

Racism and labour in Brazil: From Colonial Roots to Neoliberal Capitalism

Racismo e trabalho no Brasil: das raízes coloniais ao capitalismo neoliberal

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Abstract: The labour market is one of the spheres that unequivocally expresses the persistent structure of racial inequality in Brazilian social dynamics. This study briefly analyses aspects that contribute to understanding the complexity of racism in social relations under Brazilian dependent capitalism. Bibliographic research was conducted, grounded on the principles of historical materialism, highlighting how colonialism, slavery, and abolitionism without guaranteed rights are fundamental elements for understanding the configuration of current labour relations. It concludes that racism remains one of the main mechanisms responsible for the exclusion, or precarious inclusion, of Black individuals from the labour market, and that the advance of neoliberalism has maximised the processes of racial domination and the racialisation of poverty.

Keywords: Racism. Labour. Capitalism.

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1. Introduction

The complex dynamics of the transition from modern slavery to dependent capitalism in Brazil and its interpellation with the formation and development of the Brazilian labour market require a critical analysis based on a theoretical effort. This requires revisiting Marxist observations on the form that labour assumes in capitalist society, as well as the racial issue in relationship to the totality of social relations, highlighting its dynamic and complex connections with the production and reproduction of social life in a society centred on the production of value.

This analysis presents some, far from exhaustive, considerations, in the hope of contributing to the theoretical debate around the current conditions imposed by contemporary capitalism on the Brazilian working class, highlighting the relationship between racism and the



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understanding of structural issues. A theoretical-methodological approach is employed, based on the principles of historical materialism in dialogue with Black feminist debates. The study, based on bibliographical research, seeks to foster a critical understanding of the constitutive elements of capitalist sociability, which are based on racism and sexism, and which operate to sustain it from its mercantile accumulation to the present day.

The discussion is structured into three topics: the first revisits some assumptions about work, the form it assumes in capitalism, and its relationship with racism, based on elements of Marxist analysis present mainly in Book I of *Capital*. The second discusses the formation of the working class, focusing on the experience of the Black population during the transition from slavery to free labour in Brazil. Here, the writings of Clóvis Moura and Florestan Fernandes are the main reference. Finally, the debate promoted by Lélia Gonzalez briefly addresses the Brazilian labour market and its relationship with gender and racial issues, and the current neoliberal context of deregulation, connecting it to racial factors that structure class relations.

2. Some assumptions regarding the debate on racism, work, and exploitation in Brazil

This analysis is based on the contributions of Marx in *Capital*, especially those in Book I¹, where Marx presents an analysis of the causes of the forms of work in capitalist society that relate to the subordination, disqualification, and devaluation of the workforce in the face of capital appreciation. It is also based on other Marxist and Black feminist contributions that focus on the analysis of social relations from the perspective of the link between class exploitation and oppressions of sex/gender and race/ethnicity.

Although the space available does not allow for a more in-depth development, some assumptions are relevant to guide the considerations set out here. Firstly, that: work founds the social being, and it is through this teleological, conscious activity that the human being produces his own existence. Work is, therefore, a form exclusive to human beings, since it differs from the relationship between animals and nature not only because workers carry out actions that transform natural matter, but because through this they achieve their objective.

The work process is thus composed of activities oriented towards an end, with its objects and its means. “In the work process, therefore, man’s activity effects, through the means of work, a transformation of the object of work, intended from the beginning” (Marx, 1996, p. 300). The process ends in the product and, when the human being transforms nature, the latter transforms himself.

The second assumption refers to the complex relationship between capital and labour: the production process in capitalism is also a process of value formation, and capital is created and fed by labour power to achieve its appreciation. In capitalism, the capitalist buys all the elements necessary for the labour process, including labour power, and makes the worker consume the means of production through his or her labour. Marx (1996) highlights two peculiar phenomena of this process: 1) the worker works under the control of the capitalist to

¹ According to Wellen (2020), There were distinct phases and diverse influences in Marx's theoretical output. Among them, the so-called *three sources* stand out: German philosophy, English political economy, and the perspective of social transformation.

whom his or her labour belongs; 2) although the direct producer is the worker, the product is the property of the capitalist and not the worker. Thus, “[...] the labour process is a process between things that the capitalist has bought, between things that belong to him” (Marx, 1996, p. 304).

The product of labour in capitalism is produced with the capitalist aiming to obtain not only use value but also exchange value. He decides to produce use values, only as long as they take the form of a product intended for sale: a commodity. The capitalist “[...] wants to produce not only a use value but also a commodity, not only use value but value, and not only value but also surplus value” (Marx, 1996, p. 305). So, we can consider the production process in capitalism also as a process of value formation².

For capital to exist, therefore, labour, or the capital/labour relationship, must exist, as capital is created and fed by labour power to achieve its appreciation.

Thirdly, we understand that giving theoretical and political attention to the racial issue does not mean breaking with the social totality. Critical social theory has demonstrated that society as a single unit does not have an intention, a shared teleology, but that society possesses different and innumerable subjects who have a teleological action, oriented towards a purpose. Men and women, whether individually or collectively, based on their needs and interests, act according to an ideal of purpose that they intend to achieve (Netto, 2009).

In this sense, singularity is historically and socially constructed in the universality that materialises through social activities conducted by humanity. This singular construction (of each singular individual) – dependent on specific mediations that enable the appropriation and objectification of becoming human, which is then synthesised and condensed in the universality of gender, making each singular being rich in universal humanisation – is what generates and forms human diversity (Santos, 2017). Considering that all individuals are social, historical, and diverse, it is tacit that diversity must be understood in the singular/generic human relationship. It encompasses, therefore, the expressions of ethnic/racial and sex/gender relations, and without understanding these relations there can be no understanding of the totality of social relations with all their complexity and contradictions.

This leads us to the fourth assumption, that racism is a structural phenomenon of social, economic, political, and legal relationships, and is therefore endowed with historicity and materiality (Almeida, 2019). Capitalism needs racism for its development. It is, therefore, an active ideological mechanism of social relations that also affects the organisation of the social division of labour and the complete set of social life.

The capitalist system is fundamentally linked to the ideological structures of patriarchy and racism because it needs them. Oppression and exploitation form a dialectic unity, so that oppression serves as a driving force for the achievement of exploitation (Barroso, 2018). “[...] through oppression and domination, relationships, behaviours, and mentalities are

² These are the objective factors that allow us to identify the difference between the work process and the appreciation process. It is noted that the means of production counts, in its entirety, as an element of the work process, and only in part as an element of value formation.

naturalised, which become privileges and inequalities, which favour exploitation” (Barroso, 2018, p. 458).

Oppression and exploitation are, therefore, related, and for this close and destructive relationship to be revealed requires a perspective of the totality, which allows the understanding of reality with its contradictions and historicity. An intersectional understanding is also required to expose the link between the axes of power and discrimination that produce structural oppressions, and in particular the axes of racism, patriarchy, and the class structure (Crenshaw, 2002).

The final assumption is that Brazil presents characteristics within its socio-historical formation that have logically affected the constitution of the social and racial division of labour. In particular, the condition – deeply analysed by scholars such as Florestan Fernandes, Rui Mauro Marini, Lélia Gonzalez, and Clóvis Moura, among others – of being a country founded on a model of colonial exploitation maintained by a system of enslaved indigenous people and Black men and women, which provided the basis for the formation of a nation of peripheral capitalism of late development.

As in the rest of Latin America the transition between colonial slavery and the emergence of capitalist relations of production took on specific aspects in Brazil regarding the materiality of the general law of capitalist accumulation. Consequent marks of the colonisation process can be observed, based on the tripod of export monoculture, large estates, and an enslaved Indigenous and Black labour force (Moura, 2019).

Such aspects were decisive in the formation of a model of late developing subordinate capitalism, coupled with an extremely insecure labour market, as it failed to absorb, or even actively excluded, Black and Indigenous men and women people from production processes (Moura, 2019).

The following section addresses the formation of the Brazilian working class and makes a theoretical effort to grasp the complexity of its concrete dynamics intertwined with racial relations.

3. The formation of the Brazilian working class and the racial issue

The theoretical thoughts of Clóvis Moura, which began in the 1940s, are still relevant when considering the formation of the country in relation to the dimensions of class, racial relations, and the Black experience of work. Moura (2014b), explains how modern slavery initially emerged as a constitutive element of capitalism at the historical moment in which those holding economic power applied their surpluses in commercial enterprises “[...] that expanded through the control of an area – Africa – in which it sought merchandise to sell; and through the exploitation of other areas – Brazil, the Antilles, [and] other South America countries – that consumed the merchandise they took: the slave” (Moura, 2014b, p. 36).

During commercial capitalism, the phase that enabled the primitive accumulation of capital in Europe, colonial Brazil was a commercial enterprise for the extraction of natural resources operated through slavery. Within this mode of production, which lasted for almost four

centuries, the enslaved person was “[...] the merchandise that produced merchandise, the thing that moved [...]” (Moura, 2014a, p. 44), devoid of any trace of humanity, being seen as *something* without integrity, without intelligence, and destined only for manual labour.

Slave labour became a fundamental component of the social history of labour in Brazil. It established a production relationship that, to boost productivity and condition the lives of these slaves to captivity, was extremely alienating and violent.

The visibility given by Moura³ to the various elements of the struggle of enslaved people against captivity also highlights the internal dynamics of Brazilian society during the colonial period, and demonstrates that the formation of the country took place through the fundamental contradiction of masters versus the enslaved.

During that period, enslaved people were the protagonists; slavery not only generated profit, the state form or identities marked by African ancestry and culture, but also served as a stage for political struggles through quilombos, escapes, rebellions, religion, and multiple forms of resistance by enslaved people – forms that gave impetus to the unfolding of history. Faced with these struggles, the ruling class demanded a strong ideological slave apparatus to confront them:

In view of this, the image of Black people had to reject their human dimension. On the one hand, there was a need for powerful repressive mechanisms so that they could [be forced to] remain in those permitted social spaces, while, on the other, their rebellious dynamics opposed this. Hence the need to regard them as irrational, their rebellious attitudes as a social or even biological pathology (Moura, 2019, p. 46).

The prohibition of the slave trade in the 1850s dealt a major blow to this economic regime, based on forced labour. In addition to the Eusébio de Queiroz Law, the Land Law was also enacted to regulate land ownership. This new regulation did not, however, encourage small rural properties, since it returned property to the *sesmeiros*. This left the thousands of workers who lived in these areas, mainly on a subsistence basis, as illegal occupants. At that time, the percentage of enslaved people, as a proportion of the population, was already beginning to decline. At the beginning of the 19th century, they formed 50% of the population; by 1872, this number had fallen to 16% (Theodoro, 2022). As the complex process of transition from slave labour to free labour began, relations were renewed, but they maintained many of the features of the previous regime.

In 1888, Brazil became the last country in the world to abolish slavery. This event ended the slave regime, but did not eliminate domination, exploitation, and violence based on racial determinants. Production relationships based on racism emerged, and were maintained in the post-abolition period, which operated as an “[...] ideological fuel capable of justifying the economic-social, racial, and cultural sifting to which it is [still] currently subjected in Brazil through a series of discriminatory mechanisms that follow one another in the biography of each Black person” (Moura, 2019, p.39).

The historical labour conditions established during the colonial period are not examined here with the aim of pointing out a linearity or anachronism in today’s labour relations, but rather with the aim of establishing – based on an understanding of the racialisation of Africans

³ *Sociology of the Black Brazilian* (2019)– 1st edition of 1988; *Radical dialectic of Black Brazil* (2014a)– 1st edition of 1994.

trafficked as merchandise – how racism emerged in the world of work and became a structuring element of class relations and a defining factor in a racial division of the Brazilian labour market. The post-abolition period also has crucial elements that must be analysed:

The formation of the Brazilian working class is marked by contradictions. While in Europe the transition to capitalism was marked by the introduction of wage labour, in Brazil wage labour coexisted with slave labour for decades. From the beginning of the 19th century, it was possible to observe the existence of artisan workshops and factories in the state of Rio de Janeiro using free and slave labour in the same workplace (Andrade, 2021, p. 160).

Florestan Fernandes (1972) explains that, until the mid-19th century, the market economy did not give rise to the typical modern organisation – in the capitalist sense – of work and economic relations. Brazilian society faced great difficulties in relation to the spreading and integration of the competitive social order. Ambiguous relations prevailed, supported by authoritarian forms from the slavery period, and which drastically deviated from the democratic principles of distribution and access to opportunities.

Only from the 1860s onwards, when the crisis of the slave system reached its climax, did the urban sector become modernised and the replacement of slave labour by wage labour in manufacturing gained momentum. Soon, the disintegration of the slave/noble social order and the development of a competitive social order emerged as concomitant social phenomena.

In this broad context, the situation of Black and mixed-race people was affected from three different directions. Until this period, as slaves and formerly enslaved people, they had had a strong and untouchable position in the structure of the economy. As soon as the entire structure of the production system began to change, this position was threatened on two fronts. The international market provided the country with immigrants from Europe, who came in search of the richest and most developing areas, to work as a wage-earning class, in rural and urban areas, or as peddlers, shopkeepers, merchants or manufacturers. Additionally, traditional white families began to move from the countryside to the big cities, and the poor or dependent people emerged as an increasingly large wage-earning sector. [...] In the rapidly developing coffee farm regions, newcomers, foreign or national, absorbed the best economic opportunities, even in rural areas, accelerating the slavery crisis and transforming Black and mixed-race people into a marginalised sector of the population and a sub-proletariat (Fernandes, 1972, p. 65).

For Fernandes, the Black population, which had been victimised by slavery, also became a victim of the crisis of the slave system. The “[...] social revolution of the competitive social order [...]” (Fernandes, 1972, p. 64) in no way threatened white supremacy. It merely reorganised relations in a way that created new terrible conditions of “[...] partial or total exclusion of the former agent of slave labour and the freed from the vital flow of economic growth and local development” (Fernandes, 1972, p. 66).

Black men and women were forced to the periphery of the competitive social order, or to semi-colonial and colonial structures inherited from the past, when they played important roles in maintaining the rural economy. Even when they remained in the big cities, they found themselves in even more deplorable situations, conglomerating into slums and situations of temporary or permanent unemployment.

Florestan (1972), following from this, points to prejudice and colour discrimination as structural and dynamic causes of the organisation of social relations in Brazilian capitalism, an ideological mechanism used to restrict educational, social, and political opportunities, keeping Black men and women on the margins or even outside the system.

It is well understood that the process of the formation of the working class in Brazil occurred before the industrialisation process and linked capitalist forms with pre-capitalist forms of production. This provided the basis for different hierarchies in the composition of the working class, with the demarcation of distinct positions and opportunities between Black and White people. The majority of Black men and women were excluded from formal jobs and in extreme poverty, relegated to the worst scenario under capitalism: that of not finding buyers for their labour.

Until the early 1930s, a racialist and eugenic paradigm prevailed. This attributed the standard of civility to White European phenotypes, and the representation of social degeneration to Black and Indigenous peoples. For groups discriminated against on racial and ethnic grounds, this period meant exclusion from formal jobs, which defined their inability to work for wages and sought to erase their history and existence.

From these racist ideas⁴, a national project was built that aimed at *Whitening* the population through miscegenation, exclusion, and the elimination of non-whites. In order to ensure its status as a developed nation, Brazil had to *Whiten*. For example, the anthropologist Roquete Pinto, as president of the 1st Brazilian Eugenics Congress, in 1929, “[...] predicted years later, and despite his criticism of racist positions, an increasingly White country: in 2012 we will have a population composed of 80% Whites and 20% mixed-race people; no Blacks, no Indians” (Schwarcz, 2012, p. 26).

Once the racialist and eugenic paradigms were overcome, a new framework of discourse and thoughts regarding national identity emerged, now with a culturalist bias. Culture would be the key element for interpreting our formation. Miscegenation and hybridism were exalted in a distorted interpretation of slavery and racial relations in Brazil. The assertion that prejudice did not exist gained strength, in accordance with the myth of racial democracy: we had built a mixed-race society free of major racial conflicts. This, incidentally, is a peculiar and specific aspect of Brazil. “From this perspective, the dynamic contributions of the Black population were cast into the shadows of history, or at most were analysed from the point of view of categories such as assimilation, accommodation, and acculturation” (Queiroz, 2021, p. 256).

In the meantime, new mechanisms for reproducing racial inequalities were being developed, enabling the normalisation of the marginalisation of the Black population from the wage labour market and their limiting to subsistence and informal jobs⁵. Faced with the myth that racism does not exist, the only person culpable for their misery would be the Black individual himself or herself, due to a lack of effort in a society where everyone is equal before the law.

⁴As examples, we cite the works of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, João Batista Lacerda, Silvio Romero, Nina Rodrigues, and Oliveira Vianna.

⁵ According to Theodoro (2022), at the beginning of the 20th century, 90% of industrial employees in São Paulo were immigrants. The disproportion was so great that, on December 12, 1930, the Vargas Government issued decree no. 19,482, requiring employers to have at least two-thirds of their workforce Brazilian.

Thinking about the formation of the Brazilian working class therefore requires thinking outside the standard of the White, industrial, urban male and the European working class. To analyse contemporary times, it is necessary to encompass its complexity and diversity. Reflecting in greater depth on the conditions of a large portion of Black people outside this standard, who continue their struggle within the social, racial, and international division of labour, contributes to unmasking the elements that obscure the distinctions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat today and that hinder the materialisation of alliances within the working class.

4. The present day: The needs of capital, labour, and racism

The 1930s marked a period of economic and social change. Brazil witnessed an increase in urbanisation, economic modernisation, and the creation of a better regulated and protected labour market. Starting under the Getúlio Vargas government, innovations were introduced, such as the regulation of vacations, working hours, job stability, healthy working conditions, and the definition of a minimum wage and a work card as mandatory for the registration of employment contracts (Theodoro, 2022).

Given these new developments, one might ask: what about the social segments not integrated into the formal and registered labour order? The answer is that such segments were the target of greater social marginalisation. They were not only *non-workers*; the intermittent unemployed, and odd-job workers⁶ were labelled as unemployed, or as idlers, and marginalised. Although further progress was made in 1943, with the enactment of the Consolidated Labour Laws (*Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho, CLT*), these gains were not applied in a generalised manner. It is worth noting that:

In the five decades between 1930 and 1980, the modernisation process allowed the absorption into the labour market of segments of the Black population that, until the 1930s, had been almost completely marginalised. The revaluation of the national workforce that followed the end of the period of mass immigration directly benefited Black and mixed-race people. As Kowarick states: ‘At that moment [...] the economic needs for labour transformed everyone, Blacks, Whites and Mulattos, nationals or foreigners, into commodities for capital’ (Theodoro, 2022, p. 129).

However, as the sociologist Lélia Gonzalez (2020) rightly points out, “[...] the so-called Brazilian miracle benefited only a minority of the domestic population and, above all, multinationals [...]” (Gonzalez, 2020, unpaginated), so this process did not mean a reversal of the situation to which the Black Brazilian population had been subjected. According to Gonzalez, in the 1970 Census, 36% of total personal income was concentrated in the hands of 5% of the richest families in Brazil, and almost 100% of the Black population lived in informality – without job security – or was unemployed. Even when they had the same or better educational level, they were overlooked in relation to Whites.

The 1964 military coup brought about economic and political changes through violent repression of many sectors of the population. During this period, which saw great economic expansion, foreign capital aggressively flowed into Brazil and expanded its industrial base. This change led to the disappearance of many small businesses, which directly affected Black

⁶ The use of the term odd-job workers in this excerpt, refers to a person who performs small, occasional services, of an informal nature, in exchange for wages.

workers, since it was principally through these businesses that they participated in the industrial labour market.

Furthermore, changes in the countryside, with the absorption of small rural properties to expand large estates, had a major impact on Black rural workers. The consequent high unemployment rates drove the migration of these groups to urban centres, expanding the number of favelas. Construction, short-term contracting, domestic service, and public transportation became the main occupational alternatives for Black men and women because they did not require educational or professional qualifications (Gonzalez, 2020).

The 1970s were marked by stagnation and the crisis of the Taylorist and Fordist pattern of accumulation, and this brought about transformations in global capitalism that had a profound impact on the world of work. Given the obstacles to the processes of accumulation, measures were implemented that changed the organisation of the international division of labour and the composition of the global working class. International corporations quickly relocated, imposing absurd working conditions that were increasingly degraded. This concentrated a greater proportion of production in countries on the periphery of the system (Antunes, 2018).

As part of the same process, in several countries in the global South, the number of workers, mainly in the service sector, agribusiness and industry, has significantly expanded. In essence, capital's response to its crisis was based, and enhanced by the internationalisation of the economy, on a particular form of the linking of strategies to extract more absolute and relative value; these measures would be accentuated from 2008 onwards, amid new manifestations of the structural crisis of the system. In Brazil, particularly in the 1990s, the transformations generated by the new international division of labour were very intense, since they started from an internal dynamic characteristic of dependent industrialised countries, based on the overexploitation of the workforce. The imposition of low wages, associated with intensified production rates and long working hours, was further accentuated by the disorganisation of the workers' and union movements [...] (Antunes, 2018, p. 138).

This is the context in which neoliberalism developed in Brazil in the 1990s, amid a combination of old and new mechanisms typical of flexible accumulation forms and the process of restructuring production. From then on, informalisation and insecurity in the workplace increased, reducing workers' rights, and subjecting them to degrading living and working conditions.

It is known that the Black population, due to the structures inherited from the colonial period, was already living with this insecure work model even before it was restructured as a new mode of capitalist accumulation. The advance of neoliberalism, however, maximised the processes of racial domination and the racialisation of poverty⁷. With the deregulation of work and lack of social protection, the working conditions of the Black population have become increasingly generalised to other workers. In this context, there are more disputes over jobs that White people would once not have competed for because they were considered inferior activities.

⁷ According to Lima Júnior and Abreu (2020), from an analysis of data from PNAD Contínua (2019), between 2015 and 2018 2.8 million Black people fell into poverty and 2.4 million into extreme poverty.

According to Gonzalez (2020), Brazil, although it differs from other countries that industrialised earlier due to its unequal and dependent capitalism and its late development, has a sophisticated element of racism, which has become integrated into capitalism as an important tool for the reproduction of an ideology appropriate for the accumulation of capital.

Furthermore, “[...] racism helps to blur the distinctions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, reinforcing the differences that isolate and oppose potential allies within the working class” (Araújo, 2020, unpaginated). In line with this reasoning, racism, although it more directly and profoundly harms the Black population, affects the entire working class. Gonzalez (2020) also conducted an analysis on the position of the Black population within the labour market in the 1970s and 1980s, focusing mainly on Black women and young people:

Given that more than half of the Brazilian population is made up of people under 21 years of age, and that the majority of the Brazilian population is, in fact, Afro-Brazilian, we can see the severe problem facing the Black youth: unemployment (open or not). There are currently around sixteen million adolescents and young people in Brazil who are completely left to their own devices, without the slightest prospect in life; or rather, their only prospects are banditry and death (Gonzalez, 2020, unpaginated).

This reality, for adolescents and young people, has not changed for the positive in the last decades of the 20th century. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística) (2020), among all age groups, young Black people were in the worst situation, with rates of informal employment in 2019 above 50%, and an unemployment rate close to 25%.

In the case of young Black women, Gonzalez explains that the main outlet is domestic work for middle-class and bourgeois families, or open prostitution and the mulatto profession. Under capitalism, Black women are not only exploited economically, through work, but also through sexual exploitation and social reproduction. The stereotypes of the housekeeper, wet nurse, and the *body* that was subject to rape during slavery have been dragged on throughout Brazilian history (Gonzalez, 2020). These stereotypes, perpetuated in the social imagination by the media and literature, have a strong impact on their relationships, not only in the job market⁸, but also in relation to affection and self-esteem.

Current neoliberal policies have generated the perverse effect of making the work and lives of the working class less secure, and their impacts are becoming more acute and normalised. This has been supported by a restating of the racist ideology that sustained the cruel system of slavery and the beginning of the Republic. The Brazilian reality continues to expose the, mostly Black, working class to exhausting workdays, poor health, and hygiene conditions, forced labour, and lack of social protection, among other rights violations.

The labour market is, in this sense, the channel through which the structure of the racial inequalities in social dynamics are undeniably revealed. Black people, in addition to being those who benefit to a lesser extent and more slowly from the benefits of periods of economic

⁸ It is worth noting that paid domestic work was only regulated in 2015, through Complementary Law No. 150/2015, which changed the wording of article 7 of the Federal Constitution to establish equal labour rights between domestic workers and other urban and rural workers. This recognition of rights occurred amid broad resistance from some sectors, exposing old demands regarding the sexual and racial division of labour, social reproduction and aspects related to a servile culture inherited from the period of slavery.

growth – as can be seen in the example of the period of the economic miracle – are also those who suffer the greatest losses and deprivations in periods of economic stagnation or crisis. This was observed, for example, during the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, a period in which the Black population was the most affected.

Regarding the pandemic, in 2020 Silva and Silva (2020) analysed the National Household Sample Survey (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios (PNAD COVID-19)), developed by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE)). They concluded that, because a large portion of the Black population were active in the informal market, they were either prevented from working during the period of social isolation or were forced to continue working and thereby expose themselves to a greater risk of infection simply to ensure the minimum for their survival. During this period,

In June 2020, people who identified as Black or mixed-race (Pardo) accounted for 54.9% of the workforce, comprising 52.5% of those employed and 60.3% of those unemployed. During the first months of the pandemic in the country, the unemployment rate increased for all colour or race groups, with the overall average rising from 10.7% to 13.1% between May and July. Considering only the Black population – men and women –, the increase was even higher: it rose from 10.7% and 13.8% to 12.7% and 17.6%, respectively. (Silva; Silva, 2020, p. 8)

It is clear that multiple and intersecting inequalities affect the concrete reality of the Black population in all spheres of life. In this case, labour relations stand out, which manifest themselves differently from those experienced by workers as a whole and which weaken employment relationships and social protection. So, in order to directly impact the significant level of racial inequality that currently exists in the labour market and in the forms of organisation within the working class, employment guarantee policies need to be developed and coordinated with the expansion of social and labour protection networks while not losing sight of the anti-racist, feminist and anti-imperialist perspective.

5. Final considerations

In conclusion, the Black experience of work in Brazil has been historically permeated by racist mechanisms with the objective of reproducing their position of subordination within the capitalist mode of production. Those that live by working, that is the vast majority of this contingent of Black workers, has had its living conditions impoverished as more advanced stages of capital are reached in generating more value.

The intersection between racism and class relations is, to this day, responsible for the perpetuation of inequalities in the Brazilian labour market. In practice, the almost total absence of Black men and women in socially relevant jobs, such as political and economic leadership, has become normalised, while the number of people in underemployment, informal work or unemployment has increased. This situation is also accompanied by the perpetuation of institutionally racist practices and by weak state mechanisms for protecting workers, including in combating racial discrimination in the workplace.

So, we have a long way to go to change direction, and this involves understanding that racism and labour exploitation are intertwined totalities. Those who wish to advance the debate and social struggles must therefore reflect on the contemporary reality of the relationship between

racism and the transfer of value from the economies of peripheral countries to central countries.

We must also consider the forms of ideological domination particular to nations that were formed from domination based colonial expansion, and the structure of the justifications that the dominant group produced (Moura, 2014a). It is unopposable and urgent to consider the Brazilian working class in its specificities based on the sexual and racial division of labour, and in its relationship with the international division of labour.

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