

RAÍZES DO MEDO DO OUTRO NA SOCIEDADE URBANA *

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With this original and meticulous study of discourses on and of insecurity in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, Vera Malaguti makes a signal contribution, not only to the historiography of social control in the “cidade maravilhosa” in the tradition inaugurated by Thomas Holloway’s classic tome Policing Rio de Janeiro,¹ but also to three disparate areas of social inquiry that she patiently excavates and fruitfully connects in the Brazilian case.

The first is the cultural history of fear and its ramifying impact on social and political life. Historian Jean Delumeau has shown that pervasive fear, fed by the trauma of endless feudal wars, the epidemics of plague, virulent religious conflicts, and rampant physical insecurity, profoundly moulded European society and culture in the early modern era. And that, during the Renaissance, the Church adroitly manipulated and channeled popular fears so as to bolster and extend its political and symbolic power even as the secular mental revolution carried by the bourgeoisie was gathering steam.² Similarly, Malaguti shows that collective fear—of popular disorder, criminal activity fed by poverty, slave insurrections and their loathsome correlate, the “Africanization” of the nascent nation—played a pivotal role in the formation of the urban society of Brazil after Independence. Drawing on a multiplicity of sources, she reveals how fear “*se transfigurava em sentimento, em afeto, em política econômica, em projetos de lei, em fragmentos discursivos, em cenários, em políticas sanitárias,*” in short, invaded and infected every corner and crevice of carioca life. She uncovers how novel representations of dread and danger, rooted in the steep social inequalities and refined racial fantasies of the agrarian slave order, were deployed in and projected onto the city, where they diffused across the political, juridical, medical and journalistic fields. And, as in Europe both earlier and today, these discourses were harnessed, amplified, and steered onto certain targets by urban elites to safeguard and expand their rule in a period of dramatic social upheaval.

The second area enriched by this monograph is the historical sociology of slavery and its collateral effects and after-effects in the urban milieu and on the knowledge formations and social hierarchies that this milieu anchors. Because human bondage has been preeminently a rural and agrarian institution in the Americas, the study of its evolution and impact on the New World city has been relatively neglected. Slaves and their direct descendants have typically been seen as anomalies in the urban setting.³ Yet in mid-nineteenth century, Rio de Janeiro not only stood in the long shadow of the plantation; it harbored the largest population of African origin in both

¹ Thomas Holloway, Policing Rio De Janeiro: Repression and Resistance in a 19th-Century City (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

² Jean Delumeau, La Peur en Occident, XIVème-XVIIIème siècles (Paris: Fayard, 1978).

³ See Orlando Patterson, Patterson, Slavery and Social Death (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); a precocious exception to this pattern is Richard C. Wade, Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

South and North America. Thus slavery, as the sociolegal status forcibly imposed on that population, profoundly shaped not only the demography, geography, and architecture of the Brazilian city. It also exerted a decisive influence on the organization, discourses, and practices of such core institutions as medicine and public health, the press and politics, and, last but not least, criminology and crime control. In the wake of the 1835 *Revolta dos Malês* in Bahia, carioca medicine became fascinated and focalized around what it described as “*uma população mestiça e degenerada e por isso patológica e perigosa*” coalescing in the city. Pathologizing the black body legitimated the brutal treatment of Afro-Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro, where agonizing slaves, “*maltratados do que cavalos e mulas,*” were dumped on the streets as so much human refuse. And its alliance with positivist criminology gave pseudo-scientific licence to wield extreme penal repression on those groups located in the nether regions of social and urban space, whatever their skin color, thereby helping to normalize inordinately high levels of official violence towards the lower classes. Malaguti suggests that the selective policing, overt judicial bias based on class and color, vicious treatment of offenders, routine disregard for basic rights, and generalized indifference to the wastage of black bodies that characterize the functioning of criminal justice in the Brazilian metropolis today find their origins in the troubled imperial period when positivism, patrimonialism, and racism met and melted in the carioca state intelligentsia and apparatus.

This brings us to the third domain to which the present book offers fresh new materials: the anthropology of the material and symbolic containment of the lower classes in the city, with a stress on the pivotal role that criminology and criminal policy play in it. The prime originality of the carioca experiment in this respect is that, rather than constituting alternative techniques for the management of the dispossessed and the dishonored, as they did in industrializing Europe with the gradual differentiation of the social and criminal questions, medicalization and penalization worked in tandem and fused with racialization to effect the brutal domestication of the lower classes. The demonization of the emerging “rabble” unmoored from the countryside is here inseparable from the criminalization of the “urban mob” which is itself joined at the hip with the pathologization of slaves and their progeny.⁴

The schemata of perception and appreciation forged during the turbulent 1830s have since guided the drawing of the physical, social, and mental boundaries inside the city. And they continue to inform—or deform—the contemporary public debate on and response to urban violence. Thus the “*oposição entre uma ordem jurídica virtuosa e o caos infracional, a matriz do combate ao crime feito como cruzada, o extermínio como método, a tortura como princípio, o elogio da delação e a execução como espetáculo*” are products of the political and policy struggles of the mid-nineteenth century that continue to operate in the Rio of today. Then as now, the forces of order are entrusted with the mission to “*inspirar confiança às elites e infundir terror nos morros.*” Then as now, the fearsome “other” onto whom the concentrated physical and symbolic violence of the state is unleashed is a teeming, faceless mass of dark-skinned marginais who

⁴ For comparative materials pointing to intriguing similarities and differences between Latin American countries, the U.S. South, and Europe, see Martha Knisely Huggins, *From Slavery to Vagrancy in Brazil: Crime and Social Control in the Third World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984); David M. Oshinsky, “*Worse than Slavery*”: *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996); and Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Verso, 2nd ed. 2003).

must be portrayed monochromatically as fiendish enemies of the nation, congenital violators of its moral codes as enshrined in criminal law, so that they may be safely disregarded as the living expression of its deepest social contradictions—the embodied revelation and indictment of society’s ongoing betrayal of the liberal democratic principles it professes.

By digging up their roots and disclosing their regulative mechanisms in the nineteenth century, Vera Malaguti allows us to better understand the attraction as well as the limitations of the discourses of fear that enshroud the Brazilian metropolis at the dawn of the twenty-first century—and, in particular, to clearly discern the specter of slavery and of the racialized (di)visions it has spawned looming over postindustrial Rio de Janeiro in the manner of a malevolent Cristo Redentor do Corcovado. With this book, then, Malaguti not only maps for scholars an intriguing agenda for the comparative historical sociology of the fear of the other in urban society in Latin America and beyond.⁵ She also gives the citizens who wish to seize them the means to understand how criminal violence has turned into the obsession of our age and why the punitive policies supposed to tame it are bound to fail, in Rio de Janeiro no less than in other world cities.

** Preface to Vera Malaguti, O Medo na Cidade do Rio de Janeiro. Dois tempos de uma história, Rio de Janeiro, Revan, 2003.*

⁵ Multivocal narratives of urban dread and violence in Venezuela, Columbia, Mexico, and Brazil are presented in Susana Rotker, Citizens of Fear: Urban Violence in Latin America (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).