

# FROM SLAVERY TO CITIZENSHIP

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Artisanal fishermen, together with the *seringueiros* and those who live in the Amazon jungle, were one of the last social classes in Brazil who effectively won their citizenship. This conquest of citizen rights came late not only because of the geographic isolation of fishermen dispersed in small communities along the coastline, rivers and lakes, but mostly because of the structures of domination in which they lived.

Indeed, data from the colonial period seem to indicate that most fishing was done by slaves, who provided the *latifunda*, *haciendas* and large urban centres with fish, particularly in the northeast during the time when sugar cane was grown for export. Just like the slaves who worked the *latifunda*, the fishermen slaves were the merchandise and property of their masters. Their only right was to servile work.

Slavery ended in Brazil only at the end of last century, in 1888. In 1919, fishermen were linked, often by force, to the so-called "fishermen's colonies", created by the Navy to control those populations and convert them into "defenders of the Brazilian coast".

## Colonial times

With the exception of whaling, fishing was mostly for subsistence, with whatever surplus there was being sold in towns and cities. In the south and south-east, fishing was often associated with subsistence areas of the economy that is, to those areas connected with the export-producing *latifunda*, mostly those producing sugar cane (Diegues, 1983). Many fishermen along the coast were also farmers. Several of these subsistence areas were had been previously involved in production for export. When one-crop, agriculture ended, these areas returned to multi-crop farming. This was the case on the southern coast of Sao Paulo; once they stopped growing rice, many small farmers turned to fishing (Diegues, 1973).

In the north-east, where slave-based agriculture predominated throughout the colonial period, fishing, done by slaves, was one of the activities of the *latifundum*. The main activities of this export-oriented slave social

formation in the north-east did not exclude other kinds of production for the domestic market. Fishing was one of the more important.

Thus, according to a Dutchman writing in 1630, there were 300 slaves in Olinda who worked exclusively as fishermen, when the population of that city was barely 4,800 (Silva, 1991). In 1864, towards the end of slavery in Brazil, of the 1991 fishermen registered with the port authority of Rio de Janeiro, 47% were slaves (report of the Maritime Ministry, 1854, annexes).

In 1836, the *Diario de Pernambuco* advertised for sale "a slave who can fish with a net from canoes; capable of all services". (*Diario de Pernambuco*, 18 April 1836).

During the last years of slavery, according to the census of 1872, there were fishermen in Brazil. In the provinces and the bays, according to the same census, there were 4662 fishermen (Silva, 1991).

All these people were part of the regional market for foodstuffs, and certain cities, like Recife, had a fish market from the seventeenth century (Silva, 1988).

These fishermen laid the bases for a maritime lifestyle and culture in Brazil: They comprised the group most clearly dedicated to struggling with the sea and as tasks.

Aware of this, the Brazilian Navy, in the middle of the nineteenth century, thought that fishermen could provide a naval reserve par excellence for the Navy.

Thus the first measures taken by the nation state with regards fishing was precisely to have all fishermen register by districts- This provided detailed knowledge of how many fishermen there were and where they were located, in order to recruit them for the Navy. Despite everything, the fishermen strongly resisted being recruited.

During the time of the Empire, fishermen did not register with the port authorities and fled from their districts. After the republic was inaugurated, several uprisings

of fishermen took place, such as those of Rio de Janeiro in 1903 and Ceara in 1904. Many died and even more were wounded. There was only one motive behind these uprisings: resist obligatory recruitment of fishermen by the Navy (Silva, 1991).

*Later*, in 1919, the so-called fishermen's colonies rose throughout Brazil. These were an alternative proposed by the Navy as an attempt to undermine resistance to recruitment. The official line was that the colonies were "a more modern and broader way of seeing national defence, and especially the protection of the valiant people of our coasts" (Vilar, 1945).

The colonies, situated at conceived as state-level federations and the General Confederation of Brazilian Fishermen, headquartered in Rio de Janeiro. Leadership positions in this system of representation were traditionally occupied by military personnel, businessmen, shipowners, et al, never by fishermen.

This situation lasted more or less up to the 1960s, except for rare cases, such as Pernambuco where the link between fishermen and the peasant movement ("peasant alliances"), denouncements of industrial pollution of rivers estuaries and the shoreline, and attempts to take over the state federation of colonies led to the beginnings of a social movement of fishermen (Callou, 1983).

## The 1960s

Artisanal fishing went through several changes beginning in the 1950s, owing to the increasing urban development of the Brazilian coast and the consequent rise in demand for food. Up till that time, more than 50% of fisheries production was provided by artisanal fishermen.

In 1962, with the creation of SUDEPE, the decision was taken to develop fishing on the basis of industrial enterprises. The government began in 1967 to spend large sums of money on fishing fleets and processing plants. More than US\$ 100 million was invested in industrial enterprises between 1967 and 1974. Meanwhile, aid to artisanal fisheries through PESCART (programme to support artisanal fishing) was less than US\$ 10 million (Diegues, 1983). Moreover, much of these scarce resources never reached the bands of artisanal fishermen; they were mostly used to maintain the state fisheries bureaucracy.

The results of these investments in the fishing industry were not very encouraging: some scarce species along the coast were overfished for export, such as shrimp, lobster, and overinvestment in onshore facilities (ice plants and cold storage) led most of these firms to bankruptcy. Artisanal fishing continued to be important to the sector, either as a source of labour for the firms or by selling their catch to these firms.

Artisanal fishermen continued to belong to the colonies, in most cases dominated by people not involved in the sector or by businessmen who still controlled the marketing of fish.

Conflicts between artisanal fishing and capitalist industrial fishing increased from the 1960s on. Large trawlers exterminated schools of fish and shrimp that were fished by artisanal fishermen. The industrial fleet frequently destroyed and still today destroy the work instruments of small-scale fishermen, sometimes provoking violent reactions (Diegues, 1983; Melo, 1989; Laureiro, 1985).

Such conflicts with capitalist industrial fishing, together with those connected with the degradation and pollution of the coast, estimated an increasingly stronger reaction on the part of artisanal fishermen.

Urban expansion has been the biggest cause the destruction of vegetation in mangroves in large areas where coastal species reproduce, such as the Bays of Guanabara, Todos los Santos, Sao Jose and Sao Marcos, and in numerous estuaries in the north-east and south-east

Mangroves have been cut down to build Urban complexes for the middle class and bourgeois' as happened in Coroa de Meio in Aracaju, Sergipe. First, the crab fishermen who lived there were removed and the whole mangrove cut down. This let in sea water which finally destroyed streets and threatened the buildings themselves.

Many large beaches and reefs were subdivided risking the very existence of these important eco- systems, as happened in Isla Comprida in Sao Paulo. Besides that, many islands were and still are being privatized to be made into recreation and marine areas. The artisanal fishermen are always driven out.

Ports and large chemical and petrochemical complexes were built in ecosystems of high biologic productivity and valuable for their scenery and tourism potential, as happened in Laguna Mundau y Manguaba, in Alagoas, an estuary Suape, Pernambuco, and in Laguan de los Patos, in Rio Grande do Sur.

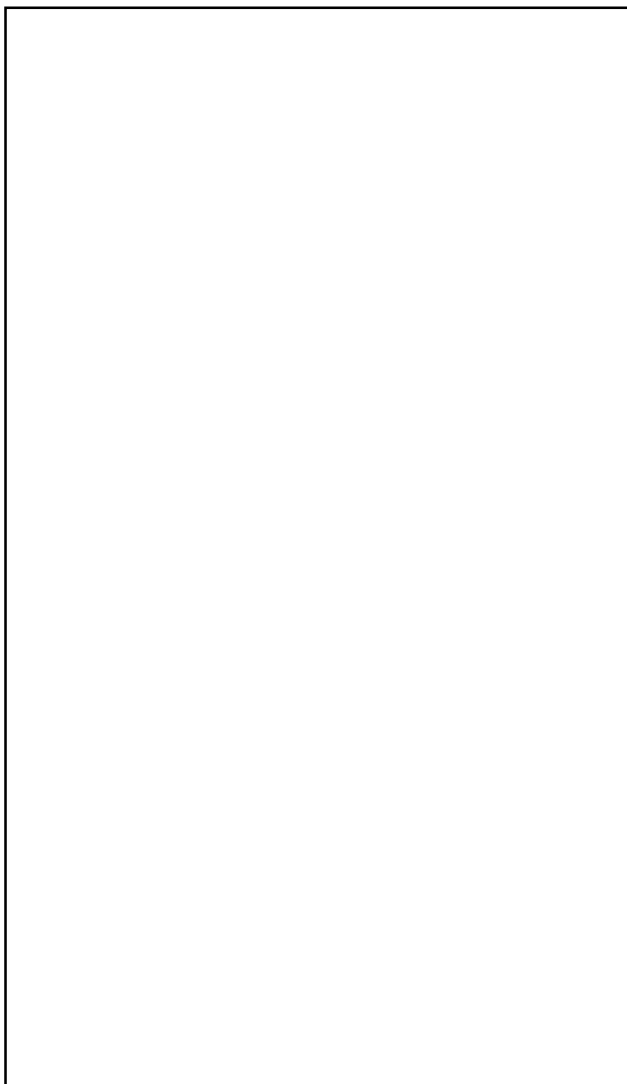
When Proalcohol was launched, subsidized sugar cane invaded the lands of the north-east, even taking over adjoining mangroves, as in Mamanguape, Paraiba. Tons of winery distillery residues and biocides are criminally dumped into rivers and estuaries.

Consequences of these processes are irreversible, completely destroying precious ecosystems that produce food for low-income groups, as happened with the destruction of hundreds of hectares of mangrove by the salt works of Galinhos, Rio Grande do Norte. Lake Batata, in the Amazon, was completely polluted by cast-offs from mining operations.

Another destructive element in rivers and lakes of the Amazon is the use of *mercury* in treating gold, particularly in rivers (like the Madeira, Gaupore and Mamore). Levels of mercury contamination are so high they approach those that caused the “killer-mine” disease that killed hundreds of people in Japan in the 1960s (Petreire, 1991).

Besides affecting the quality of life of Brazilian society as a whole, these processes have even more disastrous consequences for artisanal fishermen and their communities, ending up almost always with their being expelled from their lands and beaches.

On top of the pollution of the environment, certain actions of the state have also helped make the already difficult survival of artisanal fishing communities even more so. These actions, include the creation of parks and reservations in areas traditionally occupied by fishing communities. Many parks and ecological reservations were created without even consulting the fishermen who made their living from those natural resources. These areas were preserved because of the respect artisanal fishermen had for them, depending on them for their livelihood. These conservation units system-



atically prohibit fishing, leading to the expulsion of these small producers from their beaches. Moreover, rigid government control is always for artisanal fishermen, never for industrial fishing, trawlers, lumber operations, palmito, etc. This is highly unjust and makes artisanal fishermen and small coastal producers the villains of the story as those responsible for ecological destruction. Guided by their urban view of conservation problems, these pseudo-ecologists end up penalizing those who need clean, unpolluted water to feed their families and the general population -those who need mangroves, bays and beaches uncontrolled by construction companies, so they can exercise their profession.

Without a doubt, the rapid and intense degradation of the coastline was one of the main reasons fishermen and coastal communities mobilized from the late 1970s onwards.

In 1979 and 1980, fishermen in Pernambuco began to denounce the damage caused by the waste from alcohol production and winery distillery residues generated by the industries of the municipality of Goiana (Silva, 1989). In doing so, they were supported by the recently created Pastoral Office for Fishermen, organized by the episcopal conference of the Catholic church in Brazil (CNBB). The industries in question even gave death threats to the leaders of the fishermen. In 1983, the fishermen in that state demonstrated with a march against dumping winery distillery residues into the rivers from the Capibaribe river, which runs through the city of Recife.

These demonstrations by fishermen comprised an important social datum in a social category that was, up till then, totally dominated by the corporatist structure of the fishermen's colonies, federations and confederations.

This struggle to improve the environment of the coast was part of an emerging movement of artisanal fishermen in search for citizenship that was begun during the authoritarian military government. This movement consolidated at the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of the democratization of the country.

During that period, fishermen of some colonies began to organize to take over the leadership of those organizations. After important mobilizations, almost always supported by the Pastoral Office for Fishermen and progressive political parties, they won the presidency of some of these colonies and federations. In the states of Para, Bahia and Maranhao, fishermen became president of those federations. The struggle was fierce in those states, involving imprisonment, intimidation and even death threats for the new leaders. The Federation of Fishermen of Pernambuco was won in 1984, and in 1987 that of Alagoas, followed by others in the south (Silva, 1989).

An important moment in that emerging organization of artisanal fishermen was participating in the elaboration of the 1989 Constitution, for those parts dealing with fisheries. Several meetings were held between 1986 and 1988 for that purpose. The main reason for the movement was to elaborate a law governing the system of representation of the fishermen, since several other causes (water pollution, social security for fishermen, etc.) were politically blocked by leaders of colonies and federations who were not fishermen. Given that situation, the fishermen attempted to draw up a Magna Carta for themselves, for the movement known as the "constitutional assembly for fisheries". Despite the widespread support and participation of the whole sector, the movement was resisted by some presidents of state federations controlled by conservative sectors, generally connected with fisheries but part of the remains of the military regime.

Towards the end of the process to elaborate the Constitution, the main result of the movement was, first, the impetus given to organizing fishermen and the consciousness that they comprised a class of small producers spread along the coasts, rivers and lakes of Brazil. They also had some key victories in the text of the Constitution, such as the possibility of organizing themselves into free trade unions autonomous from the state. Fishermen also contributed to having important ecosystems like the coast and the wetlands of Mato Grosso declared *priority* regions for environmental conservation.

Another important result of the movement was the formation of MONAPE, the National Movement of Fishermen. This movement brings together the leaders of fishermen, whether or not they are representatives of colo-

nies or trade unions, with a view to democratize the colonies, see to it that the constitutional victories are implemented and fight to improve the living and working conditions of artisanal fishermen.

One of the main concerns of MONAPE is the conservation of marine and fluvial habitats as a basic condition for sustainable artisanal fishing. In two of its national meetings -Juazeiro, Bahia in August 1990 and Olinda, Pernambuco in October 1991 - the defence of the environment in benefit of local populations was one of the main points of the agenda. In those meetings, representatives of MONAPE were concerned not only about overfishing in the sea, rivers, lakes and dams, but also about the gradual and constant destruction of the natural habitats used by artisanal fishermen, such as mangroves, lakes, estuaries, reel etc.

Pursuant to decisions taken during those meetings, MONAPE members would mobilize in different kinds of campaigns to educate and denounce the degradation of the Brazilian coast, rivers, streams, lakes and dams.

As can be seen, the fishermen's struggle for Citizenship is closely linked to the preservation of habitats and ways of life that comprise a rich cultural heritage for Brazil.

Meanwhile, the struggle is far from over, as long as government agencies continue to look on artisanal fishermen as objects for aid programmes. For its part, the goal of the National Movement of Fishermen is to demonstrate that, above all, they are producers of wealth, food, workers with a defined profession, and above all, citizens, with the rights and duties of every Brazilian.