

## Introduction

On one occasion, André Rebouças had such a hard time finding a theater that would agree to host an abolitionist conference that when he finally found one, he and José do Patrocínio had to sweep it out themselves, while the audience waited outside. Two black abolitionists were doing the work of slaves. The event on August 10, 1886, required no such effort, as there was little likelihood pro-slavery gangs would dare upset proceedings, because this time Rebouças had an opera star on his side.

Upon her arrival in Brazil that May, the Russian soprano Nadina Bulicioff could never have imagined the role she would be playing that August night at the Teatro Lírico in Rio de Janeiro. She had traveled as part of an Italian company – drawn by her passion for her profession and for the young Arturo Toscanini. During her Brazilian tour, she played *Tosca* and *Gioconda* and saw how widespread abolitionist mobilization was and how many artists were engaged in it. The soprano, whose homeland had only abolished serfdom itself a few years earlier, was so moved by the campaign that when admirers sought to lavish her with diamonds, she asked them to use the money to free slaves instead.

Rebouças' Abolitionist Confederation seized the opportunity, as it was wont to do. Since the start of the campaign, in 1868, the abolitionists had appealed to the arts, held civic ceremonies to sway public opinion, created associations and sought allies abroad, piecing together a support network that spanned France, Spain, the United States, and Great Britain. It had also wooed the Russian opera singer and made her an honorary member of the Confederation. And so the opera staged at Teatro Lírico became an antislavery demonstration.

Rebouças' dream was to stage *O Escravo* (The Slave), a piece he had commissioned from Carlos Gomes in 1884 but which the maestro had yet to finish. So he had to look to the repertoire for an opera that expressed the event's political meaning, and there he came upon *Aida*, a strategic choice. Verdi's popular work was a proven crowd-puller and its theme was a snug enough fit: the homonymous protagonist, the daughter of the King of Ethiopia, had been captured and enslaved in Ancient Egypt.

When Bulicioff took to the stage before a full house, she found herself showered with flowers, the abolitionist movement's symbol of choice. The end of the first act was met with thunderous applause, and the rapture reached its height with the aria that closed the third act, when *Aida* flees captivity – her liberty represented by the switching-on of the very latest mod-con: electric lighting.

Cue José do Patrocínio, who arrived onstage with the Pauper Boys Band and six slave girls, or *enslaved* girls, as the abolitionists preferred to call them, since they were victims of an immoral, unjust, archaic institution. The girls wore white, matching Bulicioff's Pharaonic slave outfits. The band played the national anthem, and then the Russian broke her prop shackles as the audience rose to its feet, waving handkerchiefs in the air. She then hugged and kissed each of the girls and presented them with letters of manumission, transforming them into free women right before the eyes of a rapt audience, seven *Aidas*. The women wept; the audience wept, and delirium filled the house. Amid applause and cheering, flowers were hurled and doves released.

Patrocínio knelt at the diva's feet and kissed her hands. The now ecstatic audience chanted: "Viva Bulicioff!" "Viva the Liberator!" "Viva the abolition of slaves!" Next came a standing ovation for the leaders of the abolitionist movement, starting with Patrocínio, the orchestrator of many shows like this one, followed onstage by João Clapp, president of the Abolitionist Confederation, and by Joaquim Nabuco, leader of the campaign in Parliament. Last but not least, there was a round of applause for one final figure up in the boxes, the recently-ousted Prime Minister Manuel de Sousa Dantas, a Liberal Party ally of the movement. Patrocínio and Clapp, on one side, Nabuco and Dantas, on the other, personified the movement's main strategies thus far: propaganda in the public space and actions within the political institutions. On that evening, as throughout the campaign, Rebouças was the thread that bound them together, behind the scenes.

This kind of event was a main strategy to get to that point. In 1886, however, the abolitionists were changing tack. They were not staging

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FIGURE 0.1 José do Patrocínio delivers manumission letters to slaves during the staging of *Aida*, by Giuseppe Verdi, in the Teatro Lírico on August 10, 1886.

Archive of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional (National Library Foundation), Brazil.

operas because they preferred theater to politics. They had lost at the polls and the new Conservative Party government had declared war against them as troublemakers who had dared to disrespect the laws and mores that had sustained the slave system in imperial Brazil for four centuries. Art was just one of many ways of doing antislavery politics. Another one was to confront the slavocratic order, inciting slaves to follow Aida's lead by running away. The movement was flirting with civil disobedience. Even Rebouças and Nabuco, pacifist aristocrats, were willing to take things to their ultimate consequences. Patrocínio wrote in his newspaper, "all true abolitionists are ready to die." At the Teatro Lírico, what seemed like a party was really a battle: abolitionist movement versus pro-slavery countermovement.

By rising to its feet for the Russian soprano, the audience was taking sides in this national struggle. It was the movement against slavery they were applauding. The abolitionists had been building this base of support for two decades, first through shows like Bulicioff's, with the same torrent of flowers, then by contesting elections and finally, as a last resort, threatening to take up arms. They had the backing to do it. Over the course of the abolitionist campaign they had gone from a handful of pioneers like Rebouças to a legion present in all twenty provinces of the Empire. In 1886, there were thousands, all of them like Bulicioff, willing to break the slaves.<sup>1</sup>

#### A STRANGE ABSENCE

Brazil was one of the largest slaveholding countries in history and the last in the West to abolish slavery, in 1888. Despite its importance, the Brazilian abolitionist movement has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves. The British and American cases are still central in the literature. More recently, other cases, such as Spain, Portugal, and France, have started to attract greater interest (for instance, Schmidt-Nowara, 1999; Marques and Salles, 2015), but Brazil remains in the shadows.

Even in the recent wave of comparative studies, the Brazilian case has barely been addressed. The overviews of David Brion Davis (2006) and Seymour Drescher (2009) have shown the vast geographic reach of abolitionism and its long duration, but Brazil is little explored.

<sup>1</sup> The information presented here is drawn from DNAAR, Apr. 17, 1881; letter from Carlos Gomes to Giulio Ricord, Jul. 16, 1884 in *Vetro* (1982); CR, Oct. 26, 1887; *O País*, Aug. 10, 11, 22, 23, 1886; GN, Aug. 23, 1886; GT, Aug. 9, 11, 1886; RI, Aug., 1886.

The same is true for works with generalizing ambitions, such as Blackburn (2011) and Sinha (2017).

In the “global histories” of abolitionism, which have been bringing neglected cases to light, mention of the Brazilian abolitionist movement is also rare. The collection organized by Mulligan and Bric (2013), for example, brings analyses of abolition movements seldom addressed in the literature, such as Sierra Leone, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, and the essays edited by Suzuki (2016) added Japan, China, and Iran to that list. Again, neither volume looks at Brazil.

Drescher is one of the few scholars to take Brazil into consideration, while distinguishing two abolitionist paths: one, the “continental,” spread across much of Europe, elitist and grounded in lobbying and parliamentary action; the other, the “Anglo-American,” based on social mobilization – with proselytism, public demonstrations, judicial processes, and boycotts, a de-centrally structured organization with socially diverse activists. Initially, he saw the Brazilian case as resembling the parliamentary approach (Drescher, 1980), though he later recognized a considerable public space mobilization and revised his opinion (Drescher, 2009), seeing Brazil as falling somewhere in between these two broad paths. However, his explanation is based on other scholars’ research, without direct research on Brazilian primary sources.

As such, Brazil has been neglected by those interested in abolitionist comparisons and connections on the global scale. At least, one would expect Brazilian scholarship to fill the void, as research on slavery has done, but literature specifically dealing with Brazilian abolitionism retains a domestic focus, with little interest in comparing and linking the Brazilian case with its foreign counterparts.

#### MEMORY AND HISTORY

“The abolitionists grew from one outrage to the next, as everyone knows,” declared one of the newspapers sympathetic to the cause on Abolition day. They would suffer yet another outrage, oblivion. Much has been written about Brazilian abolition, but the movement’s decisive role in ending slavery has never been fully recognized.

Part of the fault rests with the abolitionists themselves. Paradoxically, one of the foremost Brazilian abolitionist leaders, Joaquim Nabuco, did not even claim the laurels for the movement. Author of the most influential interpretation of abolition, Nabuco attributed the feat to the magnanimity of the Crown. In *Um estadista do império* (A Statesman of the

Empire), published in the early days of the Republic (proclaimed eighteen months after abolition), when he was a monarchist militant, he identified a faction of the imperial elite and the Emperor himself as having been the driving forces behind the abolition process. In *Minha formação* (My Formative Years), Nabuco reiterated the point while playing down the role of the Republican abolitionists: “It means to claim for the Chamber of Deputies, for Parliament, the initiative that some have attempted to deny it on this issue, crediting to the grassroots, republican movement . . .” (Nabuco, 1900, p. 138). Nabuco was disputing who would and who would not go down in the history books as the leaders of the movement, the abolitionists within the political institutions, like himself, or those operating within the public space.<sup>2</sup>

This version of events emphasizes the institutional political actors, such as Nabuco himself, a member of parliament; the Prime Minister who signed the Golden Law; and the Crown, which would have made a sacrificial gesture of eradicating slavery even if it meant losing the throne.

Not content with ordaining the protagonists in this drama, Nabuco, this time endorsed by another abolitionist leader, José do Patrocínio (*Cidade do Rio*, May 5, 1889),<sup>3</sup> also cropped the timeline. Both singled out 1879 as the start of the abolitionist campaign, for one simple reason: it was the year they got involved – Patrocínio as editor-in-chief of the *Gazeta da Tarde*, and Nabuco in Parliament.

This version became the canonic account for understanding Brazilian abolitionist mobilization. However, to follow it is to err threefold, as it is guilty of anachronism, partiality, and omission.

Ignoring everything that went before these activist-narrators’ engagement is to become hostage to their selection of abolitionist events, emphases, and participants.<sup>4</sup> The fact that many abolitionists did not write about the part they played does not mean it never existed. Rather than follow this bias, I set as the beginning of the abolitionist movement

<sup>2</sup> Nabuco adds: “. . . the movement began at the Chamber in 1879, and not, as has been claimed in *Gazeta da Tarde* of Ferreira de Meneses, dating it to 1880, nor in the *Gazeta de Notícias*, where José do Patrocínio, writing the weekly political section, always supporting us, but still without having guessed his mission . . .” (Nabuco, 1900, p. 137).

<sup>3</sup> This version was spread by younger activists in speeches in celebrations, retrospectives in the press, and memoirs, such as those by Duque Estrada (1918) and Evaristo de Moraes (1924), who joined the campaign much later on.

<sup>4</sup> Nabuco implicitly admits the movement’s earlier origins when he says: “. . . for a long time it seemed that the emancipation movement, the abolitionist movement . . ., had withdrawn . . .” (ACD, Mar. 22, 1879). And, later (Nabuco 1897–1899, p. 849), he mentions in passing that it was in 1879 that “the abolitionist movement restarted.”

the advent of the antislavery societies, that is, a timeline following actions rather than narratives. From this perspective, antislavery activism appears to be a lot older, with its pioneers taking up the gauntlet even before the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, in 1850. However, one can only really speak of an abolitionist movement as such after the rise of a wave of association-building, which occurred during the debate in the late 1860s that would give rise to the Free Womb Law.

The second legacy of the old narrative is to overstate the importance of one sphere (the political institutions) and one actor (the monarchic elite) over and above the public mobilization. To do so is to overlook public space activism and leaders not belonging to the social elite, such as Luís Gama, and to ignore the fact that parliamentary initiatives were triggered by, or concomitant with, waves of public mobilization.

Another error is to downplay the importance of the political conjunctures and of the conflict between organized groups for and against slavery. To focus on one particular player, especially the political rulers, is to attribute to them what they always craved but could not obtain, namely control over the social forces in dispute and the power to decide the direction of history. This view confers upon abolition a coherence that a political process never had, as it results from contention between social groups and not from the skills, plans, or performances of any particular player.

In fairness, Nabuco (1900, pp. 245–6) did recognize his bias: “Who could write the history of his contemporaries impartially, fairly and completely, unaffected by political passion, sectarian bias, personal sympathy or friendship? No-one, of course, which means that various histories will be written in the future.” Despite the warning, Nabuco became and remained a reference, whether for his emphasis on Parliament or for the richness of his own personal archive, for most interpretations of Brazilian abolitionism up to at least the late 1950s.

#### INTERPRETATIONS OF BRAZILIAN ABOLITIONISM

The “various histories” came much later, starting in the 1960s, and, broadly speaking, they fall into distinct academic trends.<sup>5</sup>

The Marxist reading reacted to the emphasis on the Empire elite by underscoring the socioeconomic structures and processes. This view

<sup>5</sup> For an alternative classification of the bibliography, see Needell (2010). The analysis of the thinking of the intellectual and political elites on slavery and abolition, as in Azevedo (1987) and Carvalho (1988), can be seen as an additional line of argument.

painted abolition as part of the capitalist expansion in the country, which required a free labor market. The contradiction between capitalism and slavery would have pushed abolition, leaving little relevance to the political actors and institutions in the explanation. The abolitionist movement itself would be unworthy of specific investigation. This perspective, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, gave rise to Emília Viotti's 1966 classic *Da senzala à colônia* (From the Slave Quarters to the Colony).

A criticism of this perspective came during the centenary of abolition, in 1988, placing the spotlight on the agents. However, instead of the political and social elites, it underscored black leaders and the slaves themselves, adopting the perspective of the “enslaved” – a term the abolitionists themselves created as an alternative to slave – and supporting the black movement's struggle to replace the monarchist symbol of abolition, Princess Isabel, with Zumbi dos Palmares, the colonial black rebel. Drawing on E. P. Thompson, this perspective highlighted the agency of the lower social strata and mapped the varied forms of slave resistance to slavery, through rebellions, judicial activism, and in everyday life (for example, Chalhoub, 1990; Machado, 1994; Azevedo, 1999, 2010; Reis, 2003; Toplin, 1969, 1972). However, interest in the institutional dynamic was limited to the judiciary, with no regard for parliamentary or governmental actions.

The third trend underscored the relevance the political institutions had for abolition. Robert Conrad (1972, 1975)<sup>6</sup> produced the first and until now the only comprehensive work on Brazilian abolition, starting with the end of the slave trade and based on a wealth of documental research. Conrad mapped governmental, parliamentary, and street-level actions, but his focus was on the socioeconomic rifts and on conflicts between the regions, seeing abolitionism as a Northern phenomenon – where slavery's economy was on the wane. Carvalho (1988, 1980, 2007) and Needell (2006) also look to the political institutions, taking up Nabuco's argument that it was the Crown that steered the political process. They insisted on the incontrovertible fact that abolition came about by institutional means, a law, and not by a change in the productive system or through a slave revolt.

These interpretive lines divided the intellectual work: some focused on structural factors, others slave resistance, and a third group on the political institutions.

<sup>6</sup> Conrad's English original (1972) and its Portuguese translation (1975) diverge, as the Brazilian edition was revised to suit the Brazilian readership, with the inclusion of new subitems.



Works on abolitionist mobilizations in the public space are rare. Bergstresser (1973) mapped abolitionist associations and events in Rio de Janeiro in the 1880s, and Machado (1994) tracked grassroots mobilization and antislavery plots in the São Paulo countryside. Only in the last decade or so has research begun to emerge on Porto Alegre, Salvador, Recife, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro (Kittleson, 2005; Graden, 2006; Castilho, 2016; Albuquerque, 2009; Machado 2006, 2009; Silva, 2003), revealing a great number of public demonstrations by a varied demographic, including the lower strata and black groups themselves. Although very important, these studies remain local in scope and do not draw out any connections between social mobilization and the broader politico-institutional dynamics.

All these interpretations also follow an international trend to study abolitionism without any regard for its counterweight, the pro-slavery political reaction. When considered, social groups engaged in slavery-dependent activities are more often investigated as economic forces than as political agents, as if economic interest would convert automatically into political action. There is no systematic study on how these various pro-slavery economic actors came to produce a coordinated action targeting the same goal, a politically organized pro-slavery action.

Studying abolitionism as closed off from pro-slavery mobilization neglects the relational nature of politics. A social movement only exists vis-à-vis the State it contests and the groups who organize politically to preserve the status quo it seeks to dismantle. Dissecting the pro-slavery countermovement – an antagonist all but unexplored in the literature – is indispensable if we are to understand the actions of the protagonist. This book understands abolitionism as the apex of a triangle whose other vertices are the political institutions and the pro-slavery countermovement, narrating the conflicts between the two and the ways the State sought to mediate them.

Since Conrad (1972, 1975), there have been no panoramic visions of abolition. Scholars tend to compartmentalize the phenomenon. Broaching the “parliamentary” and “popular” movements as distinct “abolitionisms” has generated autonomous fields of investigation, with those studying one ignoring the other. Brazilian literature has been blind to the reciprocal impacts between mobilization in the public space and action within the political institutions. Just recently Needell (2010) proposed an integrated understanding of “Afro-Brazilian agency and the politics of the elite.” In a book published five years after the Brazilian version of this one (Alonso, 2015), Needell (2020) converges with

arguments raised here, regarding the necessity of a broad consideration of street mobilization and parliamentary struggles; the importance of a close study of the institutional political dynamics of the abolition process; and the uselessness of splitting abolitionists into moderates and radicals. We also coincide in acknowledging the central role played by the black abolitionist André Rebouças.

Nevertheless, my perspective is broader than Needell's, who focuses only on the post-1879 process in the Empire's capital. My analysis takes place on a national scale and on a longer timeline (starting in the late 1860s), and encompasses a greater number of activists and leaders. I also consider – which he does not – Brazilians' interaction with the transnational abolitionist network. Another major difference concerns the relevance of the Crown. Needell follows Nabuco's view of the monarch as a guide to abolitionist politics, leaving aside the massive republican participation and the crucial military adhesion in supporting for the abolitionist campaign – as I will show, both groups are very relevant. Although this book includes the Crown as one of the forces in the political contention, it does not consider it a decisive one, but, instead, as a force that shifts according to the balance of power between the two political parties, and between the political institutions and social mobilization. The final difference is methodological. While Needell does not define the “abolitionist movement” and relies on qualitative documents, I adopt a sociological concept of social movements that leads to the compilation of a dataset of civil associations and mobilizing events.

#### A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

Studying the abolitionist movement from a relational perspective means framing it as a case of contentious interaction with the State and counter-movement that played out in three arenas: the political institutions, public space, and underground. It also means not considering abolitionism as a pre-defined agent. Social movements have tenuous frontiers and volatile participants who engage and disengage all the time. Movements are networks of social groups with no access to, or influence over, institutional politics (Tilly 2005, p. 308), that, during a conflict, built up interactions connecting each other, without erasing their differences and disputes among themselves around goals, strategies, and leaders (Diani, 2003). The movement shows itself as such through pressure campaigns directed at the authorities, and recalibrating strategies depending on how the balance of power shifts over the course of the political process.