

**WORKING-CLASS SOCIETIES  
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY RIO DE JANEIRO:  
NOTES ON THE MAKING OF THE BRAZILIAN WORKING CLASS**

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“... The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.”<sup>1</sup>

In his opinion as a member of the Empire Affairs Section of the Council of State, José Caetano de Campos, Viscount of Bom Retiro, proposed the approval with some changes of the statute presented to that council by the *Corpo Coletivo União Operária* (Collective Corps Labor Union). Among the changes he suggested was that of art. 15 of the statute, so as to limit the public use of uniforms, established by that article, to “social acts”, that is, to internal activities. The statute of the *União Operária* had, precisely, introduced a novelty in the usual formulation of statutes by such societies presented to the Council of State, in the chapter entitled “Of the right of distinction”, which contained only one article, number 15, authorizing the use of a specific uniform by members of the union wherever they chose.<sup>2</sup>

According to its statute, the *União Operária* had as its aim “to deal with the general interests of the working class and crafts in the country” and in order to become a member one had to be, in the first place, “worker, craftsman or to exercise some defined material work”. The statute presented to the Council of State also demonstrated clearly that the Union intended to be more than just a mutual aid society. The members showed not only the intention of creating a library (an aim that was not unusual among labor unions of that period), but also that of publishing a periodical, entitled *Gazeta dos Operários*. Nevertheless, what made this society unique was its explicit purpose of affirming a class identity. This purpose appears in an obvious manner in the adoption of a uniform that would give a visible external identity to its members, but in a more subtle form it can also be traced in the first article of the statute, mentioning “general interests of the working class”. On the other hand, as many authors have shown, the use of the singular form “working class” instead of the plural “working classes”, more usual in that period, is by no means fortuitous.<sup>3</sup> In the same sense, the term *operário* (worker) no longer appears in its common nineteenth-century meaning of laborer, unskilled manual labor, opposed to *artista* or *artífice* (artisan or craftsman), as skilled labor, but acquires a new meaning to designate the entire class.

One last remark on the Viscount’s opinion, concerns its apparent indulgence towards

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<sup>1</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, reprint, Harmondsworth/New York/Ringwood/Markham/Auckland: Penguin Books, 1981, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Arquivo Nacional, Conselho de Estado, November, 11, 1882, 559/2/14 [the numbers correspond to the box, package, and document]. Processes will hereafter be cited as NA, CE, followed by box/package/document numbers.

<sup>3</sup> On the french case see Robert Paris, “A imagem do operário no século XIX pelo espelho de um *vaudeville*”, *Revista Brasileira de História*, São Paulo, 8 (15), Set. 1987-Feb. 1988, p. 63.

the union's request, proposing the approval of the statute with some changes, while the usual procedure, some time before, would have been to send the request back to the society to make changes before presenting it to the Council of State. In fact it seems that the Viscount sought to avoid a juridical problem, since on November, 4 1882, some days before he wrote his opinion, a law 3,150 suppressed the need of the Council of State's authorization for the operation of this kind of society. Therefore this was one of the last, if not the last, judgments on this matter delivered by the Council of State. The law of November 4<sup>th</sup> ended a bureaucratic ritual that had lasted since 1861, established by law 1,083 of August, 22 1860 and by decree 2,711 of December 19<sup>th</sup> of that year, which had not even spared the societies already operating by that time.

The most paradoxical aspect of this discussion is that it takes place in a period when, according to most authors, the working class in Brazil did not yet exist.

### **Continuity and change in labor organization**

Without risking too much it is possible to assert that no work dealing with the working class before 1888 has been published in Brazil <sup>4</sup>. However, some syntheses, of varying degrees of comprehensiveness, do mention the existence of mutual aid societies since the 1830s <sup>5</sup>; nonetheless, these experiences are seen as ancestors of the "real" working class, a sort of "pre-history" of class. The notion prevails that whatever existed before 1888, or even before the first years of the twentieth century, differed radically from what was to come in the next period. This is not very far from a division of labor history in stages, such as that proposed by José Albertino Rodrigues, establishing five stages from the origins of the labor movement to 1964, in which what he terms a "mutualistic period" came before 1888 and a "resistance period" existed from 1888 to 1919 <sup>6</sup>.

Apparently two reasons lead to this kind of interpretation, which establishes an inaugural date of depart that henceforth makes it possible to speak of the existence of a working class. On one hand, the presence of slave labor until 1888, which makes some authors doubt of existence before that date of capitalism in Brazil; on the other hand, the belief that the working class was "born from industry" and therefore could only exist from

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<sup>4</sup> There are, however, some ongoing or unpublished works which tend to break with this framework, such as the research of Marc Jay Hoffnagel on nineteenth-century artisans of Recife or Artur José Renda Vitorino, *Processo de Trabalho, Sindicalismo e Mudança Técnica: O caso dos trabalhadores do setor gráfico em São Paulo e no Rio de Janeiro (1858-1912)*, master thesis, Campinas: UNICAMP, 1995, mimeo.

<sup>5</sup> Examples are numerous, such as the pioneering work of José Albertino Rodrigues, *Sindicato e Desenvolvimento no Brasil*, São Paulo: DIFEL, 1968, p. 7; see also, Francisco Foot e Victor Leonardi, *História da Indústria e do Trabalho no Brasil: Das origens aos anos vinte*, São Paulo: Global, 1982, pp. 117-121; and, José Antonio Segatto, *A Formação da Classe Operária no Brasil*, Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto, 1987, pp. 35-36.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

the industrial expansion of the 1880s onwards <sup>7</sup>.

Some elements of change do certainly exist between the labor movement of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, but there are also elements of continuity. It is on the organizational level that these changes seem to be more visible, although they tend to be overestimated.

The first years of this century witnessed the birth of a new type of working class organization, the resistance unions, created to play an eminently labor union role, centered on better pay, the reduction of working hours, and the improvement of working conditions. At first sight, these new organizations seemed to oppose the existing mutual aid societies, which had as their aim the helping of their associates in the case of unemployment, sickness, disablement and so forth. The understanding that this new form of labor organization should be the only one to be adopted marked the First Brazilian Labor Congress in 1906.

Nevertheless, the idea that new resistance unions definitely replaced the old mutual aid societies is false. What took place was instead a quite slow and complex process of change from one type of organization to the other. Mutual aid societies never entirely disappeared as late as the mid-1930s, although they did lose importance. But on the other hand, as some of the old mutual aid societies absorbed labor union practices, new labor unions turned to assistance functions. In this sense, although change was not as radical as usually supposed, by the first years of the century, a visible change in the forms of working class organization did occur <sup>8</sup>.

Less visible elements of continuity between old and new types of organization take place in the cultural field. On one side, they can be found in the persistence of ritual practices that extend from the way union assemblies were organized to the celebrations of the craft's day, usually the anniversary of the union. The last is without doubt a heritage of the patron saint's day celebrated by the guilds, an observation that in the mutual aid societies would acquire a dechristianized equivalent. On the other side, elements of continuity are also present in notions inherited from the nineteenth-century mutual aid societies, related to the dignity of labor, the valuation of work and, above all, to class itself. Such notions constitute more than the mere survival of archaic traditions or vocabulary <sup>9</sup>. The term that best summed

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<sup>7</sup> On this notion that can be found on both historiography and the writings of the turn of the century labor movement, see my own article "A identidade da classe operária no Brasil", *Revista Brasileira de História*, 12 (23/24), Set. 1991-Aug. 1992.

<sup>8</sup> On my doctoral dissertation I tried to cover this process for the case of Rio de Janeiro, cf. Claudio H. de Moraes Batalha, *Le Syndicalisme "Amarelo" à Rio de Janeiro (1906-1930)*, thèse de Doctorat de l'Université de Paris I, June 1986, mimeo., Chaps. 3 e 4.

<sup>9</sup> The relation between tradition and change is clearly one of the most complex problems posed for historical research. It has received the attention from historians as eminent as E. P. Thompson (see, in particular, his "History and Anthropology", in: *Making History: Writings on History and Culture*, New York: The New Press, 1994, pp. 201-205).

up these notions, which inform the world of labor societies at the turn of the century, was *filhos do trabalho* (sons of labor).

Frequently employed during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, this term can be found in the title of a labor society of São José do Rio Pardo (SP) the Club Democrático Filhos de Trabalho (Democratic Club Sons of Labor). Founded in 1900, the Club published on May Day 1901, a program-manifesto, whose authorship is attributed to Euclides da Cunha <sup>10</sup>. The same expression appeared repeatedly with a clear class meaning on the pages of labor newspapers, such as the *Echo Operario* of Rio Grande (RS) or the *Aurora Social*, published by the Centro Protetor dos Operários do Recife. This sense is obvious below:

“... in all parts of the Brazilian union appear the sons of labor, who, inflamed by noble and generous actions, rise intrepid in search of freedom for the class that has been suffering with resignation the blows of tyranny...” <sup>11</sup>

Or yet this other example:

“... if peoples of different races, with opposed interests, upholding other customs, other religions and other languages, unite in order to be strong, not to succumb in the struggle, why shall not we, the sons of labor, the exploited of all times, brothers in misfortunes, having identical customs, the same religion and the same interests, unite to march steady and strong to conquer our ideal, recovering the lost spirit spent *filhos do trabalho* on behalf of the exploiting classes?” <sup>12</sup>

Although the cases mentioned above involve a socialist newspaper and a society of socialist sympathies in Recife, the use of the term was not confined to that political current, as is shown by the existence in 1890 in Rio de Janeiro of an organization seemingly composed of Portuguese monarchists, called the Congregação dos Filhos do Trabalho Príncipe Real D. Carlos (Congregation of the Sons of Labor Royal Prince D. Carlos) <sup>13</sup>.

But in the same way that elements of continuity between nineteenth-century mutual aid societies and early twentieth-century labor unions do exist, it also seems likely -- although demonstrating this would require further data -- that some continuity also exists between the guild-like craft unions (forbidden by the 1824 Constitution) and the workingmen's mutual aid societies that began to be created in the next decade.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Evaristo de Moraes Filho, *O Socialismo Brasileiro*, Brasília: Câmara dos Deputados/Editora da Universidade de Brasília, 1981, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> “Nova extorsão”, *Aurora Social*, 1 (10), Sep. 15, 1901, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Echo Operario*, “Preparemo-nos”, *Echo Operario*, 3 (117), Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Almanak Administrativo, Mercantil e Industrial do Rio de Janeiro para o anno de 1890*, Rio de Janeiro: Laemmert, 1889, p. 1489.

It seems highly unlikely that these corporations could lead an underground life after being banned, especially under the terms of the law of October 29, 1823, against secret societies, which maintained most of the previous legislation established by the law of March 30, 1818. This measure regarded as illegal any societies that failed to inform the government of their foundation and receive a written authorization to develop their activities. By not informing the government or giving false information, according to this law, a society would risk being designated as a “seditious conventicle”, and its members would be punishable by sentences that varied from life banishment to the death penalty <sup>14</sup>.

Although there was a reasonable lapse of time between the banning of corporations and the birth of the first mutual aid societies based on manual crafts, which only took place in the second half of the 1830s, there are some easily noticeable elements of continuity between these two kinds of organizations. On the one hand, a number of cases of a craft defending itself through apprenticeship requirements, can be observed among mutual aid societies, usually disguised as educational programs for workers. This does not mean that no investment was made in formal education for the societies’ members, but that the main concern was professional qualification, which allowed some control over the labor market, following the example set forth by craft corporations in the past. Other forms of craft defense were through proposals seeking the establishment of market defense and control against foreign competition <sup>15</sup>. However, on the other hand, through the defense of better working conditions and sometimes higher wages, mutual aid societies stood closer to twentieth-century resistance unions and farther from the eighteenth-century corporations.

Apart from the obvious institutional and legal differences that separate mutual aid societies from craft corporations, there is also a break in the domain of ritual and language. In this sense, if there is a certain persistence in the defense of craft and the standard of production, not only to be found in nineteenth-century mutual aid societies, but later on among resistance unions <sup>16</sup>, important changes do also occur in the symbolic universe in which these notions are inserted. In other words, if certain notions do persist, the vocabulary that expressed them and the ritual practices that articulated them changes completely. And the most visible dimension of this change is the decrease - if not complete disappearance - of the weight of religion in the discourse and the collective practices of skilled workers.

This loss of importance of religion in the world of labor is still more meaningful if one remembers that the mutual aid activities of the eighteenth century, services that from the

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Collecção das Leis do Imperio do Brazil de 1823*, Parte 1, Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Nacional, 1887, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> The protectionist position of the hatters and their seeking of an alliance with “national industrialists” against foreign competition constitute a good example of this. See the leaflet *À Sociedade Auxiliadora da Industria Nacional offerecem os Artistas Chapeleiros*. Rio de Janeiro: Typ. Economica, de Machado & C., 1876.

<sup>16</sup> Among the examples which could be mentioned are the Centro dos Operários Marmoristas (Centre of Marbleworkers), founded in 1903, and the Associação Gráfica do Rio de Janeiro, founded in 1915.

1830s onwards were offered by the mutual aid societies, had been primarily fulfilled by brotherhoods related to the crafts and only in a small part by the corporations themselves<sup>17</sup>. But unlike the craft corporations, no legal restriction on the activity of the brotherhoods was established, which makes it still more difficult to understand their replacement by the mutual aid societies in the task of helping workers.

One possible explanation for this process is that the fate of corporations and that of the craft-based brotherhoods were so closely related, that the disappearance of the former brought about the later's decline. Looking back into the first decades of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to distinguish the limits separating the craft corporation from the brotherhood of the craft's patron saint, as in the case of the Shoemakers Corporation.

“First Chapter - On the Sunday closest to the feast of Saint Chrispin, and Chrispinian, each year two journeymen will be elected, one to serve as Judge, and the other as clerk of the Shoemakers' Craft, in the way prescribed by the eleventh chapter of the Brotherhood's compromise.

(...)

Fifteenth Chapter - A journeyman cannot be elected for offices of the Craft, if he is not a brother of S. Chrispin, or if he has an infamous occupation, or if he holds privileges, except for the privilege of King's journeyman, or of official of the Holy Office; if this is not observed, the election will be considered invalid, and those who voted for the elected will be punished by the fine of ten cruzados, half due to the accuser and the other half for the expenses of the Brotherhood of S. Chrispin.

(...)

Seventeenth Chapter - No journeyman will vote during the election, without showing the certificate of the Clerk of S. Chrispin's board, that he paid his dues to the brotherhood, and that he has fulfilled his duties on masses, and on alms money, and everything else that has to be done on these occasions. The same conditions should be observed by those running for office.”<sup>18</sup>

It seems unlikely that an external fact such as the banning of corporations by the 1824 Constitution could by itself explain the changes taking place in the skilled workers' culture. The understanding of this process should be sought by examining internal elements in the world of corporations. One possible explanation is that the language of corporations, highly marked by religion, could no longer express the realities of the mid-nineteenth-century world of labor. Meanwhile, workers' societies underwent a democratization process, with the gathering under the same organization of masters, journeymen and apprentices (in the past only the first two categories had the right to constitute corporations); and with the growing weight -- at least in the statutes -- of members' assemblies in the life these societies.

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<sup>17</sup> On the brotherhoods, see Caio César Bosci, *Os Leigos e o Poder. Irmandades leigas e política colonizadora em Minas Gerais*, São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> “Regimento do Governo Economico da Bandeira e Officio de Çapateiro desta Cidade do Rio de Janeiro”, Mar. 2, 1817, AN Cod. 773

I think it is possible to sustain the hypothesis that although mutual aid societies were the only possible legal form of organization for free manual workers after 1824, many of those societies aimed at more than helping their members in moments of need, the reason that served to justify their creation, and had as their real aim professional and craft defense.

### Working Class Societies

The Sociedade Auxiliadora das Artes e Beneficente (Beneficent and Aid Society of the Arts), created in March, 1835, was among the first societies composed of skilled workers to be founded in Rio de Janeiro, having as its aim the improvement of arts and the help to its associates and their families <sup>19</sup>. In 1840, the Society changed its name to the Aid Society of Mechanical and Liberal Arts, probably already reflecting the broadening of its initial composition <sup>20</sup>. Years later, by 1877, the data concerning its members show the presence, not only of workers, but also tradesmen, capitalists and even slave dealers, in what seems to be a considerable deviation from the original aims <sup>21</sup>. However, it is possible that the meaning given to the word “arts” contained in the title of this society evoked the sense usually employed during the period of the corporations, which did not establish a clear distinction between production and commerce <sup>22</sup>. In any case, if a change in the society’s membership did occur, this was not at all an isolated case, but certainly one of the most extreme.

Something similar, although less extreme, happened to the Imperial Society of Mechanical and Liberal Artists of Recife, founded in 1841 by carpenters and masons, when celebrating its 39th anniversary had school teachers among its members, although this was

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Moreira de Azevedo, “Sociedades fundadas no Brazil desde os tempos coloniaes até o começo do actual reinado. Memoria lida nas sessões do Instituto Historico em 1884”, *Revista Trimestral do Instituto Historico, Geographico e Ethnographico do Brazil*, (47) part 2, 1855, p. 311. As this case turns obvious, in practice the distinction established by the Council of State (and accepted by many authors), considering beneficent societies those whose members paid to help others, while mutual aid societies were those who helped their own members, did not work.

<sup>20</sup> In the *ancien régime*’s vocabulary the word “art” implied in the existence of intelligence in work. In this sense, an animal could work, but only a human being could execute a work with intelligence. However this vocabulary did establish a distinction between “mechanical arts”, that referred to trade and industry, and the “liberal arts” or intellectual arts, (see William Sewell, *Gens de Métier et Révolutions. Le langage du travail de l’Ancien Régime à 1848*, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1983, pp. 42-44). In the case of Portugal, the *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa da Academia das Ciências* (1793), considered as mechanical arts those “factory crafts, that are executed through physical work” a liberal arts “those that are taught to people of quality and the nobility should learn”, (*apud*. Miriam Halpern Pereira, “Artesãos, operários e o liberalismo: dos privilégios corporativos para o direito ao trabalho (1820-1840)”, *Ler História*, (14), 1988, p. 44).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. processes referring to the societies before the Council of State, located in the Arquivo Nacional.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. for the Portuguese case which can shed some light on the Brazilian case, Pereira, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.



not incompatible with its designation <sup>23</sup>.

But in no way can the broadening of membership of working class societies in order to admit members of other classes be regarded as a general rule. The majority of the skilled workers' societies founded in this period, when not dedicated to a particular craft or industry, established in their statutes the need to exercise an art or craft (which in this context usually meant manual labor in the nineteenth-century vocabulary) in order to be admitted as a member.

The Liga Operária (Workers' League), founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1870, having as its aim raising wages and reducing working hours <sup>24</sup>, represents a different case, since clearly it appears to be an announcement of the twentieth-century resistance unions. Some authors even describe the Liga Operária as a socialist organization <sup>25</sup>, although it is not quite clear in what sense they understood this. In a certain way the Liga was a very unusual mutual aid society, because it went beyond the aim of offering material help in case of need to its members, it also had as its aim "to seek by all means within its reach to improve the fate of the working classes, introducing improvements in all branches of artistic and industrial labor", and as well "spreading education, as the most effective mean of enlightening the laborer, as well as the artisan". To attain this last aim, it offered evening classes on such subjects as Portuguese, French, English, arithmetic, drawing and music, but only a few students among members and their sons actually took these courses <sup>26</sup>. Another peculiarity of the Liga was its intention of being directed by a council representing the different crafts of its members, which in practical terms would transform it into a labor federation like those that would exist under the Brazilian Republic. However, the Council of State, as a condition for authorizing its activity, demanded the suppression of this part of the statutes <sup>27</sup>. The most astonishing information concerning the Liga Operária, is that in a survey that took place in 1872, it claimed to have 18,091 members <sup>28</sup>, a number that is

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Imperial Sociedade dos Artistas Mechanicos e Liberais, *Sessão de Inauguração do Lyceu de Artes e Officinas a cargo da Imperial Sociedade dos Artistas Mechanicos e Liberaes e Festa de seu 39º Anniversario*, Recife: Typ. de Manoel Figueiroa de Faria & Filhos, 1881, pp. II-III, 13-14.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Magalhães Lima, "Le Socialisme au Brésil", *Almanach de la Question Sociale (Illustré) pour 1896*, Paris, 1896, p. 162; Xavier de Carvalho, "Le Socialisme au Brésil", *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, Paris, (19), 15 de outubro de 1889, p. 473; and, Belisario Pernambuco, *Commemoração do 1º de Maio: A Maçonaria e o Socialismo. Segunda conferencia, realisada no salão de honra do Grande Oriente do Brazil*, Rio de Janeiro: Ribeiro, 1903, pp. 39-40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Joaquim da Silva Mello Guimarães, *Instituições de Previdencia fundadas no Rio de Janeiro, apontamentos históricos e dados estatísticos. Colligidos e coordenados para serem presentes à primeira sessão quinquennial do Congresso Científico Internacional das Instituições de Previdencia effectuada em Paris em Julho de 1878*, Rio de Janeiro: Typographia Nacional, 1883, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> AN, CE, 551/1/8.

<sup>28</sup> Guimarães, *loc. cit.*

hardly believable, because even in the more militant period of the First Republic, no labor union in Rio de Janeiro ever attained this mark.

As we have seen, there are cases of working-class mutual aid societies that did not restrict their activity to helping their members. If the case of the Liga Operária cannot be considered as typical, in most societies such activities as professional training, traditional education, job placement for members, are signs that the adoption of mutual aid was, in some way, the formula that crafts found in order to create legal organizations. As early as the 1850s, there is the emblematic case of the Associação Tipografica Fluminense, a typographers' mutual aid society founded in 1853, that shortly after its birth played a major role in a 1858 strike on three important newspapers (that would be considered the first strike in Brazil), adopting, in this way, a position as a labor union.

Through the limited available documental sources <sup>29</sup>, it was possible to establish that, between 1835 and 1899, 46 working-class societies of various types were recognized in Rio de Janeiro, including pension societies, cooperatives, mutual aid, beneficent, educational and cultural societies. The great majority (64%) were mutual aid societies, although it was not uncommon that the same organization could play more than one of these roles. These societies could either be based on a specific craft or activity branch (43%), or did not establish clear craft limits for its members, recruiting them among different crafts (37%), or still, limited its recruitment to one particular company (20%). In some cases the national origin of its members was the main criterion adopted for membership; these were the cases of the Real Associação dos Artistas Portugueses of 1879, the Congregação dos Artistas Portugueses of 1889 and the Círculo Operário Italiano of 1895.

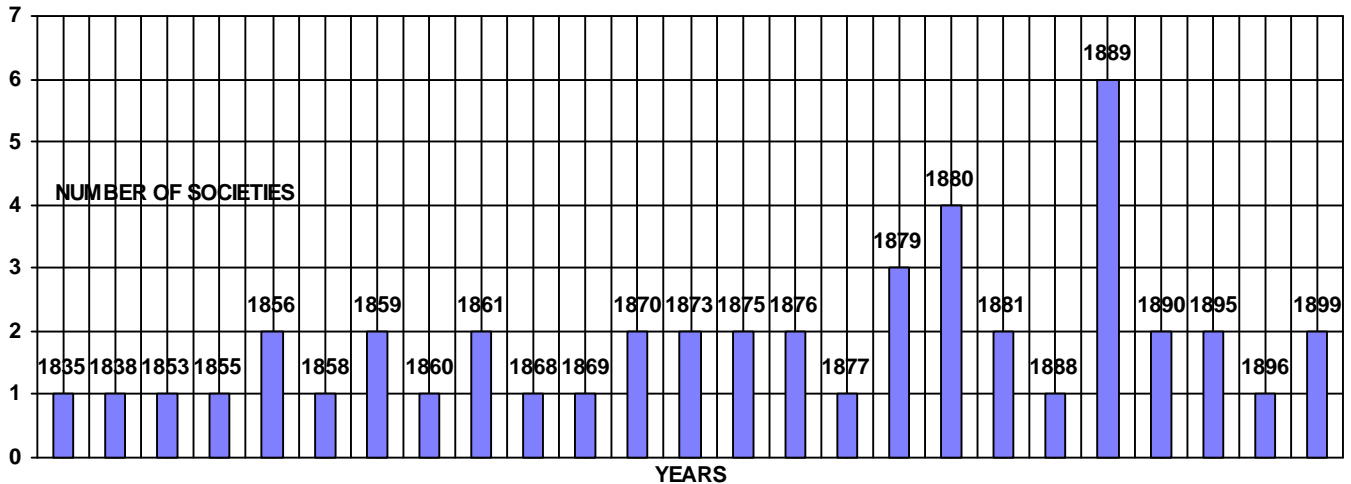
Mutual aid activity was not limited to the working class. There are a number of examples of nationality based mutual aid societies that did not limit membership to any kind of occupation, although in these cases the majority of their members was composed of foreign businessmen and tradesmen of the same national origin living in Rio de Janeiro. However, if we take the survey of Joaquim da Silva Mello Guimarães concerning all societies that offered some kind of assistance in the years 1877-1878, an expressive majority of the mutual aid societies recruited its members among artisans, manual workers or employees. According to this work, among the twenty-two mutual aid societies in operation in the Brazilian capital during those years, fourteen were composed of skilled and unskilled workers, two of commercial employees, one of employees in courts, and, one of secular employees in churches <sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Among the main sources used are the cases of the societies which passed through the Council of State, located in the Arquivo Nacional, the collection of the *Almanak Laemmert* from 1860 to 1900, and Guimarães, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Guimarães, *op. cit.*

**NUMBER OF SOCIETIES CREATED PER YEAR**  
(only the years in which societies were founded are listed)



The data indicate a growth in the number of working class societies created at the end of the 1860s and during the 1870s, but during the 1860s the number of societies founded remained slightly below the number attained in the preceding decade. There are some periods in which no new association was created, apparently the case during the 1840s (though we must always have in mind that the sources for the period are non-systematic and partial), and between 1881 and 1888. On the other hand, the establishment of the Republic in November, 1889, did not bring any substantial change to the rhythm of creating new associations. The slight growth of the 1890s only recovers the trend of the 1870s. The sources available, unlike those concerning the first decades of the twentieth century, do not allow us to closely follow the creation of associations and, in this case, no clear connection between political circumstances, and the birth of workers' societies seems possible to establish, as was the case of major strikes and labor congresses of our century<sup>31</sup>. If, from the 1860s onward, sources are relatively continuous and trustworthy, which is not the case for the previous period, nevertheless the kind of sources available does not allow us to keep track of societies that may have been created and disappeared in the same year. However, this body of data gives some indications to allow a better understanding of the history of these societies.

### **Free Labor, Slavery and the Ennoblement of Manual Work**

That working-class mutual aid societies and the free workers they represented lived in a society where slave labor held a major role cannot be overlooked. For this reason, the effective representativity of these societies and of this particular group of mostly skilled workers must unavoidably be discussed.

One argument frequently put forward is that these crafts had no means of

<sup>31</sup> As an example of this kind of analysis for the early twentieth century, see Batalha, *Le Syndicalisme "Amarelo"...* op. cit., pp. 86-94.

establishing control over the labor market, and thus free labor suffered from the competition of autonomous skilled slaves (*escravos de ganho*), frequently serving an artisan, not to mention slaves that worked in workshops, the kind of competition that had already contributed to the weakness of craft corporations in colonial Brazil <sup>32</sup>. This may be a valid argument for the first half of the nineteenth century, but seems less convincing for the second half of the century, when there was a decrease not only of urban slavery in general, but also of the *escravos de ganho* in particular <sup>33</sup>, and there is a growth of working class mutual aid societies -- especially from the 1870s onwards -- that seems to indicate that the number of free workers was in growing and/or that elements of a collective identity had become stronger.

In any case, it is relevant to stress that the attitude of working-class societies regarding slavery, especially after the 1870s, was one of open opposition to this form of labor exploitation. Some of these societies took part in the abolitionist campaign, as the Associação Tipográfica Fluminense that in March, 1879, promoted a speech by Dr. Vicente de Souza, with the title “The Empire and Slavery, the Parliament and the Death Penalty”. In the same sense, many societies during the last decades of the century proclaimed, when possible, their support of republicanism. It is certainly not a coincidence that in 1880, among the members of the “consulting body” of the Corpo Coletivo União Operária (already mentioned at the beginning of this paper) figured well known abolitionists and/or republicans, such as, André Rebouças, Benjamin Constant, Vicente de Souza, and Joaquim Saldanha Marinho <sup>34</sup>.

However, on the other hand, only free men were allowed to be members of mutual aid societies, whose statutes usually did not establish any barrier for the acceptance of freed slaves. A typical example of the rules for admission can be found in the statutes of a shipbuilders’ mutual aid society created in 1856:

“Art. 1 - The Society is named Beneficente dos Artistas do Arsenal de Marinha da Corte and has an unlimited number of members.  
Art. 2 - To become a member of the Society, it is necessary to.  
§ 1 .Be free and have a good reputation.  
§ 2 Have an occupation in a Craft or Mechanical Art.  
§ 3 Be no less than 16 years old, and no more than 50 years old  
§ 4 Have perfect health..”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Célio Debes, “Relações de Trabalho no Brasil: Aspectos de sua evolução histórica (1822-1917)”, *Anais do Museu Paulista*, 31, 1982, pp. 198-199.

<sup>33</sup> Luis Carlos Soares, “Os escravos de ganho no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX”, *Revista Brasileira de História*, 8 (16), Mar.- Aug. 1988, pp. 109-111.

<sup>34</sup> AN CE, 559/2/14.

<sup>35</sup> AN CE, 526/2/20.

Nevertheless some exceptions did exist, as the Sociedade Beneficente dos Artistas de São Cristóvão, that organized workers in a particular neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, whose statutes, presented in 1875 to the Council of State, established in its 5<sup>th</sup> Article:

“Individuals of black color, freed slaves of any color, and those that are not included in the circumstances established by the paragraphs of Art. 3 cannot be admitted as members.”<sup>36</sup>

The discussion concerning slavery in mutual aid societies was due less to humanitarian reasons or to oppose injustice, but because slavery was considered an obstacle to any effort for the ennoblement of work, since it did reinforce the already strong devaluation of manual work present in Brazilian culture<sup>37</sup>. Ennoblement of work was a central dimension of the language of working-class mutual aid societies and it preceded and was a prerequisite for the construction of a class discourse.

To be coherent with the denial of an interpretation founded on a linear evolution through stages, the critical perspective that informs this paper from the very beginning, I must underline that the process that is being studied contains different dynamics. If in some regions of Brazil and among some groups of workers the discourse of ennoblement of work is the furthest point mutual aid organizations will attain, in others, languages of craft identity, and even class identity, were clearly explicit. The rise of an organized labor movement in the first years of the twentieth century would have been extremely unlikely without counting on the previous sedimentation of craft and class identities. This does not mean in any way that the nineteenth century or the period before 1888 represented a prehistory of class, but rather that the process of class formation was initiated then. It may be more prudent to view the question of class formation, of its making, not as a process that, once concluded, can not be reverted, but as the subject of possible reversals. After all, class as a historical phenomenon is only formed when class consciousness exists and, we all know far too well, that the later is not ahistorical and permanent.

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<sup>36</sup> AN CE, 553/2/19.

<sup>37</sup> On this theme, see Debes, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-200. Specifically for this question among typographers, see Vitorino, *op. cit.*, Chap. 1.