

## SELECTIVE INVISIBILITY AND THE REVERSE OF DIGNITY: A STUDY ON MODERN SLAVERY AND RACISM IN BRAZIL FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DECENT WORK

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**ABSTRACT:** This study, from a dialectical perspective, investigates the intersection between modern slavery and racism, examining how this connection perpetuates social invisibility and marginalization. The research problem centers on the persistence of contemporary slave labor despite legal frameworks prohibiting it, with a specific focus on its disproportionate impact on racialized populations. The study aims to analyze the structural and historical dimensions that link forced labor to systemic racism, assessing their implications for human dignity and social exclusion. Methodologically, the research employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating legal, historical, and sociological analyses with empirical data on contemporary cases of forced labor in Brazil. The findings demonstrate that modern slavery is deeply embedded in racist practices, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability and systematic violations of fundamental rights. The study highlights how institutional mechanisms and economic exploitation sustain these inequalities, making eradication efforts insufficient without addressing the racialized nature of labor exploitation. The originality of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of modern slavery through the lens of structural racism, providing a critical perspective on how historical legacies shape contemporary labor relations. Its value stems from its contribution to the broader discourse on human rights, social justice, and labor policies, offering insights for more effective legal and social interventions aimed at eliminating modern forms of slavery.

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**Keywords:** Modern slavery. Racism. Racial discrimination. Invisibility. human dignity.

### INTRODUCTION

Slave labor, by its very nature, is one of the most degrading forms of human subjugation, as it reduces the worker to a situation of profound and radical social protection deficit, being exploited in their entirety (Delgado, 2020).

As elucidated by Sá, Fischer, and Mesquita (2020), the manifestation of current servitude is linked to the implementation of practices contrary to the principles of dignified labor, including, but not limited to, physical coercion, sexual violation, abandonment of the laborer in a secluded environment, and armed monitoring, constituting clear breaches of the

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affected party's freedom of movement. Even in the absence of infringement to this right, labor performed under coercion or without due voluntariness, influenced by conditions of social, economic, or legal vulnerability, is considered coercive or obligatory labor.

The legal definition of slave labor is contained in Article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code, which establishes as a crime the reduction of someone to a condition akin to that of a slave, whether by subjecting them to coercive labor or exhausting work hours, by exposing them to degrading working conditions, or by limiting mobility due to debts with the employer or their representative (Brazil, 2011).

Labor under conditions akin to slavery encompasses a wide variety of terms in specialized literature, such as modern slavery, work similar to slavery, contemporary slavery, forced labor, among others (Leite, 2019). Sá, Fischer, and Mesquita (2020) detail that the prohibitive norm of labor in a condition similar to slavery, as stated in the aforementioned article of the Brazilian Penal Code, protects dignity as a legal good, covering the submission of the laborer, either individually or collectively, to coercive labor, exhausting work hours, degrading working conditions, restriction of mobility due to debts, or retention at the workplace through restrictive measures of transport, intensive surveillance, or possession of personal documents.

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In the context of understanding the elements constituting the penal type, it is pertinent to highlight the definition of coercive labor according to Article 2 of the ILO's Convention concerning Forced or Compulsory Labor No. 29, ratified by Brazil, which defines it as "all labor or service demanded from a person under the threat of penalty and for which this person has not offered themselves voluntarily". Additionally, mobility limitation can occur due to the assignment of a workplace in a remote or hard-to-reach location (ILO, 2008).

The concept of servile labor was expressly expanded to include exhausting work hours and degrading working conditions (Brazil, 2003). It is worth mentioning that exhausting work hours are understood as any form of labor, physical or mental, that, by its duration or intensity, infringes on the fundamental rights of the laborer, especially those related to safety, health, rest, and family and social life. Degrading working conditions, in turn, are associated with the denial of human dignity (Sá, Fischer, and Mesquita, 2020).

Although the penal conception provides significant data for understanding this illegal and criminal practice, it is relevant to note that the administrative domain adopts more

comprehensive criteria, given that the satisfaction of public interest prevails over criminal policy guarantor, especially regarding the protection of the accused's freedom (MTE, 2011).

In Brazil, in the year 2023 alone, according to official data from the Ministry of Labor and Employment, 3,190 workers were rescued from conditions akin to slavery. Furthermore, according to official data from the Ministry of Labor and Employment, the percentage of Black and Mixed-Race Workers Rescued from Slave Labor in Brazil in the last two decades (2003-2023) is 60,400 workers, with the percentage by Race being as follows: Black: 40% and Mixed-Race: 42%, while the percentage of Whites, Indigenous, and undeclared amounts to 14%, 2%, and 2%, respectively (MTE, 2023).

It is therefore pertinent to inquire how contemporary slave labor is intrinsically linked to historical structures of racism and racial discrimination in their concrete expressions and how this triad can violate human dignity, perpetuating invisibility and social exclusion?

Faced with the unfolding horizon, from a dialectical perspective, this study sought to analyze the interconnection between contemporary slave labor, racism, and racial discrimination, traversing the concepts of social invisibility and human dignity.

## **I. A HISTORICAL RESCUE: THE OLD SLAVERY FINDS A REFLECTION IN THE NEW MODALITY OF SLAVE LABOR IN BRAZIL**

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Despite the promulgation of the Golden Law in 1888, which formally established the abolition of slavery in Brazilian territory, the practice of working under conditions akin to slavery persists to this day, representing a serious violation of the fundamental human rights and labor norms, characterized by the submission of individuals to inhumane working conditions (Sousa et al., 2022).

Contradictorily, the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil of 1988 enshrines the dignity of the human person as the foundation for the existence and development of an equitable and inclusive society, without distinctions. However, the perpetuation of labor practices that involve exhausting work hours, restrictions on individual freedom, and acts of physical and psychological violence is observed, evidencing a scenario of violation of the mentioned constitutional principle (Mariano et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of slave labor in modernity manifests in multiple forms, including, but not limited to, debt bondage, in which workers find themselves trapped in cycles of indebtedness and dependency; forced labor, where individuals are coerced to work under threat

or use of force; and sexual exploitation, characterized by submission to sexual acts without consent (Ribeiro, 2022).

A distinctive characteristic of contemporary slave labor is its hidden and clandestine nature, with practices often occurring in remote and hard-to-reach places, where oversight proves ineffective. This exacerbated invisibility contributes to the vulnerability of workers, kept in a context of fear, threats, and coercion by employers, making it difficult to denounce exploitative conditions and seek assistance (Barbosa *et al.*, 2022).

Illustratively, during the first months of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, a period marked by significant social vulnerability, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported an increase in cases of forced labor, attributed to the interruption of income sources and the consequent increase in worker indebtedness (ILO, 2022; OIT, 2022).

Contemporary slave labor is a global reality, affecting various nations. In Brazil, there are documented records of this practice in various regions, notably in sectors linked to agribusiness, such as sugar cane cultivation and charcoal production (Cleita, 2022).

Globalization and the complexity of production chains contribute significantly to the persistence of modern slave labor. The expansion of corporate operations beyond national borders, often through the hiring of suppliers and subcontractors in jurisdictions with less restrictive labor regulations, increases the risk of association with labor exploitation practices (Gama *et al.*, 2023).

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According to the ILO's 2022 report, approximately 28 million individuals were victims of forced labor in the preceding year, with 86% of these cases occurring in the private sector, and notably, one in eight victims was a minor (ILO, 2022).

It is emphasized that the main victims of this type of exploitation are vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, indigenous populations, women, and children, mostly of black or mixed race, with low educational levels or illiteracy, highlighting a condition of significant socioeconomic vulnerability. This susceptibility to exploitation stems from factors such as limited access to quality education, discrimination, scarcity of opportunities for dignified work, and cooptation by illegal intermediaries (Silva *et al.*, 2021; Santos, 2020).

Many of the workers subjected to conditions akin to slavery come from distant rural regions, migrating internally in search of better living conditions, from contexts of extreme poverty, which culminates in educational and technical difficulties, restriction of access to the

urban labor market. Nonetheless, they remain tied to exploitative conditions until the intervention of competent authorities (Oliveira *et al.*, 2005; Feitosa *et al.*, 2023).

The association between socioeconomic factors and population growth causes pressure on basic resources, such as food and employment, exacerbating poverty conditions when job creation does not keep pace with demographic growth. Modern slavery is directly influenced by rapid population growth, which expanded from 2 billion to 7 billion in the last fifty years, intensifying the demand for cheap and intensive labor in the global market (Baptista *et al.*, 2022).

Studies by Gonçalves and Macedo (2019) indicate that municipalities with low socioeconomic indices are significant foci for the identification of rescued workers, often hosting a high proportion of quilombola communities, highlighting the vulnerability of these groups. According to data from the Labor Inspection Secretariat (SIT) of 2023, the analysis of victims of slave labor in Brazil revealed a majority profile of illiterate men, corroborating the relationship between illiteracy, poverty, social exclusion, and low economic development (ILO, 2022).

Additionally, labor akin to slavery is often interconnected with other social phenomena that affront human dignity, such as human trafficking, prostitution, pornography, and sex tourism, among others (Nascimento *et al.*, 2013)

Cleita (2022) emphasizes that violations of human and labor rights occur in various economic sectors, often recruiting workers from impoverished and vulnerable regions under false promises of dignified employment, fair remuneration, and adequate working conditions, resulting, however, in their submission to degrading conditions, characterized by exhausting work hours, unhealthy accommodations, restriction of access to basic resources, among other abuses.

## 2. THE PERENNIAL INTERFACE BETWEEN MODERN SLAVERY AND RACISM

Thus, it becomes evident that in Brazil, the issue of contemporary slave labor is intrinsically linked to a deeply ingrained historical legacy originating from the colonial slavery period. Despite the formal abolition of slavery in 1888, labor exploitation persisted, metamorphosing over time and currently manifesting in various economic sectors such as agriculture, livestock, construction, and the textile industry (Schwartz *et al.*, 2020).

As previously elucidated, slave labor can manifest in various forms, including debt bondage, which traps workers in a vicious cycle of indebtedness and dependence on the employer; forced labor, which subjugates individuals to a state of captivity, coercing them to work against their will; and sexual exploitation, characterized by submission to sexual acts without proper consent (Ribeiro, 2022).

Prudente (2020) discusses the persistent exclusion of Afro-descendants in Brazilian society, a paradoxical reality considering their ubiquity in various sectors during the slave-owning period, from mining, due to their knowledge in metallurgy, to agriculture, where they excelled as experts in cultivation techniques. Despite the formal acquisition of citizenship post-abolition, black people remained on the fringes of a society marked by profound racism, often being invisibilized and excluded from public and private spheres, with the exception of marginal spaces such as prisons, asylums, and urban peripheries.

In this panorama, Almeida (2019) discusses the historical link between slavery and racism, stating that racist practice stems from the aftermath of slavery and colonialism, perpetuating slave-owning mental and institutional patterns.

Racism, therefore, translates into traces of slavery, which hinders the consolidation of democracy, as it seeks to exclude black people and their histories from society, generating devastating impacts of slavery on the Brazilian economic and social structure (Almeida, 2019). 485

Racism is thus seen as an intrinsic element of both modernity and capitalism, making its disassociation impractical. Racism facilitates the perpetuation of a racially privileged class in power, resorting to discriminatory mechanisms to ensure the stability of this system (Gomes et al., 2020).

Muller and Cardoso (2017) emphasize that societies with colonialist legacies are profoundly affected by the systematic devaluation of black people throughout history, as they are recurrently perceived as the antithesis of white, a "potential victim" that justifies a social hierarchy based on supposed racial superiority. This structure, emblematic of colonialist relations, thus demonstrates notable resilience in various social scenarios, maintaining the privileges and dominant position of a self-declared white group.

Racism thus establishes itself as a dominant power structure, enabling a specific ethnic-racial group to enjoy numerous advantages and maintain control over society's dominant institutions (Gomes et al., 2020). In this direction, racism emerges as an effective tool for social control, normalizing the assignment of lower wages to workers from minority groups and

acting as a deterrent mechanism for white workers, who might hesitate to demand wage improvements in the face of the possibility of being replaced by black or immigrant workers, often more vulnerable to unemployment and available as a labor reserve (Almeida, 2019).

According to Myrdal (1944), the adverse situation of the black population can be elucidated through the concept of "cumulative causes," which refer to the historically imposed low purchasing power of this community, exacerbated by the lack of access to economic opportunities, quality education, and other essential resources, perpetuating a transgenerational cycle of socioeconomic disadvantages.

De Mello (2020) points out that various factors contribute to the over-representation of the black population in the context of contemporary slave labor, with social and economic inequality, coupled with the lack of opportunities for dignified employment, being key elements that increase this population segment's vulnerability to exploitation. Racial discrimination in the workplace prevents the professional advancement of black workers, restricting them to limited opportunities and inferior working conditions.

Almeida (2019) discusses racial discrimination as a process that involves the attribution of differential treatment based on the racial identity of groups, highlighting that such discrimination requires a power dynamic that enables the imposition of racial advantages or disadvantages. 486

Figueira et al. (2019) show that racial discrimination directly affects the recognition and protection of the labor rights of affected individuals, with significant barriers to access to information about rights, reporting abuses, and implementing effective protection measures.

The interconnection between contemporary slave labor and racial discrimination demonstrates a recurring pattern of inequality and social injustice in Brazil, with the black population continually marginalized and subjected to degrading working conditions, configuring a modern form of slavery (Girardi et al., 2022).

Figueira (2019) emphasizes that this relationship is heavily influenced by the historical legacy rooted in Brazilian society, which for centuries relegated the black population to the role of slave labor force in agricultural, extractive, and urban sectors. Although formal exploitation was abolished, its repercussions persist, reinforcing the marginalization and vulnerability of black workers. Socioeconomic inequality is a determining factor in this dynamic, imposing barriers to access to dignified jobs, quality education, and basic services, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and exposure to exploitation.

The persistence of racial inequality in the labor market, exacerbated by structural racism, restricts equitable access to dignified work opportunities, promotions, and better working conditions for black workers, who are more susceptible to exhausting work hours, labor rights violations, violence, and coercion by employers.

Girardi et al. (2022) argue that the ineffectiveness of policies to combat contemporary slave labor and promote racial equality contributes to the continuation of this scenario, with deficient oversight, impunity for offenders, and the lack of comprehensive public policies representing significant obstacles to the eradication of slave labor and the overcoming of racial discrimination.

### 3. RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO SOCIAL INVISIBILITY

Invisibility is understood as a consequence of a prolonged historical process that minimizes the social perception of individuals, especially those associated with forms of devalued and alienating work (Costa, 2018).

Cechinato et al. (2018) argue that the evolution of social invisibility throughout history was marked by acts of dispossession and servitude, beginning with the exploitation of African slaves and natives, and later extending to low-paid immigrants. Thus, social invisibility is shaped by social and psychological aspects, supported by established social patterns.

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In the legal realm, after the atrocities of Nazi-fascism and the world wars, legal systems began to centralize the human being as the fulcrum of law, enshrining human dignity as a fundamental value of the Democratic State of Law, as established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and reiterated in article 1, section III, of the Federal Constitution of 1988 (Brazil, 1988).

Roberta Soares da Silva (2022) and Sarlet (1998) reinforce that dignity is an intrinsic and inseparable quality of every human being, defining them as such and making them holders of rights that must be respected and effected by the State and society.

Nobre Junior (2011) and Jorio (2016) discuss dignity from the perspective of the prohibition of human degradation, emphasizing the complexity of the human being and the pursuit of a dignified existence, marked by the presence of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Flávio Martins (2021) and Barroso (2022) address the relativity and fundamental importance of human dignity in the legal system, functioning as a moral value and a normative foundation for fundamental rights, guiding the interpretation and resolution of legal conflicts.

Thus, the principle of human dignity establishes an essential ethical and legal framework, both limiting and holding accountable state powers and the community, ensuring the protection and promotion of a dignified existence for all, particularly in the context of labor relations, including the fight against slave labor.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Brazilian legal system is founded on the principle of human dignity, a cornerstone of the country's legitimizing and interpretive activity, affirming that the definition of dignity permeates the primary objective of the Democratic State of Law.

The research in question delved into the historical legacy of slavery translated into the structural racism existing in Brazil, as this interconnection of concepts not only confines these individuals to subordinate positions in the labor market but also hinders the recognition and protection of their fundamental rights.

In this context, human dignity emerges as a fundamental principle of the Brazilian legal system, as enshrined by the Federal Constitution of 1988. This principle not only underscores the intrinsic and inseparable quality of every human being as a holder of rights but also imposes on the State and society the responsibility to ensure the realization of these rights, prohibiting any form of degradation or instrumentalization of human beings.

The detailed analysis carried out in this scientific article highlighted not only the persistence of slave labor in Brazil but also its intricate relationship with structural racism and racial discrimination, which manifest in particularly perverse ways in contemporary labor practices.

Contemporary slave labor in Brazil is intertwined with racial issues, as the majority of victims of this type of exploitation are of black or mixed race and find themselves in vulnerable positions, being targets of exploitation and violations of fundamental rights.

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