Indenture-at-wide: Learning from Madeiran Sugar Routes[1]

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1. Madeira and sugar

Madeira's archipelago stands 320 miles off the NW of Africa at 32' N. It includes the larger island of Madeira (286 sq. miles), the smaller Porto Santo, and the islets of Desertas and Selvagens. Unlike the nearby Canaries, which were inhabited by the Guanches, Madeira had no indigenous population. In 1419 it was claimed by the Portuguese after being visited by the Atlantic-scouting captains Zarco and Teixeira. The settlements began in 1420, modeled on European feudalism, with large estates endowed to aristocrats and a mass of landless peasants.

Madeira is also the birth site of the modern plantation system. In 1425, Madeira became the first stopover of the sugar cane in that plant's trajectory from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, a crucial step in its longer journey from New Guinea to the four corners of the world. It was in the Atlantic colonies that sugar plantations became the core of a global economic system that led to modern capitalism.[2] Sugar became a most profitable commodity – the "white gold." Its demand expanded constantly, and so did the interest of financiers. Sweet and addictive at the consumers' end, sugar production was a bitter, bloody and destructive endeavour that caused ecological disruption, indigenous dispossession, and massive displacements of people coerced into the field tasks of planting, cutting, transporting and threshing the cane, plus further assisting in the processing of the liquid, molasses, crystals and sugar loaves.[3]

Portuguese young girls at work on sugar estates in Hawaii in the 1880s-1890s

Madeira's 15th century plantation experiment generated richesses for some, opened connections to Flemish and Genovese markets, and brought enslaved labourers from the Canaries and Africa. But the island's forest wood was soon depleted, the territory was limited, and competitors entered the market. In 1532, the Portuguese administration relocated the sugar-producing technology to the wider horizons of Brazil. Madeiran estates gave way to wine production. Small-plot agriculture expanded with mainland settlers bonded to contracts ("colonia") with the landlords. In the 18th and 19th century, British wine traders and producers became highly influential in Madeira, adding a layer of complexity to the existing feudalistic structure. There was a second wave of sugar cane production in Madeira in the 19th century, but in smaller plots, remaining a residual production to our days, mostly for the processing of fine molasses (mel de cana) and rum.

The plantation system had in the meantime conquered the West Atlantic: Brazil since the 16th century, Barbados since the 17th, followed by most Caribbean islands and Guianas. Millions of enslaved Africans were trafficked across the

1 The basis for this article was originally presented as the lecture "Comparing and connecting: labour and racialization in plantation and industrial economies – notes from colonial Guiana, Hawaii and New England", delivered at the International workshop *Towards Establishing a Comparative Framework for the Study of Indentured Labour* at the Centre for Research on Slavery and Indenture, University of Mauritius, 5th – 6th March 2019. I am much indebted to Vijaya Teelock, Satyendra Peerthum, the Indentured Labour Routes Project, The AapravasiGhat Trust Fund, and the members of the Colour of Labour Nicholas Miller, Marcelo Moura Mello, Colette LePeticorps, Rita Kantu and other participants in the workshop for their comments, and to the many interlocutors I had along the research conducted in the project The Colour of Labour- the Racialized Lives of Migrants, supported by the European Research Council Advanced Grant # 695573.

2 Sidney Greenfield, "Madeira and the Beginnings of New World Sugar Cane Cultivation and Plantation Slavery: A Study in Institution Building." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 292, no. 1 (1977): 536-552; Jason W. Moore, "Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the "First" Sixteenth Century: Part I: From "Island of Timber" to Sugar Revolution, 1420–1506." Review (Fernand Braudel Center) 32, no. 4 (2009): 345-90; Alberto Vieira, *Canaviais, Açúcar e Aguardente na Madeira, séculas XV a XX*. Funchal, CEHA, 2004.

3 Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power. The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin, 1985.

Atlantic to work in the sugar fields and mills. The racialized colonial violence upon which stood the plantation economies created deeply wounded societies in permanent tensions and active revolts; by the 19th century, the system was still profitable but increasingly unacceptable. Abolition and Emancipation made their way to the plantation world, replacing enslavement with indenture, while keeping the structure of production, the violence, the devastation, the generalized displacements, the racialized societies.[4]

2. Sugar Labour Routes

The massive displacement of African men and women as enslaved laborers to the American and Caribbean plantations of sugar, coffee, cocoa, cotton, etc., is well documented by scholars and heritage activists. The post-emancipation massive displacement of Asian men and women as indentured labourers to the Caribbean and also to the then British colonies of Mauritius and Fiji is equally well documented, as illustrated by the Indentured Labour Routes Project. Yet, besides those two major displacements there were also other modes of capturing labouring hands into plantations, from the "blackbirding" (a form of group kidnaping) of South Pacific Islanders into Australia and Fiji[5] to the establishment of three to five year contracts to entire families willing to relocate themselves in a distant land.[6]

Madeiran islanders were also recruited as working hands for sugar plantations in the British colonies. They were recruited, or lured, or wrongfully brought into unknown situations that ended in the sugar cane fields of British colonies in the aftermath of emancipation. Sometimes, Madeirans were legally contracted and knew their rights and duties. Sometimes not. Recruiters for British planters seeking field hands found their way into the most vulnerable islanders, those who experienced in their bodies the downsizes of agricultural fluctuations and famines and longed to escape them. In some cases, they embarked in semi-coercive conditions, in others they knew where they were going and had contracts that resembled what would later become the indenture system. Madeira had been the experimental site of the modern sugar plantation; now, Madeirans were the experimental subjects of bonded plantation labour.

3. Madeirans into British Guiana and the Caribbean

Mainstream Portuguese history, so focused on its own empire, gives little or no attention to the large outflow of Portuguese islanders into British plantations. Yet their number is estimated above 30,000 – an impressive figure for an island which rarely had over 100,000 people. Right after Emancipation, already in 1835, a few hundred Madeirans disembarked in Georgetown headed to Demerara plantations under legal contracts.[7] In nearby Trinidad, a group of Azoreans had been wrongfully brought to sugar plantations where they found brutal working conditions and death, and soon pleaded for rescue.[8] From then on, and particularly between 1846 and 1848, tens of thousands of islanders from Madeira, and occasionally from the Azores, Cape Verde and the Canaries, moved into sugar-cane plantations in the Guianas and the Caribbean; sometimes they left Madeira not fully aware of what their destination was, and could end up in St Kitts or St Vincent while thinking they embarked to Cape Verde.[9]

After the end of their contracts, some Portuguese labourers remained in Guiana and competed with the recently freed African-descendants in the food-and-drink retail business. They grew into a successful community that attracted more Madeirans to Guiana for business and trade. At that time, indentured South Asians had became the pillar of the plantation labour force.

In the tensely racialized Guianese society, the Portuguese became one of the six races of the nation, along with White, Black, Indian, Chinese and Amerindian, a status that lasted after the colony became a republic in the 1960s. During

4 Among many others, see Mintz, Sweetness; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Richmond, U N Carolina Press, 1944; Philip Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

5 Laurence Brown "'A Most Irregular Traffic'": The Oceanic Passages of the Melanesian Labor Trade." *In Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World Book*, ed. E Christopher, C Pybus and M Rediker, 184–203. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

6 Susana Caldeira, *Da Madeira para o Hawaii: a emigração e o contributo cultural madeirense*. Funchal: CEHA, 2010; Cristiana Bastos, "Portuguese in the Cane: The Racialization of Labour in Hawaiian Plantations." In Changing Societies: Legacies and Challenges, ed. S Aboim, P Granjo and A Ramos, 65–96. Lisbon: Imprensa de CiênciasSociais, 2018; Nicholas Miller,"Trading Sovereignty and Labour: The Consular Network of Nineteenth-Century Hawai'i." *The International History Review* 42, no 2 (2019), 260-277.

7 M Noel Menezes, *Scenes from the History of the Portuguese in Guyana*. Victoria Printing Works, 1986; Jo-Ann Ferreira, "Madeiran Portuguese migration to Guyana, St. Vincent, Antigua and Trinidad: a comparative overview." *Portuguese Studies Review*, 14, no. 2 (2006): 63–85.

8 The Historical Society of Trinidad and Tobago. Publication No. 796 "A petition from certain Portuguese colonists to the governor of Trinidad, 1835". I thank Jo-Ann Ferreira for this reference.

9 Caldeira, *Da Madeira*; Bastos, Portuguese.

Portuguese young girls at work on sugar estates in Hawaii in the 1880s-1890s

that time, many Portuguese-Guianese moved into new destinations, mostly in Canada, where they formed multi-hyphenated communities.

4. The route to Hawaii

Beyond the boundaries of the European empires in the late 19th century, the indigenous Kingdom of Hawaii, along with a number of visiting white traders and missionaries turned local landowners, converted the island into a major sugar producer. The labour needs and the demographic decline of Hawaiian population propelled a politics of sponsored immigration that targeted different groups in different times: Chinese, Portuguese islanders from Madeira and the Azores, Japanese, and, after annexation to the United States in 1898, also Koreans, Filipinos, Puerto Ricans. Why Portuguese islanders from so far away, when it would cost less to planters and the Hawaiian government to bring Asian workers? Partly, it was precisely to counterbalance the predominantly Asian repopulation of Hawaii. Plus, there was a small community of Portuguese sailors and whalers in Hawaii who pleaded for their homefolks. Furthermore, a close collaborator of King Kalakaua, the German naturalist and physician Wilhelm Hillebrand, went to Madeira and found such remarkable resemblances to Hawaii that he actively engaged in the recruitment of Madeirans.[10]

In the end, as historians of labour argue, a workforce divided by nationalities, reframed as ethnicities, was of the interest of the planters, as it prevented the united insurgence of labourers.[11] Portuguese islanders enjoyed some privileges, above all the fact of being sponsored as families. The contingents of Madeirans and Azoreans arrived to Hawaii between 1878 and 1913, bringing a total of near 20,000 men, women and children. Although the voyage was harsh and long – six months sailing or six weeks on steamer – and the work in the cane fields was brutal, Portuguese islanders signed the contracts to Hawaii on their free will and most of the times moved there for good. After the end of contracts, many moved to the city and engaged on urban jobs, others kept farming with homesteading, or remained in the plantations, and others moved to the mainland U.S. Few returned to their ancestral islands. In the early 20th century, the Portuguese were over 10% of the population in Hawaii. They were counted as a separate group as late as in the 1930 census. Much of their heritage became part of the material and intangible cultural references of Hawaii – the small guitar that evolved as ukulele, the fried dough malasadas and other foods, the religious rituals, etc.

Concluding note: comparing and connecting.

What do we learn from the study of the recruitment of Portuguese islanders for the sugar labours in foreign plantations? Although their number is small when compared to the millions of enslaved Africans and indentured Asians, their case is rich in a variety of forms and adds nuance to our analysis of indenture systems. They shared with other workers the violence of the plantation, and they entered it in a variety of ways. Not enslaved, although sometimes reported as victims of "white slavery,"[12] their modes of bondage varied. Some signed contracts at departure, others at arrival; some were lured or nearly kidnapped, others went as stowaways; some had no idea of where they were going, others knew it; some escaped famine, others wanted to further improve their lives. In the highly racialized plantation societies where they settled, Portuguese islanders were sometimes brought to buffering zones and intermediary positions as those of foremen, and benefited from marginal racial advantages to move beyond the plantation labour into other jobs and social positions. They became part of the social mosaic of the plantation societies inherited from a divided workforce of multiple displacements and modes of bondage, with the collective wounds flattened by the celebratory representation of the society's multi-ethnic character.

10 Bastos, Portuguese; Caldeira, *Da Madeira*; Miller,Trading.

11 Edward Beechert, *Working in Hawaii: A Labor History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985; Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawai'i 1835–1920*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983; Moon-Kie Jung, *Reworking Race: The Making of Hawai'i's Interracial Labor Movement*.New York: Columbia UniversityPress, 2006.

12 José Silvestre Ribeiro, *Correspondência para o Ministério do Reino*. Arquivo Regional da Madeira, liv. 644, 1846–1851.