

Black American Colonization in the Brazilian Amazon: Colored bodies in motion¹

Colonização Negra Americana na Amazônia Brasileira: Corpos de cor em movimento²

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Abstract: In the 1860s, when post-emancipation debates reached transnational significance, Brazil and the United States were the only two countries in the Americas where slavery was still legal. While Brazil was recognized as a place where “colour is no obstacle to advancement” (CHRISTIE, 1865, 78), the United States witnessed the emergence of the belief that “the races cannot live together in a state of freedom” (WEBB, 1853). Considering that context, the fortuitous encounter of a New York Times article from 1862 aroused my curiosity for it reported a project to transplant Afro-descendants from the United States to the Brazilian Amazon. Such a project remained virtually ignored by the Brazilian historiography, except for the book published by Nícia Vilela Luz in 1968, denouncing the American intentions to colonize the Amazon. Although the so-called “negro colonization” project never yielded an official proposition to the Brazilian government, it still deserves examination. I argue that, in the present context of global exchanges and migrations, this historical event gains new relevance. The intention of transferring an entire category of the population from one national territory to another raises questions about citizenship and national sovereignty. At the same time, it opens the opportunity for a transnational approach that can illuminate otherwise unseen aspects of migrations.

Keywords: Black colonization. Amazon. Amalgamation. African diaspora.

Resumo: Na década de 1860, quando os debates pós-emancipação alcançavam significado transnacional, o Brasil e os Estados Unidos eram os únicos países nas Américas onde a escravidão ainda era legal. Enquanto o Brasil era reconhecido como um lugar onde “a cor não é obstáculo para o avanço” (CHRISTIE, 1865, 78), os Estados Unidos testemunhavam o surgimento da crença de que “as raças não podem viver juntas em estado de liberdade” (WEBB, 1853). Diante desse contexto, o encontro fortuito de um artigo do New York Times de 1862 despertou minha curiosidade, pois relatava um projeto de transplante de afro-descendentes dos Estados Unidos para a Amazônia brasileira. Tal projeto permaneceu praticamente ignorado pela historiografia brasileira, a não ser pelo livro publicado por Nícia Vilela Luz em 1968, denunciando as intenções americanas de colonizar a Amazônia. Embora o chamado projeto de “colonização negra” nunca tenha rendido uma proposta oficial ao governo brasileiro, ele ainda merece ser examinado. Defendo que, no atual contexto de trocas e migrações globais, esse evento histórico ganha nova relevância. A intenção de transferir uma categoria inteira da população de um território nacional para outro levanta questões sobre cidadania e soberania nacional. Ao mesmo tempo, abre a oportunidade para uma abordagem transnacional que pode iluminar aspectos das migrações que de outra forma seriam ignorados.

Palavras-chave: Colonização negra. Amazonas. Amalgamação. Diáspora africana.



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¹ This work is part of a broader research project that aims to understand the feeling of *Brazilianess* through the lens of the History of Emotions.

² The expression “de cor” is used here as reference to how people of African descent were customarily identified in Brazil in the nineteenth century.

Recently arrived in Rio de Janeiro, in October 1861, General James Watson Webb was invited to a game night at the Russian embassy. Partnering with the British minister against the team formed by the host and the Prussian minister, he tried to get a sense of what it meant to represent the interests of powerful nations in that exceptionally tropical monarchy. He was proud of his title “American Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Brazil,” which he would maintain from that year until 1869. However, his long career as a journalist and editor of the *New York Courier and Enquirer* had not prepared him for the challenges he would face in the new diplomatic career.

The controversy over slavery, which had just led to the start of the Civil War in his own country, delayed the assumption of Webb’s duties. When preparing his official presentation speech, the impetuous general insisted in replying to the remarks that his predecessor – a southern cause sympathizer – had made when leaving the American embassy in Rio, during the parting interview with the emperor. Webb felt the urge to refute the statement that the institution of slavery established “an affinity” between the two countries. After all, in his view, slavery was not a national institution in the United States. Although informed by the Brazilian foreign minister that “any reference to slavery would be embarrassing to the emperor, particularly on the occasion of a full-court,” the new American minister to Brazil stubbornly insisted on the hot topic. After weeks of arguing with the Brazilian government, Webb consented to rewrite his official speech (HILL, 1932, p. 147-148).

Soon, Webb would understand that slavery, and particularly slave trade, was a controversy that could even break off diplomatic relations. On that warm October night, with no intention whatsoever, he aggravated a transnational crisis involving his game-partner, the British minister named Christie. Sitting at that green felt table, friendly welcomed among his fellow ministers, Webb criticized his game-partner’s play, and felt offended by the rude response from Mr. Christie, who had supposedly said: “You talk too much” (THE TIMES, 1863). The animosity that started on the basis of “personal differences” between the two diplomats is well documented in the newspapers, including a 63-pages letter by Webb recounting the chronology of the events.³ Such personal dispute would reinforce the negative image of the British diplomat – “a rather impetuous and tactless man, ill-suited for diplomacy and particularly for such a post” – who already had to deal with sensitive questions of state, such as the British pressure on Brazil to abolish slavery (ALLEN, 1978, p. 21). The set of incidents that became known as “the Christie Issue” resulted in the interruption of diplomatic relations between Brazil and Great Britain from 1863 to 1865, and “ended in a diplomatic victory for Brazil.”⁴

In the 1860s, when post-emancipation debates reached transnational significance, the United States and Brazil were the only two sovereign countries in the Americas where slavery was still legal.⁵ At that time, Brazil was internationally recognized as a place where “colour is no obstacle to advancement” (CHRISTIE, 1865, p. 78). The United States, however, witnessed the emergence of projects for Afro-American emigration out of the belief that “the races cannot live together in a state

³ J. Watson Webb, “A Letter from His Excellency J. Watson Webb, United States United States Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in Brazil to J. Bramley-Moore, Esq., M.P: In Reply to a Statement in the “Times” Newspaper by His Excellency W.D. Christie 1863.” *The Times*, London, Issue 24553 (May 08, 1863), 12.

⁴ “In December 1862, William D. Christie, a particularly arrogant and overbearing British minister, who had already irritated the Brazilian government by consistently championing the cause of the *emancipados*, *Africanos livres* and slaves illegally imported since 1831, authorised a naval blockade of Rio de Janeiro as a reprisal for the failure to pay compensation for the plundering of a British vessel *The Prince of Wales* after it sank off the coast of Rio Grande do Sul in June 1861 and the alleged mistreatment of three British naval officers of HMS *Forte* accused of misconduct on the streets of Rio in June 1862. It lasted only six days and only five Brazilian merchant vessels were seized. But the Brazilian government regarded it as unacceptable ‘aggression’, and in May 1863 broke off diplomatic relations with Britain. Christie, criticised by the British community in Rio, by commercial interests in Manchester and London and by the opposition in parliament, was withdrawn. After arbitration (in Brazil’s favour) by Leopold II, king of Belgium and mediation by the king of Portugal, diplomatic relations were restored in September 1865 when Edward Thornton, the British minister in Buenos Aires, conveyed the apologies of Queen Victoria to D. Pedro II at Uruguaiana, where the emperor was visiting Brazilian troops at the start of the Paraguayan War (1864–70). Thus, the ‘Christie affair’ ended in a diplomatic victory for Brazil.” Bethell, Leslie. “Britain and Brazil (1808–1914).” In: *Brazil: Essays on History and Politics*, 57-92. London: School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2018, 79. For a version of “the Christie Issue” from his own perspective, see Christie, William Dougal. *Notes on Brazilian Questions*, 1865.

⁵ In 1862, Cuba was still under the Spanish dominion.

of freedom” (WEBB, 1853).

This research was motivated by the fortuitous encounter of a New York Times article dated December 28, 1862. Its curious headline said: “Negro Colonization. Brazil Proposed by Our Minister as a Field for Colonization. Interesting Dispatches from J. Watson Webb” (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862). The article reported a project, conceived by the American minister to Brazil during the Civil War, to transplant Afro-descendants from the United States to the regions of the Brazilian Amazon.

Although the black colonization project has never yielded an official proposition to the Brazilian government, it reveals much about slavery and racial relations in both countries. I argue that, in the present context of global exchanges and migrations, this historical event gains new relevance. The intention of transferring an entire category of the population from one national territory to another raises questions about citizenship and national sovereignty, at the same time as it opens the opportunity for a transnational approach that can illuminate otherwise unseen aspects of the problem of populations’ transfer.

“Negroes are not citizens of the United States”⁶

While it was ever clearer that slavery was an anachronistic and morally condemnable system, economic interests still played a considerable role in the confrontation between plantation owners and abolitionists in both the North and the South Americas, and doubts about the aftermath of a future emancipation represented additional problems. For Brazil, a mixed-race country where there were as many free people of African descent as people deemed white,⁷ the Constitution recognized Brazilian-born free and freed persons as citizens, regardless of race.⁸ Thus, the main issue was the transition of a slave-based economy to a waged labor model. For the United States, there was additionally the concern about the destiny of the almost four million black people who would be suddenly freed, and for whom citizenship had been denied by the Supreme Court in 1857. The decision in the Dred Scott case was clear: “no black person” – enslaved, freed, or free-born – was a citizen of the United States (JONES, 2018, p. 14).

Dred Scott was an emblematic legal case, to which Chief justice Roger Taney responded with a jurisdictional ruling “on the basis of his race” with “twenty one separate references to either black inferiority or white superiority” (ALLEN, 2006, p. 160). Jones (2018, p. 13) argues that Taney’s decision “reflected the tensions that free African Americans generated in Baltimore.” That was the city where he lived, and which was also home to “the nation’s largest free black community.” Only after the Civil War had ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment would state that all people born in the United States are citizens, no matter if they were born free or freed from formerly enslaved conditions. However, soon the threat of forced removal would be replaced by racial segregation. As Allen (2006, p. 176) summarizes, “American law, since the founding of the republic and more intensely thereafter, sought the continued subordination of free blacks.” In the antebellum period, citizenship was very much a matter of race, going beyond the condition of bondage. That was the historical context in which Webb developed his ideas.

Years before becoming a diplomat, general Webb had already expressed such preoccupation with the future of freed slaves in an article from 1853, in which he affirmed that “the races cannot live together in a state of freedom” (WEBB, 1853). As a competent journalist, he was in tune with the anxieties of the society, out of which many projects for Afro-American emigration had emerged since

⁶ “WHO ARE NEGROES? – Chief Justice Taney Decides in the Dred.” Weekly Vincennes Gazette, April 1, 1857, Vincennes, IND. sec. XXVI.

⁷ As Sidney Chalhoub notes, “the free population of 4,245,428 people of African descent represented 42.7 per cent of the inhabitants of the country, just about the same number of people deemed white in the 1872 census.” p. 406.

⁸ Celia Maria Azevedo (2005, p. 297) draws attention to the fact that, in the early nineteenth century, “the word race was yet far from being instilled in one’s mind as a scientific truth either in biological or cultural terms.” Furthermore, she argues that “the struggle against ‘prejudice of color’, and in defense of citizenship, pointed toward the rejection of the public recognition of ‘race’.”

the early 1800s. Liberia, the colony established in West Africa in 1822, is the most well-known case of the effort for black colonization, even though places like Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, Haiti, Sierra Leone, in different degrees, had also been considered as possible migration destinations (EVERILL, 2012). It does not mean, however, that all these countries were receptive enough to make the plans work.

The Haitian government, motivated by the deficit of skilled labor, set up a scheme in 1824 to recruit black Americans, which included paying for their transportation and granting them land (TAYLOR, 2002, p. 288). In 1829, Canada was also receptive to the about 2,000 Afro-Americans who left Cincinnati. Their legal status was guaranteed and, therefore, their land ownership was respected. The Afro-American Canadian colony went well until the late 1840s, when Irish settlers moved to the same area (TAYLOR, 2002, p. 297). Nevertheless, many were the cases of rejected Afro-American colonies. The New York Daily Tribune informed in December 1862 that the United Kingdom declined the American government's proposition of "voluntary colonization of Americans of African descent in the British colonies." The same article expressed the "serious fears seemed to be entertained by the people of Nicaragua that the President intended establishing a colony of free colored persons in some part of Central America" (NEW YORK DAILY TRIBUNE, 1862). In his Annual Message to Congress in 1862, President Lincoln confirmed that "Liberia and Hayti" were, so far, "the only countries to which colonists of African descent from here, could go with certainty of being received and adopted as citizens" (LINCOLN, 1946, p. 668).

It is worth mentioning that discussions about deportation to Africa were not absent in Brazil. Indeed, motivated by the Malê revolt, led by African-born slaves in 1835 (REIS, 2019), the province of Bahia passed a law that made legal the repression of freed Africans suspected of "promoting slave insurrection", including their "re-exportation" (SILVA, 2010, p. 102). The demographic profile of the province's capital, Salvador, may suggest the intensity of the panic caused by the revolt. There, 78 percent of the population was black or mixed, and "among the slaves, the vast majority (63 percent) was born in Africa" (REIS, 2019, p. 186). Yet, the threat to security that such a large foreign population represented was not the only reason for sending Africans back to Africa. Since the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1831, the Brazilian government had needed to deal with the problem of the Africans illegally brought to the country. Thus, Bahian law targeted both the freed Africans and the individuals imported as slaves after the prohibition of 1831.

In Brazil, the deportation of Africans was a solution for a dual problem of internal security and international affairs. Whereas in the USA, it made part of a rhetoric of the need to segregate races. If in one country it was a political issue, in the other it was explicitly racial. This does not mean that Brazil was immune to the racial ideal of Anglo-American philanthropism. Proof of this is the periodical *O Philantropo*, which circulated in Rio de Janeiro between 1849 and 1852. Its aim was "to combat slavery and indicate the means of its extinction." In this context, following the American example in Liberia, it defended the colonization in Africa with freed slaves from Brazil (*O PHILANTHROPO*, 1849). Recently, historians have shown that this periodical received ideological and financial support from British organizations (RE, 2017; KODAMA, 2008). Still, black colonization did not have much repercussion in Brazil, given the limited space this idea received in the Press. The few articles published about this subject remarked "the hatred that reigns in America between the white and colored population" (*DIARIO*, p.2) or the Northern "antipathy" (*O CORREIO DA TARDE*, p. 1) as motives for both parties wishing to separate. Even though the proposition of racial segregation may have been unappealing or inapplicable in the country, *O Philantropo* contributed to the intertwining of the notions of race and nation (KODAMA, 2008, p. 426).

Webb was probably aware that the debate on "African colonization" in the Brazilian context implied transferring the black population in the opposite direction envisioned by the American Colonization Society. Under that expression, what was discussed was the free African immigration to replace the slave labor in the country. The Brazilian Parliament addressed that possibility in 1843

when both European and free African settlers were considered (ANNAES, 1843, p. 741). In the following decades, the debate extended to newspapers' pages. Some periodicals defended this alternative (O PAIZ, 24 de abril de 1860, p. 1), while others highlighted the impossibility of putting African colonization into practice, for the risk of being interpreted as disguised slave traffic and provoking British retaliation (O REGENERADOR, 10 de abril de 1860, p. 1). In this debate, those who advocated a "Brazilian colonization" also considered European immigration unwanted (O REGENERADOR, 21 de abril de 1860, p. 2). That situation might have made Webb believe that his project had some chance of being accepted.

Besides, regarding racial relations, the Brazilian stance seemed to be similar to that of Canada. In response to a consultation on the prospects to black Americans settling in that country in 1829, the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada said: "We royalists do not know men by their color. Should you come to us you will be entitled to all the privileges of the rest of his majesty's subjects" (JAY, 1853, p. 377-378). Such a statement suggests an opposition between the American (republican) and the Canadian (royalist, monarchist) attitudes regarding race, which the example of Brazil (at that time, a monarchy) seems to reinforce. The South American country was recognized by the American press as a place "where already the social distinctions between the white and black races which once existed have been nearly eradicated" (NEW YORK DAILY TRIBUNE, 1862). Even Mr. Christie, that "particularly arrogant and overbearing British minister," confirmed it. (BETHELL, 2018, p. 79). He asserted that "there is no doubt, as stated by the reviewer, that colour is no obstacle to advancement, and the free-born son of an emancipated slave may attain to any position, if he has merits and abilities, and fortune favours him" (CHRISTIE, 1865, p. 78).⁹

Recently arrived in the country, Webb could rely only on travelers' and diplomats' opinions to make sense of the racial feelings in Brazil. If the near eradication of "the social distinctions between the white and black races" was true, how receptive would Brazil be to the idea of taking black immigrants from the United States as its own citizens? Why would the United States prefer to deport their freed slaves instead of assimilating them into the waged workforce? These are the questions that guide the present research, which is motivated by the New York Times article from 1862 that revealed to the public Webb's plan to set up a colony in Brazil to relocate the undesired Afro-American population (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862).

In his first months as a minister in Rio de Janeiro, Webb mistakenly assumed that, because of the growth of coffee plantations in the Southeast, "the fact that the slave population is on decrease instead of increase, as with us [the United States], [...] is rapidly depopulating the northern provinces of the empire" (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862). Based on this premise, it occurred to Webb that the labor question of Brazil might be "auxiliary to our own [of the United States] difficulty in disposing of the free negro" (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862). Thus, the general came up with a supposedly win-win solution: a project to transplant freed slaves from the United States to the Amazon regions. Webb's scheme consisted of a "joint-stock colonization company," to which the manumitted slaves would work as "apprentices" for three years. At the expiration of that term, the black migrants would become citizens of Brazil. Besides the remuneration, as a company stockholder, on the labor of hundreds of thousands of people during the years of apprenticeship, Webb expected to be rewarded with the appointment as president of the company. (HILL, 1932, p. 160-161).

Webb believed it was "quite impossible that the Government of Brazil could hesitate" to sign a treaty that would benefit all. From his perspective, without expending any amount of money, the country would solve its labor problem and would be free from the risk of slave insurrections. Theorizing on the differences between the Africans who had been sent to North and South America, Webb argued that Brazil had been supplied with "a very superior race," which is "a fierce, warlike and intellectual people, to whom slavery is as much a burden as to many of the Caucasian races." Therefore, in his view, Brazil would profit from receiving the black people from the United States –

⁹ For a recent study on social mobility in early nineteenth-century Brazil, see DANTAS and DOUGLAS (2020).

“an ignorant and servile people” who yield themselves naturally to servitude” (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862).

Webb’s black colonization project remained virtually unknown to the Brazilians until 1968, when the historian Nícia Vilela Luz published a book denouncing the American intentions to colonize the Amazon (LUZ, 1968).¹⁰ Influenced by the zeitgeist of the Cold War, Luz was interested in the project’s implications for national sovereignty. After all, the opening of the Amazon river for free navigation was a realistic threat to Brazil, especially since the American “government’s interest was an outgrowth of the expansionist fever” (HILL, 1932, p. 218). Webb’s project was inspired by the Navy officer and scientist Matthew Maury’s suggestion that “the free navigation of the Amazon is the greatest commercial boon that the people of the South and West— indeed that the people of the United States can crave” (Cited by HILL, 1932, p. 219). In 1850, in the midst of British pressure against the slave traffic, Maury argued that the Amazon Valley was a “safety valve” where US slaveholders could settle. In his words, “That Valley is to [be] the safety valve for our Southern States, when they become over-populated with slaves, the African Slave Trade will be stopped, and they will send their slaves to the Amazon. Just as the Mississippi Valley has been the escape valve for the slaves of the Northern, now free, States, so will the Amazon be to that of the Mississippi.” (Cited by HORNE, p. 114). Like the Americans Maury and Webb, the English Edward Haslewood also defended the colonization of the Amazon valley (SOARES, 1970, p. 76).¹¹ Nevertheless, it is curious that foreigners’ projects to occupy the Amazon received very limited public attention in Brazil.

Suspicion about American expansionist intentions would be more than enough reason for Brazil to decline a proposition like the black colonization envisioned by Webb. However, it is still worthy of examining such a project, not only from the geopolitical but especially from the human perspective. That is why, instead of focusing on the word “Amazon,” the present paper is interested in the word “Negro.” Therefore, while the 1968’s analysis of Webb’s project privileged geopolitical aspects, the present study is related to the topic of racial relations and citizenship. In this sense, it is worth of considering the mentalité that gave birth to the “negro colonization” project, looking at the main characters involved in its conception.

Slavery and the threat of Amalgamation

The collaboration and beliefs shared by general James Watson Webb, the American minister to Brazil, and William Henry Seward, secretary of state during Lincoln’s government, are key to understanding the circumstances that led to a black American colony project in the Amazon in 1862. As a strong anti-slavery leadership, Seward had run for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860 against the more moderate Abraham Lincoln. Seward lost but became responsible for the country’s foreign affairs, imprinting his mark on American diplomacy. In the case of Brazil, he counted on his friend, general Webb, whose influence as a newspaper editor had supported Seward’s political ambition (HILL, 1932, p. 146).

In a speech delivered in the senate, in 1860, Seward showed his radical face when denounced the ‘irrepressible conflict’ between the slave and the free labor systems. Although they “have existed in different States, but side by side within the American Union... these antagonistic systems are continually coming into closer contact, and collision results.” For him, it was “an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slave-holding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation” (SEWARD, 2018). The domestic audience was not so receptive to this tone, which apparently

¹⁰ Search remade on 10/15/20, in the Hemeroteca Digital, referring to the period from 1860 to 1869, with the keywords “Amazônia”, “negros norte-americanos”, “ministro norte-americano”, “colonização negra”, “colonização africana”, “Abrantes”, “colonos amazonas”, “sociedade de colonização” did not return any result that demonstrates this event’s repercussion in the Brazilian press.

¹¹ On the international interest in Amazon in the nineteenth century, see: PALM (2009) and SOARES (1970).

hurt his chances for the presidential nomination that year.

Considering Seward's duties as secretary of state, his opinions about the causes and effects of slavery would have sounded even more radical and offensive if addressed to audiences from Latin America. In Seward's opinion, slavery's "legitimate fruits are seen in the poverty, imbecility, and anarchy which now pervade all Portuguese and Spanish America" (SEWARD, 2018). He suggested that the United States did not have the same fate as the Latin American countries because "the free-labor system is of German extraction, and it was established in our country [United States] by emigrants from Sweden, Holland, Germany, Great Britain, and Ireland. We justly ascribe to its influences the strength, wealth, greatness, intelligence, and freedom, which the whole American people now enjoy" (SEWARD, 2018). Seward clearly condemned all Latin populations to poverty, imbecility, and anarchy. He understood the presence or absence of slavery in hereditarian terms, transferring the responsibility for the adoption of that institution to past generations and to other cultures. By doing so, even though he denied the agency of all contemporary peoples, he preserved the dignity of "the whole American people" who enjoy strength, wealth, greatness, intelligence, and freedom.

General Webb, as a long-time supporter of Seward political career, expressed similar opinions about slavery, however in a more direct style. He was convinced of the necessity of getting rid of not only the institution of slavery dominant in the South but also of the black population once it was abolished. Even before having government credentials, in 1853, Webb had appointed himself as "a fair representative of the Press of the United States," taking leave to approach domestic and foreign policy in the English Press. He, then, had declared: "Be assured that we shall get rid of slavery as rapidly as we constitutionally can, and that we shall never permit Cuba to pass out of the possession of Spain, or become a republic of free negros, while we have the power to prevent it." In a letter to the editor of *The Times*, Webb had expressed his belief that "there is not a man in [his] country...who does not consider slavery a curse to the slaveholder and the States in which it exists" (WEBB, 1853).

The previous passage reveals Webb's point of view and his assertiveness, which would later manifest on many occasions during his stay in Brazil. First, when he insisted on addressing the issue of slavery in his official presentation to D. Pedro II, ignoring the advice of the Brazilian foreign minister that it would cause embarrassment to the emperor (HILL, 1932, p. 148). Second, Webb "refused to learn Portuguese, regarding Brazilians as an inferior race," making evident his disdain for a slave Monarchy, populated by a mixed-race people (CROUTHAMEL, 1960, p. 415). Considering the attitudes of a man who was already "confirmed in the conviction that slavery is ... utterly demoralizing to the people who tolerate it," one can imply how offensive Webb's ideas might have sounded to the Brazilian audience (WEBB, 1856). After leaving the embassy in Rio, in 1869, Webb would be remembered by the members of the Brazilian parliament as someone who "looked more like a private interest agent than a political representative of the great republic of the United States" (ANNAES, 1870, p. 236).

As James Watson Webb's biographer James Crouthamel affirmed, "Webb favored emancipation only if the freedmen were removed from the United States." Such an attitude illustrates the fact that being an abolitionist does not necessarily imply empathizing with the enslaved people. Likewise, one should not assume that those who fought for the end of slavery would defend the transformation of slaves in their fellow citizens. Ideological, as much as material, reasons motivated not only the American ambassador but also millions of Southern and Northern citizens to support the freed black population's deportation. In Crouthamel's words, "Webb's nationalism, carried to the extreme of racism, was a trait he shared with many Americans in that optimistic age" (CROUTHAMEL, 1960, p. 418).

In the mid-1800s, material and ideological conditions converged to make the United States rethink their concept of citizenship. That was an age of intense economic growth and technological

transformation when the industrial growth of the Northern states conflicted with the slave-based commercial agriculture of the South. Almost one decade prior to the Civil War, a Southern review discussed what was considered an “excessive slave population,” which had doubled from 1820 to 1850 and was predicted to reach four million slaves by 1860, while the limits of the slave territory were fixed. The article suggested that Northern states were acting against their own interests by attempting to impede the slavery expansion into new territories. “The rapid increase in the number of slaves will compel the southern people to employ their slaves in the manufacture of such articles that are now made exclusively in the northern states.” However, the transformation of slave labor in a direct competitor of northern cheap white labor is more than a threat to the North. It is the proposed “remedy” to “the alarming evils of a rapidly and fearfully increasingly slave population” (DE BOW’S REVIEW OF THE SOUTHERN AND WESTERN STATES, 1852, p. 182).

One may ask: What was such an “alarming evil” of an increasing slave population? In economic terms, it seems that the people in the South should not perceive the competition with white labor as nothing but an advantage. In this case, an excessive slave population would be “evil” only from the Northern perspective. So, what would be equally disturbing to the entire country? Abraham Lincoln gave us the answer in his speech at Springfield, Illinois, on June 26, 1857: “There is a natural disgust in the minds of nearly all white people, to the idea of an indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races” (LINCOLN, 1946, p. 359).

Based on Lincoln’s words, one may infer that, at that time, “a natural disgust” to amalgamation was an emotion shared with many Americans – who were “horrified at the thought of the mixing of blood by the white and black races.” In that speech at Springfield, Lincoln said that “a very large proportion” of the members of the Republican party were for the idea defended by him that “the separation of the races is the only perfect preventive of amalgamation.” Lincoln continued: “Such separation, if ever effected at all, must be effected by colonization” (LINCOLN, 1946, p. 364).

Later, as president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln addressed, once again, the black colonization issue in his Annual Message to Congress on December 1, 1862. He recommended the following article as an amendment to the Constitution: “Congress may appropriate money, and otherwise provide, for colonizing free colored persons, with their own consent, at any place or places without the United States.” When proposing the provision for colonization, Lincoln reaffirmed: “I strongly favor colonization.” His justification is very pragmatic. “With deportation, even to a limited extent, enhanced wages to white labor is mathematically certain. [...] Reduce the supply of black labor, by colonizing the black laborer out of the country, and, by precisely so much, you increase the demand for, and wages of, white labor.” Although “the subject is presented exclusively in its economical aspect,” Lincoln’s words spoke to the ears of those who believed that new homes could be found for free colored persons “in congenial climes, and with people of their own blood and race” (LINCOLN, 1946, p. 679-687).

The “Negro Colonization Project”

Soon after presenting his credentials in Rio de Janeiro, James Watson Webb “perceived by allusions in the public Press... that the President, in suggesting the means to carrying out the gradual manumission of the negro, alludes to the necessity of obtaining a place of colonization for the persons manumitted” (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862). Although Webb did not mention his source, it is a fact that the colonization issue was present in the newspapers. On January 13, 1862, for instance, the Daily National Republican reported that Governor Blair, of Michigan, had introduced a bill in the House of Representatives containing “provisions in respect to the colonization of negroes.” That newspaper also reported that “the President shall acquire in Mexico, South America, Central America, or islands in the Gulf of Mexico, lands, or the right of settlement on lands, to which emancipated slaves shall be transported” (DAILY NATIONAL REPUBLICAN, 1862).

Although acknowledging the “wisdom” of the president’s suggestion, Webb knew that its

execution might “be attended with difficulties so embarrassing as, in a measure, to defeat the object in view.” Thus, after some study, he elaborated a project that he believed would be worth the consideration of investors and of the two governments. As if he had “discerned the finger of God pointing to the northern provinces of Brazil as the land of promise” Webb believed he had found the perfect new home for “the negros” from America (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862). After all, Brazil was a country “in congenial climes, and with people of their own blood and race” (LINCOLN, 1946, p. 679-687).

On May 20, 1862, Webb dispatched the project to Seward, the secretary of state, who then submitted it to President Lincoln. When it first came to public, Webb’s project was briefed by press as

[...] a treaty by which all the free negroes of our country shall be transplanted to the regions of the Amazon, at the expense of the United States, and there endowed with land gratuitely by Brazil, and at the expiration of a term of years become citizens of Brazil, with all the rights and privileges of the free negro population of the Empire, all of whom, by the Constitution, are the recognized equals of the white man, and equally eligible with him to the highest office of the Empire,...(NEW YORK DAILY TRIBUNE, 1862, p. 1).

On July 21, 1862, Webb received the reply, and it was negative. Discussing the project issue by issue, Seward’s response established that most of the arguments that Webb had presented as facts were only assumptions. Seward started by saying, “you [Webb] assume that this toleration of Slavery afflicts them.” It goes on with phrases such as, “You tell me...;” “You assume that...;” “You, but perhaps erroneously...;” “You think that...,” which indicated that Webb was the one responsible for the information gathered about the Brazilian labor situation (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862).

In the dispatch of July 21, Seward recognized that “in Brazil the slave is generally the only laborer, and he is found in every province. In the United States slaves are exceptional... and found in only a section and not through the whole country.” Thus, in the face of an inevitable movement towards the end of slavery, reforms must be made with moderation. “How to practice this moderation is really the problem now to be solved respectively by Brazil and the United States” (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862).

Webb had told him about the changes in the Brazilian labor market after the abolition of the African slave-trade, which caused a rise in the prices of slaves and the scarceness of labor to meet the increasing demand for coffee. He had also argued that “owing to some cause emigration from Europe into Brazil is practically unknown...” Moreover, Webb had suggested that a presumed excess of laborers in the United States could find employment in Brazil, where they would be part of a “colonization upon most liberal principles” (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862).

However, considering that the Civil War had not facilitated the relations between the executive and the legislature and the senate, many questions involved in the proposition made by Webb “remained a subject of earnest but as yet confused discussion.” Seward expressed doubts about whether the provisions for a treaty based on executive decisions on those matters could obtain approval from the Congress. To explain that the president could not grant him permission to negotiate that treaty with Brazil, Seward recognized that “we have no right to assume that the emperor of Brazil would prefer an expelled caste from this country to other possible supplies of population for the improvement of the laboring classes of the empire” (NEW YORK TIMES, 1862).

It took seven months for the “negro colonization” project to become public. In the meantime, newspapers announced the abandonment of black colonization schemes in Central America (CENTINEL OF FREEDOM, 1862). The main reason for the failure of such schemes was apparent in what the governments of those countries intimately responded: “If we [the United States] have a class of people we desire to get rid of, they [Central America countries] do not wish to take them” (BOSTON TRAVELER, October 21, 1862).

The proposition of black colonization was never formally presented to the Brazilian

government. However, the Brazilian historian Sergio Buarque de Holanda mentioned that the emperor D. Pedro II wrote in his journal, dated June 11, 1862, that “Abrantes presented three proposals from the American minister, whose purpose was to transplant to the Amazon valley, principally, the freed negros from the United States! Abrantes is to take copies of so singular proposals and to respond to Webb as appropriate” (HOLANDA, 2017, p. 131). The expression that the emperor used in Portuguese to qualify it “as appropriate”– “como convém” – has a slightly negative connotation. Alongside with the exclamation point in the preceding sentence,¹² it indicates that, more than surprising, Webb’s project might have sounded a little offensive to the emperor. It is worth noting that Webb contacted Brazilian authorities before hearing from his superiors, therefore, without authorization. According to historian Gerald Horne, who examined Webb’s papers archived at Yale University, about two weeks later, on June 24, Marquis d’Abrantes sent a response to Webb. The proposition was rejected because “nothing of that sort may possibly be tried in our country, as we have a positive law which expressly interdicts the admittance of any freed Negroes within our limits” (Cited by HORNE, 2007, p. 6). The Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs justified the rejection referring to the law of November 7, 1831, which prohibited the slave trade.

Similar propositions, and the threats implicit in them, had incited negative reactions from Central America countries. As Horne notes, some countries “thought that U.S. Negroes might wind up being a Trojan horse for Washington.” He suggests that, due to the suspicions it provoked, “the scheme passed into stillbirth—and Lincoln was then poised to “evolve” to the point of accepting the continued presence of U.S. Negroes, not least since his desire to send them away was being extinguished for lack of finding a place to deposit them” (HORNE, 2007, p. 181-182). However, there were countries eager to welcome free laborers from the United States. That was the case of Dutch Suriname. Examining the Dutch-language papers of the Netherlands’ Department of Foreign Affairs, Michael J Douma suggests a different perspective on Lincoln Administration’s colonization plans. According to his findings, the U.S. government turned against the project as a reflection of a change in the American society’s perception of “the African class.” As Seward wrote to the American ambassador to the Netherlands, James Shepherd Pike, in 1864, “Now not only their free labor, but their military service is also appreciated and accepted.”¹³

Two years before that, Seward had already manifested his attention to “public opinion,” recognizing its importance to “guide” the government’s actions. Closing the document dated July 21, 1862 concerning the president’s rejection of the “negro colonization” project in Brazil, Seward alerted Webb that “We shall grow wiser every year, every month, and every day, in regard to the questions I have been considering, because public opinion will settle and guide us as occasions for our action arise” (BOSTON TRAVELER, October 21, 1862). Nevertheless, it is also possible that Washington’s decision not to make a formal proposition to the Brazilian government was, somehow, influenced by concerns with international relations and diplomacy.

Conclusion

Webb was no slave trader. Even so, he came up with a scheme that could have made him profit from mass migration. That opportunity seemed so clear as if indicated by “the finger of God” (WEBB, 1862). His initiative could serve a two-fold benefit to his country – solving the economic problem of excessive labor and the ideological discomfort of racial segregation. Moreover, the black colonization project was legitimized by official government policy. No matter the “evil” – the devaluation of wages or the threat of amalgamation –, Webb could personally profit from the

¹² Note the exclamation point, in the quotation from Holanda, in the first paragraph on page p.131 of “*Livro dos Prefácios*”: “...os negros que se libertassem nos Estados Unidos!”

¹³ “Seward to Pike, February 15, 1864, Diplomatic Instructions from the Department of State, 1801–1906,” *General Records of the Department of State*, (vol. 14, January 29, 1833–September 12, 1864), RG 56, U.S. National Archives. Cited by Michael J. Douma, “The Lincoln Administration’s Negotiations to Colonize African Americans in Dutch Suriname.” *Civil War History* 61, n. 2 (2015), 116.

situation. Behind the appearance of nationalism and philanthropy, being the agent of such an ambitious migration project was an incredibly profitable endeavor.

However, despite its seeming convergence with his nation's priorities, the colonization project was a failure. Although Webb understood why the United States would prefer to deport their freed slaves instead of assimilating them into the waged workforce, he completely misjudged the Brazilian economic and cultural reality. The anxieties of the American society regarding "amalgamation," which made the Afro-American population "undesired," justified the effort towards the "disposing of the free negro." Thus, he wrongly assumed that a country whose population was already amalgamated would naturally take "disposed" black people as its own.

Brazilian miscegenation might have blinded Webb to the geopolitical issues that would make Brazil unreceptive to black immigrants from the United States. The colonization of the Amazon valley had serious implications for national sovereignty. Hence the suspicion about American expansionist intentions. Therefore, we can conclude that Webb's black colonization project might have failed because slavery was already a dying-out economic system in the Americas, including Brazil. The kind of labor in which the Afro-Americans were skilled was not appealing to Brazil's development project. Thus, those potential migrants were seen as nothing more than an "expelled caste" from the United States. In addition to their lack of economic utility – especially if compared to skilled free laborers from Europe –, such a vast population could reach four million people, coming from an expansionist power raised earnest suspicions. It seemed like a serious threat to the recipient country's sovereignty.

Nevertheless, as Horne observes, "nations shipping huge numbers of their nationals to distant climes was not new, as the example of the poor and the Irish in the U.K. showed" (HORNE, 2007, p. 175). So, what makes this particular case relevant? As I have argued, in the present context of global exchanges and migrations, it can shed light on some aspects of the problem of populations' transfers that continue valid in the present. One aspect has to do with the opportunities for private profit, as the example of Webb illustrates, which can stimulate the organization of mass migrations. Another aspect relates to the implications for the national sovereignty of the country receiving the migrants, as the American expansion into the Amazon valley would represent for Brazil. Besides, one should not ignore the emotional aspects of this complex issue. As expressed in Lincoln's speech, amalgamation provoked disgust in the mid-nineteenth century Americans. The extent to which such a visceral feeling influenced the projects of black colonization deserves further research.

It is intriguing that Webb's Project remained unknown to the Brazilian public and hardly discussed in the American press. News about it appeared months after Webb had presented it to Seward. The expression "Interesting Dispatches" used in the headline suggests it sounded surprising for New York journalists. Moreover, the only information we have about the Brazilian government reaction is that collected by Luz in Webb's papers archived at Yale University (and not digitized) and a reference made by Holanda to D. Pedro's journal. I wonder what the interests were to keep the black colonization project confidential.

In any case, one should bear in mind that Webb's project considered transferring almost four million people to Brazil, whose entire population in 1860 was a little more than eight million (IBGE). The scale of such a deportation project draws attention to the significant pressure that it can impose on the infrastructure of the recipient territory. Finally, Black American Colonization in the Brazilian Amazon illustrates how ideologies and emotions can stigmatize specific populations, transforming them into categories of "undesired" people. More importantly, though, this historical event also shows that the process of global exchanges and migrations can be interrupted or even reverted. The failure of Lincoln's colonization plans – and the subsequent incorporation of the Afro-descendants into the American nationality – invites us to reflect on the fluidity of society's perceptions of collective identities.

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