave, for attempting to commit suicide by drowning,” as well as the “investigation into the body of the slave Diogo Inhambane, who committed suicide by hanging himself”¹⁵. Another report stated the arrest of “Maria, a black female slave owned by Pedro Affonso de Carvalho, who attempted suicide by inflicting a wound to her throat”¹⁶. This was a method somewhat common among enslaved and free people, wherein they would cut their throats, severing the jugular vein and causing death due to rapid blood loss. The “slave Roza” also “attempted to commit suicide with a knife,” and was subsequently “sent to the Santa Casa for treatment”¹⁷. In 1847, there was the case of “Helena, a slave who died after falling from her mistress’s house balcony due to drunkenness”¹⁸. This case was also considered a suicide.

But despite the difficulty of accessing firearms, in 1849 there was a recorded case “of a black slave who committed suicide with a pistol shot”¹⁹.

The graph below shows the suicides of enslaved individuals that occurred in the city of Rio de Janeiro between 1842 and 1857, published in the “Repart. da Polícia” section. This source does not cover all events that occurred in the city but seems to be an interesting snapshot of the phenomenon. We counted 49 suicides of enslaved individuals over the period. In only 1 of the cases, it was not possible to determine the gender of the person. For the others, only 5 were women, while men accounted for 43. That is, 87.7% of the suicides were men. Regarding the method, hangings accounted for 71.4% of deaths. The remaining suicides were divided among unspecified causes, injuries from bladed weapons, others “throwing themselves into the sea” or from some height.

Graphic 1. Enslaved suicides by year - Rio de Janeiro

¹⁰Relatório do Presidente da Província do Rio Grande do Sul, 1860, ed. 1, p. 10.

¹¹Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 13 de maio de 1842, ed. 105, p.2.

¹²Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 14 de julho de 1842, ed. 152, p.2.

¹³Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 9 de dezembro de 1842, ed. 274, p.2.

¹⁴Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 13 de agosto de 1845, ed. 6895, p.3.

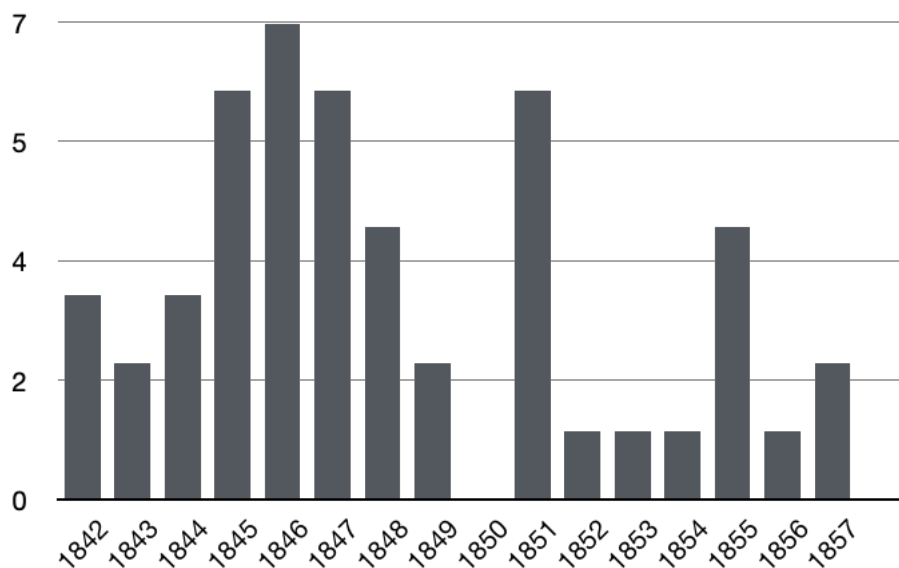
¹⁵Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 17 de fevereiro de 1846, ed. 7138, p.1

¹⁶Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 21 de abril de 1846, ed. 7188, p.2

¹⁷Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 9 de setembro 1846, ed.7300, p.3

¹⁸Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 27 de fevereiro de 1847, ed. 7740, p.3

¹⁹Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1 de março de 1849, ed. 8029, p.3



Source: Diário do Rio de Janeiro

In the *Jornal do Recife*, on May 31, 1868, two notes were published about the suicide of captives. “On the 18th, a slave named Francisco, under 19 years old, belonging to Mrs. Raymunda Pereira de Jesus, committed suicide.” Then; “Also on the 19th... at the house of citizen Manoel Jaques Jourdan..., the African named Félix committed suicide with a pistol shot fired into his ear. The suicide... was a slave of citizen Augusto da Silva Machado”²⁰. The Pernambuco newspaper reported news from other provinces. From Rio de Janeiro came the news that “a woman named Marcelina, 32 years old, a slave of the heirs of Commander Manoel Gomes Ferreira, committed suicide yesterday by throwing herself into a well in the residence of Mr. José Maria Dias, one of the heirs to whom she was rented”²¹. The following year, the death of “black João, a slave of Lieutenant Colonel Feliciano Joaquim dos Santos”, who “committed suicide by throwing himself from the Boa Vista bridge into the river”²² was reported. “Yesterday... black Adão, a slave of Mr. Joaquim Pinto Lapa, residing on Rua da Moeda, committed suicide by hanging himself from a beam in the attic of the house”²³. “On the 10th of this month... Antonio, a slave belonging to Antonio Vicente da Costa, owner of the Junco plantation, committed suicide by hanging himself”²⁴.

2.2 Alcohol Use and Abuse

There is no consensus definition of alcoholism. Consequently, recent literature characterizes it as “alcohol use disorders” (AUD), which represents a spectrum rather than a binary classification between alcoholics and non-alcoholics. Therefore, this paper avoids using the terms “alcoholic” and “alcoholism.”

There exists a non-linear relationship between depression and alcohol abuse, as some cases appear to cause each other (Edenberg, Gelernter & Agrawal 2019, p.26). Depression may lead to alcohol abuse, while alcohol abuse may lead to depression. Additionally, depression is linked to suicidal thoughts and attempts. Although not every depressed individual attempts suicide, they are more likely to do so. Moreover, while small doses of alcohol can briefly elevate mood, excessive consumption can reduce guilt and release behavior typically suppressed by punishment (Vaillant 1995, p.78), potentially triggering suicidal tendencies.

Given the harshness of enslaved lives, from menial labor such as stoking mill boilers to less burdensome activities such as street vending, it is not unexpected that many resorted to alcohol as an escape. Anderson (2012, s.p.)

²⁰Jornal de Recife. 1868

²¹Jornal do Recife. 16 de dezembro de 1868, ed. 290, p.2.

²²Jornal do Recife. 119 de fevereiro de 1869, ed. 40, p.1.

²³Jornal do Recife. 23 de agosto de 1869, ed. 80, p.2

²⁴Jornal de Recife, 1880 ed. 115, p.1

cautions that “[m]any studies have found significant associations between stress in the workplace and elevated levels of alcohol consumption, an increased risk of problem drinking and alcohol dependence.” It is challenging to imagine a work situation more stressful than that of a slave.

Friedrich Engels, in his classic “The Condition of the Working Class in England” from 1845, when talking about Irish workers, states: “since the poor devil must have one enjoyment and society has shut him out of all others, he betakes himself to the drinking of spirits. Drink is the only thing which makes the Irishman’s life worth”. Engels goes on to say: “The temptation is great, he cannot resist it, and so when he has money he gets rid to it down his throat. What else should he do? How can society blame him when it places him in a position in which he almost of necessity becomes a drunkard...?” (Engels 1845, p.)

Access to alcohol, notably *aguardente* (also known as *cachaça*), a high-alcohol content drink²⁵, was easy in a country where sugarcane was a fundamental part of the economy. Enslaved individuals could consume part of the drink produced in the sugar mills, they could make their own drink²⁶, and those who lived off their earnings in the cities could buy it in taverns and bars with what was left after paying their masters’ wages.

In 1828, during a debate in parliament about a change in beverage taxation, deputy Lino Coutinho stated: “the people and slavery have a strong tendency towards spirituous beverages.” He added later that “most of the plantation owners lose their slaves due to the love of *cachaça*, which results in edema and obstructions, etc”²⁷. In 1830, his colleague Paula e Souza said that “idleness” and “drunkenness” were the “favorite passions of slaves”²⁸.

In a letter to the newspaper *O Universal* (MG), an individual complains about the evils caused by the “abundance of sugarcane *cachaça* produced in Brazil, which has caused the price to decay...so that in any tavern, a quartilho of it sells for 40 rs.” And that this was the cause of various problems among the free population and enslaved individuals. The author says: “there you can see...immense slaves, drunk, sleeping on the cold ground, catching grave illnesses; others stealing to sustain their depraved vices and running away; all with serious harm to agriculture, which thus remains dormant, besides countless others that such quilombolas cause.” The author proposes an increase in the price of the drink, following the example that would have been done in the Kingdom; “well, it is clear that a black person with 40 rs bought a quartilho of *cachaça* that could kill them if they drank it all at once; with 40 rs at the price of [*cachaça*] from the Kingdom, they would satisfy their appetite and not cause the slightest discomfort and would not fail in their duties”²⁹.

The topic reappears in the newspaper in 1827:

The *aguardente* and *cachaça* that are produced in Minas are... a product of luxury, vice, and the origin of public depravity. It is not an export commodity... Often selling for 40 rs. per bottle in towns, it is seen that idle, drunken men commit thefts and murders every day. Slaves are lost. Women of the lower classes are given to this infamous vice; and unfortunately, many well-born young men have been and still are shameful victims of this drink. Therefore, I consider it more than a holy law and more political for Minas, one that would raise the price of *aguardente* to the point that a slave cannot get drunk with 40 rs. (easy to acquire). (*O Universal*, April 20, 1825, ed. 276, p.4)

Nogueról, Versiani, and Vergolino (2016, p.263) state that “the maximum price that buyers would be willing to pay for a slave” was determined by “the sum of expected earnings from productive activity,” taking into account the individual’s life expectancy and a certain discount rate over time. In this economic logic, alcohol abuse by enslaved individuals reduced their return, as it not only reduced labor productivity, but also shortened their life expectancy.

²⁵ *Aguardente* (brandy) typically has an alcohol content between 38% and 48%, while wines have an average of 14%.

²⁶ The production of alcoholic beverages is not a difficult task to achieve. In addition, in the sugar mills, enslaved people often had the right to cultivate a small piece of land for their own.

²⁷ Anais do Parlamento Brasileiro, Sessão de 14 de julho de 1828, pp. 112-3.

²⁸ Anais do Parlamento Brasileiro, Sessão de 15 de setembro de 1830, p. 514.

²⁹ *O Universal* (MG), 28 de outubro de 1825, ed. 45, p. 2.

Therefore, it was common in advertisements for the purchase, sale, and rental of enslaved individuals to reference their inclinations towards “spirituous beverages,” as they were called at the time.

In an advertisement published in 1843 in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, a female enslaved individual was offered, emphasizing that “it is guaranteed that she does not drink spirits”³⁰. However, it was more common to only mention this quality of the advertised captives. In the Rio de Janeiro newspaper in 1828, the rental of a “black woman from a Nation” for 6\$000 reis per month was advertised, and among the attributes of the woman, it was stated that she did all the domestic services and was “very faithful and does not drink spirituous beverages”³¹. In the same newspaper, a few years earlier, the sale of “a boçal black girl from the Monjolo Nation, without tricks or any vice”³² was advertised. In a 1828 advertisement, “a black woman who is nearly 40 years old, very suitable for faithful guarding of a house, because besides being quiet, she has no vices of drinking or running away”³³ was offered for 320\$000.

In 1836, someone was looking for “two or more blacks to rent, even if they are given to the vice of drinking”³⁴. This position may be due to the following factors: (i) the difficulty of finding workers who did not drink, and/or; (ii) the fact that drinkers had potentially lower rent.

Conclusion

According to Marxist tradition, the alienation of workers from the fruits of their labor and the productive system is a fundamental characteristic of the market economy. As we have seen, Marx and Engels analyzed the impacts of this “disconnection” on the physical and mental health of workers. In mainstream economic literature, some authors have also sought to explain certain manifestations of individual and social malaise from an economic theory perspective. The so-called “deaths of despair” attempt to explain the recent increase in suicide and substance abuse by a portion of the US workforce. Based on these perspectives, this paper sought to analyze the physical and psychological health of enslaved workers in 19th century Brazil. This group formed, so to speak, the base of the social pyramid of capitalism of its time: they lived on the outskirts of the system, enslaved, with basic elements of their humanity systematically denied. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of these workers ended up suffering from serious psychological and physical problems. Depression - or “banzo” -, substance, and suicide were unfortunately not rare among them. This text surveys some literature on the topic of the physical and mental health of slaves, complementing it with archival material taken from the press and official documents. We believe that this work is important because we seek to give voice to individuals who unfortunately succumbed to their demons, by force of the economic and social system in which they lived.

References

Books and Papers

Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., & Robinson, J. A. (2005). Institutions as a fundamental cause of long-run growth. *Handbook of Economic Growth*, 1, 385-472.

Amantino, M. As condições físicas e de saúde dos escravos fugitivos anunciados no Jornal do Commercio (RJ) em 1850. *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos* 14 (2007): 1377-1399.

Anderson, P., Møller, L., & Galea, G. (2012). Alcohol in the European Union: consumption, harm and policy approaches. *World Health Organization*. Regional Office for Europe.

³⁰Diário do Rio de Janeiro, December 5, 1843, ed. 00273, p.3.

³¹Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 7 de janeiro de 1828, ed. 0100005, p.2.

³²Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 21 de março de 1822, ed. 0300017, p.2

³³Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 29 de abril de 1828, ed. 0400023, p.2

³⁴Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 17 de junho de 1836, ed. 0600012, p.3

Baquaqua, Mahommah Gardo (2002). *Biografia de Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua*. Ed: Information Age Pub Incorporated.

Canario, E. D. do A. (2011). “É mais uma scena da escravidão: suicídios de escravos na cidade do Recife, 1850-1888”. *Dissertação de Mestrado*. Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE).

Case, A., & Deaton, A. (2020). *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton University Press.

Costa, C. D. da (2019). “As cores do suicídio: a morte na sociedade escravocrata do Rio de Janeiro (1830–1850).” *Dissertação de Mestrado*, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

Dias, E. C. J. (2011). As condições físicas e de saúde dos escravizados nos anúncios de jornais da Paraíba oitocentista (1850-1888). *Temporalidades*, 3.2: 98-112.

Edenberg, H. J., Gelernter, J., & Agrawal, A. (2019). Genetics of alcoholism. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 21(4), 1-7.

Engels, F. (1993 [1845]). *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Figueira de Mello, J. M. (1979[1852]), *Ensaio sobre a estatística civil e política da província de Pernambuco*. Recife: Conselho Estadual de Cultura.

Henderson, J. (1821). *A History of the Brazil: Comprising Its Geography, Commerce, Colonization, Aboriginal Inhabitants...* Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown.

H.S.D.M. (1825). *Recollections and reflections of a South-American Seaman in a series of letters to...* *The Atheneum*. Ed. John Cotton, Boston.

Klein, H. S., Engerman, S. L., Haines, R., Shlomowitz, R. (2001). Transoceanic mortality: the slave trade in comparative perspective. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 58(1), 93-118.

Koster, H. (2015[1816]). *Travels in Brazil*. Project Gutenberg. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/48960/48960-h/48960-h.htm>.

Lima, C. A. M. (2015). Fronteira, cana e tráfico: escravidão, doenças e mortes em Capivari, SP, 1821-1869. *História, Ciências, Saude-Manguinhos* 22: 899-919.

Marx, K. (2007). *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. New York: Dover Publication Inc.

Muniz, P. Gouveia Mendonça, and Carlos Victor de Sousa Ferreira. “Cenas fatídicas: experiências suicidas dos escravizados no Maranhão (1834-1888).” *Revista Cadernos do Ceom* 33.53 (2020): 23-35.

Nunn, N. (2008) The long-term effects of Africa’s slave trades. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123.1: 139-176.

Oda, A. M. G. R. (2008). “Escravidão e Nostalgia No Brasil: o Banzo.”. *Rev. Latinoam. Psicopat. Fund.*, São Paulo, v. 11, n. 4, p. 735-761, (Suplemento).

Rodrik, D. (2018). Populism and the economics of globalization. *Journal of International Business Policy*, 1, 12-33.

Tollenare, L. F. (1905). *Notas dominicaes tomadas durante uma residência em Portugal e no Brasil nos annos de 1816, 1817 e 1818*. Recife: Empresa do Jornal do Recife.

Walsh, R. (1831). *Notices of Brazil in 1828 and 1829*. Vol. 2. Richardson, Lord & Holbrook.

Wilberforce, W. (1807). *A letter on the abolition of the slave trade addressed to the freeholders and other inhabitants of Yorkshire*. Luke Hansard & Sons: London.

Newspapers and Official Reports

Newspapers

Jornal do Commercio (Rio de Janeiro - Rio de Janeiro).

Diário do Rio de Janeiro (Rio de Janeiro - Rio de Janeiro).

O Publicador Maranhense (Maranhão - São Luís).

Diário do Maranhão (Maranhão - São Luís).

Jornal do Recife (Pernambuco - Recife).
Diário do Grão-Pará (Pará - Belém).
O Universal (Minas Gerais - Ouro Preto).

Official Documents

Anais do Parlamento Brasileiro (1828;1830).
Assembleia Legislativa do Espírito Santo (1885).
Relatório dos Trabalhos do Conselho de Governo, Bahia (1877).
Cunha e Figueiredo, J. B. D. (1855). Relatório do presidente da Província de Pernambuco à Assembléia Legislativa Provincial no ano 1855. Recife: Typ. de MF de Faria.
Relatório do Presidente da Província do Rio Grande do Sul, 1860, ed. 1.