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## **The Theatricalization of Politics: the Brazilian Movement for the Abolition of Slavery**

[work in progress]

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More than a decade after the end of slavery in Brazil, Joaquim Nabuco, one of the leaders of the antislavery movement, asked:

"Who among the contemporaries will write this history with impartiality, justness and cleverness, without allowing political passion, sectary prejudice, fascination, or personal subjection to come into it? No one, for sure, which means that in the future there will be many histories" (Nabuco, 1900:245-246).

Despite his pointing this out, Nabuco's own account of the abolition of slavery in Brazil constitutes the mainstream way of retelling the history of this movement. Most scholarship takes his memories as a departure point. As Nabuco observes, however, to rely on individual memories is a risky choice. Activists such as himself usually retell their stories, attributing teleology, coherence, and meaning to former political experiences based on their position in the present.

Rather than explore Brazilian abolitionists' individual memories, I will instead discuss a collective one: the set of past forms of political collective expression still working as orientation to action. Charles Tilly (2008) labels these clustered past political experiences a "repertoire."

This concept allows one to engage with the theme of this session by raising as a problem the way the Brazilian abolitionist movement dealt with the past and the foreign collective abolitionist memory it found crystallized in a repertoire.

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As latecomers to abolitionism, Brazilian activists could look at a previous abolitionist repertoire in search of mobilizing strategies to shape their own activism. However, elements of this repertoire could not just be transferred from one context to another. While the British-American abolitionist movement relied on the local Protestant tradition, both in terms of arguments (Davis, 1966, 1984) and in terms of organizing (Stomatov, 2010), the Brazilian movement arose in a country where Catholicism was the state religion. The church, consequently, was entangled with the institution of slavery. This difference in context pushed Brazilian abolitionists to employ secular propaganda. Hence, while incorporating the Anglo-American format of popular mobilization, adaptation and even reinvention were required to fit a distinct local political tradition, the combination of institutions, values, and settings associated with the status quo, which, while circumscribing an antagonistic field, constrained the abolitionists' choice of strategies.

While mounting a protest, activists had to figure out ways of challenging this local political tradition. Mere emulation of the protestant Anglo-American repertoire was not an option. On the other hand, the strong Catholic tradition and presence of the Catholic Church in public life was a similarity shared by both Brazil and Spain. Although there is a lack of scholarship relating Brazilian and Spanish abolitionist movements,<sup>2</sup> this commonality in political tradition, and the fact that the Spanish mobilization in Madrid occurred just before the Brazilian one, made the Spanish abolitionist experience an antislavery experience that Brazilians could borrow from. The Spanish Abolitionist Society's mobilization located its protest inside theaters rather than in religious organizations (Schmidt-Nowara, 1999:52). Theater could work for Brazilian abolitionism as well.

### **1. Cycles of abolitionist mobilization in Brazil**

Brazil became an independent country in 1822, retaining slavery in the process. It was a pervasive organization, structuring economics, and invading all of

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<sup>2</sup> Schmidt-Nowara (2008) recently compared the cases, focusing however on structural similarities rather than on the mobilizing process.

social life. This importance made it difficult to address, avoided by the political system so as not to "disturb the order." British pressure led to the first effective measure, outlawing the slave trade in 1836, but the law was only applied in the 1850s, thanks to Britain military pressure once again (Bethell, 1970). The Brazilian elite experienced this intervention as a national trauma, and the political system remained silent about the issue throughout the following decade.

The problem was then raised from outside Parliament through three successive waves of antislavery discussion, according to changes in political opportunities. The first abolitionist wave was minute; just two emancipationist organizations were created in domestic reaction to international pressure in the 1850s. A more substantial wave came in the late 1860s, during debates concerning the country's modernization. At this point, abolitionists started to work within the legal framework that endorsed slavery, presenting appeals to political and juridical institutions to enforce the existing emancipationist law. In particular, they focused on an agreement with England that prohibited the slave trade in 1831 and made free all Africans entering the country after that year.<sup>3</sup> Abolitionists also produced a number of discourses, denunciations, projects of law, and petitions to the national Parliament and provincial assemblies, and established organizations, newspapers, and pamphlets. Although slight, this mobilization helped the Conservative government to approve the Free Womb Law of 1871, one of the most controversial decisions of the Brazilian empire (Needell, 2006).

The new law pushed the abolitionist mobilization to grow in two ways. First, it signaled that emancipation might occur in the short term, since there was at least one faction ready to support emancipation inside political institutions. This faction could work as an ally for civil society's mobilization. Second, the new law created a governmental Emancipation Fund to be used to buy manumissions, pushing the multiplication of organizations to raise money for doing so. In both

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<sup>3</sup> The most famous abolitionist using this strategy was the mulatto Luiz Gama, who, even without a formal degree in law, filed many suits in court on behalf of slaves during the 1870s. Comprehensive analysis of the abolitionism in Brazil can be found in Duque Estrada, 1918, Moraes, 1924, Viotti, 1966, Conrad, 1972, Toplin, 1972.

ways, the Free Womb Law created favorable political opportunities (McAdam, Tilly, Tarrow, 2001) for the rise of antislavery mobilization.

From 1871 on, abolitionists invested in enforcing the existing emancipationist law, creating organizations to either raise money to buy manumissions or to motivate slaveholders to voluntarily release their slaves (Frick, 1885:16; Fonseca, 1887:247). In addition, Free Womb was part of a huge modernizing project carried out by the Conservative Party leader Viscount of Rio Branco, which included urban improvements, incentives for businesses, and undergraduate course reform. As a consequence, undergraduate schools and a new press arose as spaces for the dissemination of ideas of social progress and sites for public claims against the Empire's institutions (Alonso, 2002). By the late 1870s, new actors carrying out new ideas were ready to join what was, up until then, minor antislavery mobilization.

However, mobilization only increased in 1878, following another change in political opportunities. The Liberal Party took office after a long-term Conservative hegemony, ushering in a huge reform agenda to public debate, including the gradual abolition of slavery. At this point, abolitionists saw an opening of political opportunities to influence institutions, and a third and decisive wave broke forth.

In this wave, popular mobilization came to be the main strategy. Drescher (1980,1988) points out the existence of two models of abolitionism, the Anglo-American approach, combining popular mobilization and parliamentary strategies,<sup>4</sup> and the "Continental model," e.g. the French abolitionist style, relying on elite-based parliamentary action. Drescher categorizes Brazil as an intermediate case. In contrast, I argue that antislavery mobilization in Brazil was closer to that of the Anglo-American model, constituting a social movement, as defined by Tilly:

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<sup>4</sup> "The distinguishing characteristic of the Anglo-American variant was its relatively broad appeal. It had the characteristics of what we think of as a social movement. It attempted to bring public pressure to bear on reluctant or hostile economic interests and agencies of government. At critical moments it used mass propaganda, petitions, public meetings, lawsuits and boycotts, presenting anti-slavery action as a moral and political imperative. Its adherents achieved, at least occasionally, a reputation for fanaticism. Organizationally, it tended to be decentralized in structure and rooted in local communities. It usually aimed at inclusiveness, welcoming participants who were otherwise excluded by sex, religion, race, class or locality, from the ordinary political process" (Drescher 1980:43).

A "consequential synthesis of three elements: 1. A sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities; let us call it a campaign; 2. Employment of combinations from among the following forms of political action: creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions; public meetings; solemn processions; vigils; rallies; demonstrations; petition drives; statements to and in public media; pamphleteering; call the variable ensemble of performances the social movement repertoire; 3. Participants' concerted public representations of WUNC: worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies; call them WUNC displays" (Tilly 2005:308).

From the 1870s on, Brazilian abolitionism grew into a broad social protest, a coordinated network of antislavery activists, organizations, and demonstrations. This paper does not aim to recover the movement as a whole, but focuses instead on the mobilizing phase. It seeks to demonstrate how much Brazilian abolitionist propaganda borrowed from the former abolitionist movements' repertoire, and how much it made innovations anew, constrained as it was by local political tradition and the political opportunities it faced.

## **2. A movement in search of a mobilizing repertoire**

As with any social movement, Brazilian abolitionists relied on a variety of mobilizing strategies and engaged a high number of adepts in urban centers, especially in the capital, Rio de Janeiro. From the late 1870s to the mid-1880s, the main strategy was public demonstrations, especially "conference-concerts," a combination of political meeting and cultural happening that occurred inside theaters.

A large number of activists took part in such events, having at their head three mulattos: André Rebouças, Vicente de Souza, and José do Patrocínio. The first two engaged mainly in practical arrangements, while the third acted as soul of the events. The passionate José do Patrocínio was son of a priest and an ex-slave, who, half-abandoned by his father, managed to survive thanks to the help of friends, small jobs, and a good marriage. He started to write abolitionist articles in newspapers in the mid-1870s (Magalhaes Jr, 1969) and, in 1879, his father-in-

law bought him a medium-sized paper, *A Gazeta da Tarde*, where Patrocínio built abolitionist headquarters and sketched out the Sunday conference-concerts.

Where did Patrocínio get this idea? Looking at the available international abolitionist repertoire, as Drescher (1988) describes it, Patrocínio could choose between the mobilizing Anglo-American model and the elite-based Continental model. Patrocínio preferred the first option, publishing Frederick Douglass's autobiography in his newspaper and emulating the North American civic celebrations.

As Rugemer (2008: 222ss) shows, North American abolitionism relied on previous Fourth of July celebrations, military parades, and the elite toast tradition as models for creating a cultural form for its own celebrations. These "forms of antislavery mobilization" incorporated secular elements, picnics, fireworks, band of musicians, banners, parades, and toasts (Rugemer, 2008:224), but still retained a religious quality: the church as a gathering point, priests, bells, religious hymns, vigils, and avoidance of alcohol (toasting with water).

Religion was pivotal for Anglo-American abolitionism in at least three ways. First, it acted as motivation and legitimization. As David Davis (1984:122ss) demonstrates, abolitionist ideas mixed the idea of progress, widespread amongst 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> European thinkers, with Protestant ethics. What is more, Temperley (1981:32) argues that "antislavery can be seen as a secularized or semi-secularized form of Christian evangelism." Besides, Drescher (1988) adds, religious associations were the institutional basis for abolitionist mobilization. Finally, Rugemer (2008) points out that the religious ritual was one element structuring the public expression of the abolitionist cause. Hence, Protestantism worked as an ideology, a mobilizing structure and a cultural format for Anglo-American abolitionism.

Brazilians were aware of it through newspapers, but to appropriate this repertoire would require an adaptation. The Brazilian situation was, after all, quite different. First, the idea of progress was a key element in creating abolitionist mobilization, being part of several modernizing ideas inspired by European

"scientific politics" (Alonso 2002). This approach presented religion, and especially the Catholic Church, as a traditional institution fated to fade away with the "march of civilization." Because of this, the Christian doctrine could not work as the main track of antislavery legitimization in Brazil, and Christian symbols were merely accessorial. The main argument, then, would be a moral one, based on a universalist ethos, and appealing to humanitarianism rather than to religion.

Second, in Brazil, Catholicism was a state religion and the Catholic Church an institution within the state, with priests holding public jobs. This intermingling of religion and public bureaucracy gave a very distinct position to priests with regards to slavery vis-à-vis the Anglo-American world. As state civil employees, they were restricted to enforcing the actual slaveholding status quo rather than challenging it. As a matter of fact, on an individual level, many priests were themselves slave owners, embedded in the logic of slave society. As an organization, the Catholic Church enforced and legitimized the Empire's institutions, one of them being slavery. Although some priests and brotherhoods would eventually be abolitionist, they were a marginalized minority. Hence, religion had no significant impact, either as discourse or as institutional basis, on configuring the characteristics of Brazil's abolitionist movement.

Third, since the Catholic Church was the core of Brazilian tradition and state institutions, abolitionists sought out political rituals not associated with Catholicism. Although they did engage in street demonstrations that adopted elements of religious processions (Tilly, 2005:313), they preferred to call them "parades", "marches," or even "*civic* processions," to stress their secular features.

Hence, while adapting the British-American repertoire to a local context, Brazilian abolitionists had to deal with constraints posed by the national tradition.

In this respect, Brazilians shared similarities with Spanish abolitionists. Brazil, like the Spanish colonies, had a colonial history that brought slavery into its society at a proportion, depth, and intensity that the British never experienced at home, and that North Americans only experienced in part of their country. Besides, Brazilian debates on slavery took place long after the English

and North American ones, but almost at the same time as the Puerto Rican and Cuban discussions.<sup>5</sup> Finally, unlike English and American abolitionists, Brazilians and Puerto Rican/Cuban ones confronted religious institutions - the strong Catholic Church - rather than be supported by them. Corwin (1967:166) points out that "the clergy were conspicuous by their absence" in the abolitionist propaganda and that "Spanish abolitionism was a facet of the anticlerical movement of nineteenth-century Spanish liberalism" (1967:171). The same is true for Brazil. These striking parallels render astonishing the lack of comparative scholarship on the subject. An exception to this is the work of Schmidt-Nowara who focuses, however, on structural similarities rather than the mobilizing process itself.

While looking for strategies to mobilize, Brazilian abolitionists, without losing the Anglo-American experience from sight, paid particular attention to Spanish mobilization, the closest experience both in temporal and cultural terms.

What were the Spanish abolitionists doing? The Spanish Abolitionist Society had organized "conferencias antiesclavistas" in theaters since at least 1872 (Castro, 1872; Villar y Villar, 1996; Schmidt-Nowara, 1999: 118; 129; 148;99). Brazilian abolitionists followed suit, choosing to showcase their propaganda within theaters.

### **3. The conference-concerts**

In 1880, Vicente de Souza, André Rebouças, José do Patrocínio, and the senior but second-rate politician Nicolau Moreira, created the Central Emancipation Association (ACE) in Rio de Janeiro. The ACE immediately started abolitionist conferences at the Sao Luis Theater.

In late nineteenth century Brazil, theater was a popular form of entertainment. Newspapers discussed actors and actresses, operas, and plays for days on end. It was a family-style entertainment, one which ladies could attend, and where flirtation took place. Patrocínio, a bohemian and companion of poets and

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<sup>5</sup> Both ended up with similar emancipationist legislations: "In Brazil, Cuba and Puerto Rico, the enslaved might gain their freedom through self-purchase or manumission" (Schmidt-Nowara, 2008:108).

artists, realized that theater might serve as a public space for Brazilian abolitionist propaganda as it did in Spain.

Between July 1880 and July 1881, the ACE organized 43 abolitionist events in theaters (*O Abolicionista*, 1880), averaging three per month. These "conferences" took place on Thursdays and Sundays, with one or two speakers addressing a public of "ladies and gentlemen." Conference Number 25, which was held on January 20 1881, shows how theater was influencing the format of propaganda at the time. The conference was also a concert:

"(...) The Abolitionist Family was assembled in the elegant S. Luiz Theater, when the musical and concert part of the Conference got started" (ACE, Bulletin n.8, 20/3/1881:10).

On this day, performers played two pieces by Verdi; a fantasy from a Donizetti opera (*Martha de Floto*), and a piece by a local writer, Arthur Napoleao. This "concert part" always appeared in the conferences, before or after the political speeches, mixing theater tradition with political activism.

Some theatrical elements immediately stand out: for example, tossing flowers over the speakers, as in Conference n.27, on January 30, 1881, when the speaker was José do Patrocínio. His emergent leadership was celebrated when he reached the stage:

"The applause continued, reaching proportions of true acclaim, when the popular speaker José do Patrocínio took the stage (...)"(ACE, Bulletin n.8, 20/3/1881:17).

Patrocínio was not only a man on stage, he was also the one making the stage happen. After this series at the Sao Luiz Theater, he managed to secure events in other theaters—e.g., the *Recreio Dramatico*, the *Polytheama*—usually in ones he would get in to for free. From 1880 to 1888, under numerous different names - conference, conference-concert, festival, soiree, matinee - at least 147 abolitionist events occurred,<sup>6</sup> more than one every month, mostly in Rio de Janeiro.

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<sup>6</sup> I collected this information from the most important abolitionist newspapers: *O Abolicionista*, from 1880 to 1881; *Gazeta da Tarde*, from 1883 to 1886; *Cidade do Rio*, from 1887 to 1888.

When the conferences gained in number and spread throughout the city, achieving growing public support, Patrocínio and Rebouças gathered the twenty small abolitionist organizations working in town into a single Abolitionist Confederation (AC). Since then, in 1883, the AC was responsible for coordination, creating a collective agenda, defining a schedule of events (to avoid overlaps), attracting artists, and administrating monetary donations. AC also established a relationship with theaters owners, who would rent to them without charge or at an affordable price.

The placement of events in theaters impacted *how* abolitionist propaganda was carried out. Theater structure and symbols came to be the language through which Brazilian abolitionism articulated its political message. The events were named accordingly as "conference-concerts."

Conference-concerts were customized and ritualized. At least 44.8% of them had an artistic presentation before or after the abolitionist discourses - while no one counted on priests or religious hymns. They borrowed the theater's concern for scenario. Leaves and flags adorned the building entrance; gardens were illuminated. This technical innovation, electricity, was presented as the "lights of freedom" against the darkness of slavery.

Careful preparation preceded the events. For a week or so, the *Gazeta da Tarde*, the Abolitionist Confederation's official newspaper (*Confederação Abolicionista*, 1884:10-11), published the program and highlighted items such as sets, and the artists to perform at Sunday's noon gathering. The time was not fortuitous. Rather than mix abolitionism and religion, the movement distinguished them, scheduling its events *after* mass.

Occasionally preceded by a parade led by Patrocínio, the event usually started around 11 a.m., with a band of musicians playing in the theater garden. Dressed in white, abolitionists' sisters, daughters, or wives stayed at the door, collecting donations. Once the theater was full, the band entered the building still playing, followed by the Abolitionist Confederation's board of directors, one of

them carrying the abolitionist flag. They walked slowly up to the stage, and at the precise moment they reached it, the curtains opened.

The effect was emphasized by decoration. In an event organized by the Caixa Emancipadora Joaquim Nabuco, the main entrance was adorned with flags and leaves covered the street (GT 16/12/1883). Sometimes, the gardens were filled with brand new electric lights (GT 10/2/1884). On several occasions, the Carnival group Demon's Tenants was in charge of indoor adornment, employing figurative and allegoric pieces, flowers, flags, shields, laurels, curtains, drapes, tissues, special chairs, gold and shiny articles, and other theatrical motifs (for instance, GT 25/5/1883;GT 26/6/1883). The walls featured portraits of local abolitionist heroes or famous foreign ones, like Victor Hugo. The abolitionist newspaper *Gazeta da Tarde's* insignia was always present, sometimes wrapped into a red flag (GT 9/2/1884). On one occasion, there were eight golden chairs surrounded by bibs (GT 10 12 1883). The stage was filled with allegoric pieces and, as in artistic performances, there was even an opening of curtains.

The meetings lasted around three hours. The first part was filled with political speeches. Joao Clapp, the Abolitionist Confederation's president, was in charge of welcoming greetings and a short report on the week's activities. Next, a key speaker would address the public for an hour or so. Even in this so-called "political" part, the event relied on theater tradition. The speeches had a romantic framing: in a humanitarian appeal for abolition, sentimental vocabulary and images addressed the audience's sensibility. During conference number 27, one Sunday at the Sao Luiz Theater, Patrocínio said:

"There is nothing more holy and noble than we, of African race, who are working day and night, to save our brothers from the barbarous irons of slavery ?! (General applause.) What would be awkward, what would be infamous, (...) would be if we, for fear (...), were not at the forefront, amongst the first fighters, willing to do anything, to win or die, in the name of the most holy cause; a cause which is wholly ours, by our blood, our heads, and our hearts (Repeated applause)" (Patrocínio, 30/1/1881; ACE, Bulletin n.8, 20/3/1881:17).

The feelings the discourses evoked were honor, nobility, humanity, and compassion. Economic arguments - the slaveholder field - scarcely appeared. Speeches were situated within a moral terrain, presenting freedom as a universal value, proper to the human condition, and, as such, beyond economic matters. As Antonio Pinto, in his conference on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1884, stated:

"The slave has the same talents we have, the same heart, the same feelings and affections, and often they are far superior to those who call themselves their masters (...)(...) Slavery is theft; man cannot enslave man because of the equality of his nature and his destiny (...)" (Pinto, 1884:9; 11-12).

By the end, the speaker would be greeted with a bouquet of flowers and, if the speech were in fact appreciated, flowers would rain over him.

Comedy sketches filled the intermezzo. Many actors would perform, many of them from Italian companies. However, the most popular "comic" was the Brazilian Mattos.

During the "concert" part, at least four artists would take the stage. On one day there could be a string quintet and two bands of musicians (GT 16/1/1883); on another day, "single pieces, classical music, quartets, trios, and romanzas" (GT 9/2/1883), an Italian waltz (GT 25/5/1883), or even opera singers, performing arias from Gounod's *Faust* and Bizet's *Carmen*. There was even a diva, Luiza Regada, the "abolitionist nightingale." Lyric companies such as the *Companhia Lirica Del-Negro* frequently performed. Classical music was outstanding, but there was room for a variety of styles, including tangos and zarzuelas. Even the popular "maxixe" was featured.

Contrasting with the Anglo-American tradition, sources included an appropriation of the local Indianist tradition, as in the opera *O Guarani*, by Carlos Gomes, which was played periodically (for instance, GT 25/5/1883). Moreover, there occurred an assimilation of French revolutionary heritage, as in the creation of a popular symphonic march: the *Marselhesa of the Slaves* (CR 20/3/1888). Abolitionists created their own hymns, including the *Hino da Cearense*, sung by "23 ladies from distinguished families," and the *Hino da abolição* (GT 17/3/1883).

Poem declamations followed. Many young writers, such as Coelho Neto, Valentim Magalhaes, Olavo Bilac, and the brothers Aluisio and Arthur de Azevedo wrote abolitionist poems for the conference-concerts. However, the preferred was Castro Alves, a late poet, who died at a young age: *Navio Negreiro* and *Vozes d'Africa*, published as a pamphlet in 1880, depicts slaves who lament their fate:

"Today America feeds from my blood  
Condor turned into a vulture,  
Bird of slavery."

Acts from a play would come next. The country's most popular actor, Vasques, performed sketches with romantic slavery-related plots. Vasques and Luiza Regadas were ubiquitous figures in the conference-concerts in Rio de Janeiro, and even engaged in creating an Abolitionist Artistic Association. They headed this "engaged-art," especially in the mid-1880s, when abolitionist engagement came to be widespread among artists.

Sometimes an entire play was performed, such as the *Corja Opulenta*, *drama abolicionista em 3 atos* [Opulent Gang: Abolitionist Play in Three Acts], by Joaquim Nunes, enacted in all of the northern provinces, as well as Rio de Janeiro, the Empire's Capital, in 1884. The plot features a poor and noble hero fighting against a hideous, capitalist slaveholder to free a little girl. The dialogues read like pure abolitionist proselytism:

"You see how Brazilian people are changing. Everywhere you hear: I am an abolitionist! Death to the slaveholders! Greetings to abolition!" (Nunes, 1884:22).

In this case, Julieta dos Santos, a ten year-old actress from Rio Grande do Sul, played the main character, attesting to the incorporation of children in propaganda. Sometimes little girls like Candida (GT 12/2/1883) would recite poems. Another child, Mario Barbosa de Andrade, usually declaimed poems and even speeches, as in an event organized by the Guttenberg Club (GT 9/2/1884).

Abolitionists never lost the opportunity to contrast children's purity with slavery's sordidness.

The whole idea of a family-like event was put into motion. Those present were frequently referred to by the orators as an "Abolitionist Family." Besides kids, abolitionists' wives, daughters, sisters, sisters-in-law, and other siblings worked on the theater decoration, collected monetary contributions, and even walked on stage playing piano, singing, and reciting poems, as did Rosalia Sena - José do Patrocínio's sister-in-law, Vicente de Souza's wife, Joao Clapp's daughters, and his wife. Honorina Ferreira was always there, reciting either *O Escravo* [*The Slave*], from Soares de Passos (GT 25/5/1883), or her own compositions, such as the poem *Liberdade* [*Freedom*]. Nevertheless, women also actively participated by organizing their own associations and delivering speeches, as did a medical student who was featured as the key speaker at one of the conference-concerts. Besides, abolitionists always encouraged women's participation. For instance, a "matinee musical" on February 6 1881, promoted by the Abolitionist Confederation's president-to-be Joao Clapp, was dedicated to women, and featured almost only women performers:

"(...) This was a great day for the abolitionist party. It was not just a conference, it was a real festival with the profusion of music, poetry, flowers, ladies, and girls. (...). All the cabins were almost exclusively filled with ladies; even the chairs and galleries had distinguished representatives of the fairer sex " (ACE, Bulletin n.8, 20/3/1881:19).

Performances and speeches generated a sentimental mood, preparing for the apotheosis. A slave would step on stage to receive a freedom certificate, acquired with the gathered donations - on average more than 200 thousand Reis, the necessary amount for one slave's manumission. The slave would be converted to a free man in front of all those present, materializing the possibility of the end of slavery before being discursively presented. For instance, on January 30 1881, Vicente de Souza took the stage to deliver freedom to Juvencio:

"He led the African Juvencio by the hand; he gave him the certificate of freedom and a hug of Equality and Fraternity, which baptized him as a Brazilian citizen. The auditorium was delirious with excitement; from the sad eyes of the venerable abolitionist Muniz Barreto ran tears of the most unspeakable joy" (ACE, Bulletin n.8, 20/3/1881:17).

Scenes like this had a powerful effect on the audience, and a general catharsis would manifest itself. The freedom-giver and the freedom-winner cried, as the crowd, standing "in delirium," clapped, shook handkerchiefs, and threw flowers (GT 27/7/1880, for instance) as at the finale of a play.

Ostensive use of the theatrical tradition and the extensive presence of artists marked some traits of the abolitionist propaganda style. The most striking one was the use of flowers. As in strictly cultural shows, when the audience tosses flower over divas and idols, in the conference-concerts, the public celebrated the activists and "freedom-winners" in the same fashion. This practice came to be so popular that even when the abolitionist events did not feature artistic performances, flowers would appear. In June 1883, Patrocínio delivered 115 freedom letters to slaves freed during the conference-concerts that year and "the redeemed ones were covered with flowers as they received the letters" (GT 26 6 1883). At the end of another event, "flowers rained from the ceiling on those present" (GT 10 12 1883). In fact, so widespread were the flowers that camellias came to be the Abolitionist Confederation's symbol (Duque Estrada, 1918).

The use of scenery, performance, actors, poets, and of plays, music, and sketches reveals the intrinsic cultural character of this propaganda, as well as the actual mise-en-scene of politics that runs throughout the entire campaign. It is not that abolitionism used artistic means to express its message. The events were theatrical in the sense that they employed the format, space, scenic and dramaturgical resources, actors, music, stage, and the whole idea of an artistic representation of reality. In this sense, the conference-concert produced a literal dramatization of slavery in Brazil. While Anglo-American abolitionists can be seen to make a "religionization" of arguments about slavery, Brazilian abolitionism

produced a theatricalization of politics, framing political messages within artistic language. In this sense, the political transfer of the foreign abolitionist repertoire generated an innovation. Religion, presented in the Anglo-American celebrations, gave room to artistic and secular elements in a more accentuated fashion than happened in the Spanish case. However, it seems quite excessive to link the Brazilian conference-concerts to Carnival, as Robert Conrad (1972) and, following him, Drescher (1988) have done. The "festive" features came instead from the artistic repertoire of the nineteenth century elite.

Through theater, abolitionists generated a new sensibility toward slavery amongst the urban public. This in turn served as a condition for mobilization itself. Having previously been experienced as a lifestyle and the natural state of things, slavery was transformed through this artistic-oriented propaganda into a moral evil, oppressive and unbearable. This new framework impacted the sensibility of urban educated civil society, prepared for it as they were by the romanticism of the time. Discourses, verses, and performances spread a new "moral repertoire" (Halfmann and Young, 2005) in which the slave changed from a "thing" to an "enslaved person," as Patrocínio remarked, as in the Anglo-American propaganda: "Is he not a man and a brother?" Through the same process, slavery came to mean damnation.

A second effect of the conferences was an expansion of the political public. From the point of view of participants, conference-concerts greeted the reformist urban public. They attracted "citizens of all classes" (GT 18 2 1884), including members of the social elite, as in one event at the Theater Pedro II, where "the cabins were occupied by respectable families" (CR 26 3 1888). However, conference-concerts attracted mainly the segments of civil society that were marginalized from the political system. As I have argued before (Alonso 2002), during the 1870s and 1880s, a huge reformist movement took form in Brazil, working out an expansion of the political participants, and bringing into political protests all those otherwise excluded from the political system: younger men, women, mulattos, and the lower social strata. The abolitionist campaign added

children and the slaves themselves. The variety of abolitionist organizations created in Rio de Janeiro between February 1883 and January 1884 attests to the diversity of social support that the movement gathered. Three organizations were formed by theater artists:<sup>7</sup> one by lawyers (Centro Abolicionista Forense), one by Portuguese immigrants;<sup>8</sup> six women's organizations;<sup>9</sup> two boys' organizations;<sup>10</sup> two by typographers; one by commerce employees;<sup>11</sup> and one by cooks and servants.<sup>12</sup>

This social inclusion is particularly outstanding in two cases. The first one is the women's organizations. Certainly, there existed a hierarchy between men and women abolitionists, and most members of either group were not exactly feminist. However, abolitionists raised the question of women's participation in Brazilian public life. The *Gazeta da Tarde* created a column that addressed the issue, provocatively titled "Are Brazilian women slaveholders?" The answers were varied, but some, as for example that of the young novelist Aluisio de Azevedo, used the forum as a way to instigate women to defend themselves and to present their own opinion in public. Abolitionists included women in many subordinated roles in the conference-concerts' organization, but they also opened up a space for several outstanding women. The brave Mercedes de Oliveira, one of few female medical students, was assigned the role of key speaker at one of the conference-concerts, in January 1884. Symbolic of the fact that this position was neither expected nor comfortable, Mercedes claimed to be sick on the day of the presentation. This excuse—whether real or not—made it possible for her to face the audience sitting instead of standing, and justified her trembling voice. Despite being sick, she in fact spoke and handled the stage at a level equal to that of men. This caused frissons among the many women present who, in the end, raised their kerchiefs (GT 28 1 1884). Besides, the women created their own associations, which grew to be numerous. While engaging women and children, abolitionist activists were also

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<sup>7</sup> Caixa Emancipadora do Club Vasques; Congresso Literário Guarany; Sociedade Artística Emancipadora.

<sup>8</sup> Sociedade Abolicionista Luso Brasileira.

<sup>9</sup> Sociedade Libertadora de senhoras de S. Francisco; As Baturiteenses Libertadoras; Aurora Redemptora; Libertadoras; Associação abolicionista feminina; Club Carlos Gomes.

<sup>10</sup> Libertadora 28 de setembro; confederação infantil abolicionista.

<sup>11</sup> Club dos Abolicionistas Empregados do Comercio.

<sup>12</sup> O Club Abolicionista dos Cozinheiros e Copeiros Confederados.

politicizing private life. Until that point, women were believed to be "incapable"; they had to be politically represented by men in the family. Since the abolitionist conference-concerts were a "social" and cultural event, women could attend them without being seen as invading masculine spaces. However, while women started going to the conference-concerts in the same way that people go to the theater, many ended up being converted into political activists.

In addition, the most important abolitionist transgression was to bring slaves into politics, not just as objects of politics, but as political actors in their own right. The ex-slave, J. Agostinho dos Reis, after being freed at one conference, turned into an active abolitionist. On another occasion, the Black Abel Trindade, vice-president of the Caixa Emancipadora Jose do Patrocínio, delivered a speech after receiving a tribute (GT 26 6 1883). In this sense the Club dos Libertos de Niteroi, directed by Joao Clapp, was outstanding. It ran a school for freedmen and included them in its political activism.

The whole idea of bringing ex-slaves and women into public life challenged Brazilian political tradition. Presenting politics as something accessible to established society's outsiders and including the political system's excluded ones: the conference-concerts built the public support necessary for abolitionist leaders to push the question inside Parliament. By the mid-1880s the Abolitionist Confederation president commemorated the conference-concerts as "the safest way to have people identify with our ideas" (*Confederação Abolicionista*, 1884:8).

Hence, the abolitionist conference-concerts were socially very inclusive. In this sense, they differ from the Spanish abolitionist pattern. Most abolitionist propaganda for the abolition of slavery in Cuba and Puerto Rico were made, as in England, in Europe, and directed at a middle-class European audience (Schmidt-Nowara, 1999: 87),<sup>13</sup> far away from the slaves themselves, living on the other side

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<sup>13</sup> Schmidt-Nowara says the public was mainly middle-class and that the workers were absent in abolitionist manifestations (1999:87). He also mentions the inclusion of middle class women as an abolitionist audience, but always in a subordinate position (1999:118). He adds that a change in the public profile, with the emergence of a middle class associative culture (p74) would have started abolitionist mobilization in Spain. In Brazil, although middle-class associative culture also suffered a boom during the 1880s (Alonso, 2002), this was part of a broader movement, with a growing number of organizations created by all social strata, and connected to the most different themes, from reformist to reactionary.

of the Atlantic. Brazilian abolitionists, like the ones in the southern United States, had to face a more complex reality, living side by side with slaves.

They had to decide whether to work in behalf of them or directly with them. Eventually abolitionists split on this topic, but most of their efforts were inclusive.

#### 4. Beyond conferences

Conference-concerts were the main strategy of the Brazilian abolitionist movement from the late 1870s to the mid-1880s. The political movement assumed a cultural format, targeting the persuasion of urban public opinion. The abolitionist movement discourses do not call for revolution, rebellion, running away, violence, or subversion; quite the opposite, in fact. The Abolitionist Confederation's report of 1884 points out its "orderly motives" (*Confederação Abolicionista*, 1884:7), searching for solutions inside the legal framework itself. Persuasion and indemnification are the key words throughout this phase of abolitionist propaganda. Hence, the abolitionist choice of the theater-as-activism model was also a self-restrained option, keeping public mobilization within the legal borders and in accord with the rules of political order. To stress this characteristic, I call this phase *the cycle of mobilization of flowers*, in which violence was avoided in discourse and as practice, while flowers were widespread as a symbol of the peaceful abolitionist style.

In 1884 and 1885, however, two sequential shifts in political opportunities altered abolitionist strategy, giving rise to two new cycles. I am not going to focus on them here, but I would like to briefly highlight their differences vis-à-vis the first cycle.

The second cycle was very short, lasting basically the year of 1884. Pushed by abolitionist pressure, a cabinet sympathetic to abolition took office. This change led abolitionists to support the cabinet and to concentrate efforts on institutional actions, launching candidacies to the parliament and to other political positions such as aldermen. At this point the conferences changed into meetings

for supporting abolitionist candidacies. Many progressive, mainly Liberal, politicians, joined the abolitionist campaign, participating in conferences and meetings while abolitionist leaders themselves entered the political system as candidates, as in the cases of Joaquim Nabuco, Marcolino Moura, Jose Mariano, José do Patrocínio. Confident in the increasing opening of the political system to their claims, abolitionists took their chances inside political institutions in a *cycle of mobilization of ballots*.

However, when the electoral strategy failed the following year, with Parliament resistance breaking down the cabinet, a slaveholder coalition came into power and the abolitionists faced repression. Facing adverse political opportunities, abolitionists changed their strategy. The conferences declined abruptly: 76% of them occurred from 1880 to 1884. From 1885 to 1888, just 34 conferences occurred, showing that they declined as the main strategy. Abolitionists answered to change in political opportunities by changing their strategy. They then walked into confrontational actions. Again they relied on the abolitionist repertoire available, this time emulating the North American Underground Railroad, a model Patrocínio even published in his newspaper in 1885. In the following years violence grew on both sides. This was a *time of bullets*, as one abolitionist newspaper declared in 1887:

"The time of kermises, flowers, music, is over (...). Today we should use more positive ways (...). To teach the strike to the slave workers, to teach them they have been exploited, to make them run away from the farms (...), this should be a mission for all abolitionists. Flowers for what, music for what? (...) The abolitionists should secretly assemble (...) and work together (...)" (A Redempcao, 21/7/1887).

Although Brazilian abolitionists never reached the level of bloodshed the process took in the United States, violence was certainly present, as Toplin (1972) has extensively documented, especially in this last phase.

In short, the abolitionist movement was made up of three phases: activism started in theaters (the flowers), moved to institutional actions (the ballots), and then to forms of confrontation (the bullets), accompanying the changes in political opportunities. Inciting public opinion against slavery in the beginning and making difficult the administration of slavery (by promoting runaways) in the end, the abolitionist movement certainly impacted the political process, leading slaveholder leadership to give up, conceding, on May 13 1888, the approval of a final abolitionist law.

## 5. Final remarks

This account of the Brazilian movement for the abolition of slavery is not a history based on activists' memories, as Joaquim Nabuco suggested it should be. Rather, relying on newspapers and pamphlets, the aim here is to approach how the Brazilian movement dealt with the sort of collective memory provided by former abolitionism.

Brazilian abolitionism counted on this available abolitionist repertoire in two ways. On the one hand, it molded itself as a social movement, emulating the British and the American patterns of mobilization. During the 1880s, Brazilian abolitionism mobilized social sectors that were until then marginalized by political institutions, including women, freedmen, lower social strata, ex-slaves, and even children, thereby building a large and popular movement.

On the other hand, Brazilian abolitionism had to adapt the abolitionist repertoire while choosing certain strategies. Since Catholicism was the religion of the state and the Church and its members worked as part of the slavery status quo, Brazilian abolitionists could not just emulate Anglo-American activism, rooted as it was in religion and religious associative networks (Stamatov, 2010). Brazilian political tradition prevented the local abolitionist movement from relying on religion either as an ideological or organizational basis for activism. Because of this, the element that Brazilians incorporated from the abolitionist repertoire was Spanish secular propaganda through theater. Theater provided the features of

propaganda and even the organizational basis for abolitionist mobilization. Although art worked as a form of political propaganda for abolitionism elsewhere in the world, in the Brazilian case, theater replaced religion as the principal form of political expression, as well as the way to work out a dramatization of slavery. In this sense, the movement built a theatricalization of politics.

Thus, Brazilians related to the former foreign abolitionist fights and memories as a repertoire, extracting tools that would suit the local political tradition and the political opportunity that the movement faced. While using the available abolitionist repertoire in a different context, Brazilian abolitionists had to improvise, to reinvent. Appropriation generated innovation.

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