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Forced Labor and Poverty in Latin America in the interwar period

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Abstract

In the following article, we analyze the constitution of various legal categories and the existing articulation that was given to them in the interwar period. In the immediate period after the First World War, the need to organize coexistence between the powers was established. One of the issues inherited from the 19th century and that required a resolution was Slavery. The international organizations resulting from the First World War had different responsibilities, and Slavery was incorporated as central. However, the issue seemed more complicated and it was necessary to deal with the issue of freedom along with the labor issue. Slavery was treated in parallel with forced labor but missing the relationship with poverty. Later, the claims of the colonial countries showed that it was necessary to incorporate a new dimension: native or indigenous work. What seemed simple in principle was presenting an enormous complexity that demanded the entire interwar period to think about alternatives and options that they were imperfect and unsatisfactory for all parties. Finally, we consider how the peripheral countries, specifically Latin America, reacted to these debates on Slavery, forced labor, and indigenous labor

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Introduction

The abolitionist movement led by European abolitionists had sharp importance to ending slavery in the 19th century. However, other forms of compulsory and captive labor relate to continued slavery by other means. In the Treaty of Versailles that ended the First World War, slavery was included as a problem to be solved by mutual agreement between the different countries and the new international agreements. Slavery no longer had any justification for continuing in the colonies and territories controlled by Germany were forced to abolish slavery, a task that corresponded to new tests, as in Articles 21 to 23 of the Versailles Treaty (LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1919).

After the First World War, by the League of Nations (LoN) was created by the Versailles Treaty, to shape a new system of coexistence and peaceful resolution of conflicts. It created a new paradigm in the treatment of relations between countries and in the construction of agreements related to technical and professional issues. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 culminated in several treaties signed between the winning and the defeated states. In all treaties, clause 22 of the Convention of the Treaty of Versailles was included, which established the end of the slave, arms and liquor trade in Africa. Additional agreements on the slave trade, guns, and alcohol were signed in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Article 22 of the Versailles Treaty replaced the treaties of Berlin (1885) and Brussels (1890), eliminated the institutions they created and proposed just and humane forms of work (LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1919).¹ From the agreements established at Versailles, the International Labor Organization (ILO) also emerged. This ILO was designed to improve the general conditions of workers. Despite the abolition of slavery, there were continued problems relating to colonial labor and complaints of slave labor.

Defining Slavery and forced labor was a task that demanded the entire decade of 1920 and involved the emergence of bodies of employees and the engineering of conceptual and legal definitions.

¹ See also MIERS. 2003: pp. 61 – 62.

The general question here is: the word slavery related to real working conditions in the 20th century? This question becomes relevant when we see the profusion of terms used as synonyms or equivalents. Slavery as a historical category was redefined over time. It is a category built from the legal and from Western law, but at the same time, it has been challenged from the experiences that must be included in the legal framework. At the same time, we must think about which groups of people experienced forced labor and how, in order to understand how different groups experienced poverty.

The League of Nations, the International Labor Organization and Slavery

Since its creation in 1919, the League of Nations has treated slavery as trafficking and as a system. The commitments of the LoN to abolition slavery conflicted with its other interests. One of the great ideological justification of colonization was to fight against slavery. These acted as a constant control of what happened in that area. On the road to civilization, abolitionist institutions and organizations could be inconvenient companions. On the other hand, certain institutional duplicity between LoN and the ILO created tensions by having overlapping functions. They had to carry out their tasks on a limited budget, and duplicity meant allocating money to the same tasks. Problems were faced as they appeared, became public or when pressure factors were able to mobilize the institution. Often the League itself depended on the work of others who, in turn, had their agendas. We cannot forget that the investigators were responsible for the countries that made up the LoN administration. For example, the research on sex trafficking carried out in 1924, and 1926 received the support of the American Social Hygiene Bureau (HOUSDEN 2012: 83).

Among the cases that interested the abolitionists were those linked to sexual slavery because they defied the limits of Western morality. These countries, mostly Muslims, where where the West tried to draw borders between 'civilization' and 'barbarism'. The LoN had to deal with the abolitionist pressure and with the refusals of the local administrators to accept the end of sex

trafficking and the abandonment of concubinage. The way to get around the conflict was the transformation from concubinage to the polygyny system (multiple marriages) which was seen by the West as a less objectionable practice (LOVEJOY, and HOGENDORN 1993: 251-260; and RODRÍGUEZ GARCÍA 2014).

To address issues related to trafficking and slavery, the LoN created a specific committee, the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children. Civil society, mainly European, had strong participation in it, imposing European standards as a universal norm. These committees included the United States, even though they were not LoN members. The American action could be official or unofficial, like the actions of the American Social Hygiene Association, which were financed by John D. Rockefeller (KNEPPER 2016: 139-140).

Other practices of trafficking or domestic labor involving children or young people actively mobilized public opinion and abolitionist groups. Three of those practices strongly impacted public opinion in the early 1920s and contributed to the approval of the LoN Slavery Convention: Vudusi or Trokosi, which had its epicenter in the Volta River region in Africa, Devadasi in India, and the Mui Tsai in China. The three can be summarized as delivering children to work in domestic and sexual services. Trokosi, or Vudusi and Devadasi, had these characteristics. Mui Tsai was closer to domestic servitude. Domestic and sexual Slavery remained the responsibility of LoN.

How people thought about slavery in the 1920's

Throughout the 1920s, it was necessary to establish the clear responsibilities of each institution when the definition of slavery was established. Once slavery was formally abolished, other forms of captivity came to light in different parts of the world that had been poorly known by the West. Slavery, as a form of commodity production, and domestic and urban slavery, a by-product of the plantation system, had legally disappeared before the First World War. However, other forms of captivity and exploitation remained.

The subjection of human beings continued with other names, adapting traditions and practices to the actions of the new international organizations, colonial governments, and philanthropic associations. Because of those agreements, domestic slaves came to be called servants, concubines as secondary wives, agrarian slaves to be subject to debt, and so on, continuing to exploit and lose freedom. In these cases, we can see a direct relationship between socioeconomic status and colonial societies. If concubines were incorporated into new families, urban or rural servants were treated as subordinates. The initial debt that caused these conditions of forced labour was the extension of poverty in colonial societies, which resulted from the collapse of traditional societies, which in turn was caused by consequences of the pressures of global imperialism.

In this new situation, the League of Nations and the ILO's responsibilities needed to be established. Part XIII of the Versailles Treaty had to be defined in practice. The LoN dealt with pressure from religious and civil society associations, such as the Anti-Slavery Association (MIERS 2003b: 7), ILO met the demands of unionized workers and entrepreneurs.² These demands were, wages, working conditions, and sick pay, amongst others. Workers' rights were rarely extended to workers who were outside their organizations. Therefore, slavery was in an ambiguous area.

Slavery entered the LoN agenda when it was created. In 1920, at the first LoN Assembly, the Secretary-General asked for a meeting to analyze 'White Slavery', and it took place in June 1921 (LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1920: 180). The call was complemented with a questionnaire sent to all member countries, with questions about criminalized and permitted sexual practices in each country. Among the questions were, for example, whether prostitution was legal. The meeting was attended by 34 countries that recommended abolishing trafficking in women and children and their punishment. An

² The term workers was used to refer to those who were union members and were the ones who had the right to representation.

organization was created with members of the League and advisers from feminist, religious, and hygienist associations. Another measure derived from the meeting was to change the term white slavery to *trafficking in women and children* (LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1921, 432-462).

The LoN approached Slavery more generally in 1922 following a New Zealand petition to pass a resolution to investigate the African situation in general, supported by the Haitian delegation. The petition was due to the British navy capturing an Ethiopian boat carrying slaves, which was considered an affront to the international community (MIERS 2003a: 73-74).

In 1922 and 1923, the League held further consultations on Slavery at this time, including indigenous labor. The reception was not reasonable, given that many countries did not even answer the questions or gave ambiguous answers. Based on this lack of engagement, the LoN leadership decided to create a commission called "Temporary Commission on Slavery" to take measures that would lead to the definitive abolition. In 1923 Nepal and Ethiopia abolished slavery and were the last two countries with legalized practice (MIERS, 2003a, 188-189). For Ethiopia, it meant joining the LON, despite the opposition from Great Britain.³ The exciting thing is that there was still no consensual definition of what slavery was.

The *Temporary Slavery Commission* was recently installed in 1924 and was made up of the central colonial countries of the period: Great Britain, France, Italy, Portugal, The Netherlands, and Belgium. Along with them was an extraordinary member: ILO.⁴ The members were to control each other and the colonial and semi-colonial countries, overseeing the permitted practices of recruiting and retaining workers, without allowing drift into slavery. The Commission's powers were limited because its function was to create legislation, and the ILO member would act as the

external control.

The Temporary Committee's first activity was to analyze national laws, subsequently drafting a convention to be approved by consensus. The commission discussed practices considered to be slavery including: borrowing people to pay debts, servitude, forced marriage, the arranged marriage of children, transferring or adopting children to their farms, debt work and peonage, and the obligation to grow specific products. It was an effort to conceptualize slavery considering all the different possibilities of subjecting people to forced labour, even though not all the forms mentioned implied a permanent deprivation of freedom.⁵

Two years after its actions began, the Temporary Committee was able to approve a version of the convention that would be considered a milestone in international law. Robert Cecil, Viscount of Chelwood, British representative who coordinated the commission, tried unsuccessfully to incorporate debt bondage, domestic bondage, and the adoption of children for domestic work, among others, into the category of slavery, but it was not possible (ALLAIN, 2013, 299-300).

The report said: *Even if, as is possible, these last practice [debt bondage, serfdom, forced marriage, and child exploitation] do not come under the definition of Slavery as it is given in Article 1, the Commission is unanimously of the opinion that they must be combated*, rejected by the majority (LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1926: 1-2).

Committee members understood that the Convention should establish what the word 'slavery' meant. The previous drafts that established the loss of individual freedom as defining slavery were reduced to the property of the person. As it appeared in article 1. compulsory work, was not considered as analogous to slavery since it did not establish permanent bonds. The draft recommended that labour conditions that were similar to Slavery should be avoided by paying for work or by limiting the time allotted to carry out tasks.

³ The continuation of slavery in Ethiopia was the excuse for Italy's failed intervention between 1935 and 1936. For the Ethiopian case see ALLAIN 2012: 200-203 e MIERS 2003a: pp. 73-74.

⁴ The list of members of the Temporary Committee in LEAGUE OF NATIONS: 1925. The ILO representative was its Secretary General: Albert Thomas.

⁵ See MIERS 2003a: pp. 100-121; MIERSb 2003: 7; and ALLAIN 2008: pp. 32-33.

Furthermore, if the tasks performed were for the benefit of the inhabitants of the colonies, they were seen to be characteristic of the 'civilizing' model, bringing benefits to the community, and jointly, to trade and the production of raw materials. In practice, coercive work continued. Committee members defended the colonial interests of European countries and, at the same time, had defined slavery in response to the calls of anti-slavery groups and other organizations that had been active since the 19th century.

The Convention signed in September 1926 consists of 12 articles that define slavery as the property of the person. The effort aimed to consolidate the relationship between slavery and property, disregarding the other forms of captivity mentioned during the preparatory work and by the abolitionists, as is possible to understand in the articles of the Convention we analyze here:

Article 1.

For the purpose of the present Convention, the following definitions are agreed upon:

- (1) Slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.*
- (2) The slave trade includes all acts involved in the capture, acquisition or disposal of a person with intent to reduce him to Slavery; all acts involved in the acquisition of a slave with a view to selling or exchanging him; all acts of disposal by sale or exchange of a slave acquired with a view to being sold or exchanged, and, in general, every act of trade or transport in slaves.*

Article 1 defined slavery as the property of a person, but Article 2 opened another interpretive possibility, which considered the previous debates of the Temporary Committee, such as those related to an arranged marriage, serfdom, debt peonage, and others.

Article 2.

The High Contracting Parties undertake, each in respect of the territories placed under its sovereignty, jurisdiction, protection, suzerainty or tutelage, so far as they have not already taken the necessary steps:

- (a) To prevent and suppress the slave trade*
- (b) To bring about, progressively and as soon as possible, the complete abolition of Slavery in all its forms.*

The Temporary Committee had to accept that some forms of captivity were rejected by some European countries, such as forced labor in the colonies. For the progress of the territory, colonial governments should have the right to demand that certain activities of their inhabitants be carried out (DRESCHER 2012: 99). Article 2 drew attention to other forms of captivity that could lead to Slavery.

Article 5 recognized the existence of forms considered to be forced or compulsory labor, but with no direct relation to Slavery. In the Convention, it was stated that forced labor should not create *forms analogous to Slavery*, which paved the way for specific interpretations about the relationship between slave and forced labor:

Article 5

The High Contracting Parties recognise that recourse to compulsory or forced labour may grave consequences and undertake, each in respect of the territories "placed under its sovereignty, jurisdiction, protection, suzerainty or tutelage, to take all necessary measures to prevent compulsory or forced labour from developing into conditions analogous to Slavery. It is agreed that:

- (1) Subject to the transitional provisions laid down in paragraph (2) below, compulsory or forced labour may only be exacted for public purposes.*
- (2) In territories in which compulsory or forced labour for other than public purposes still survives, the High Contracting Parties shall endeavour progressively and as soon as possible to put an end to the practice. So long as such forced or compulsory labour exists, this labour shall invariably be of an exceptional character, shall always receive adequate remuneration, and shall not involve the removal of the labourers from their usual place of residence.*
- (3) In all cases, the responsibility for any recourse to compulsory or forced labour shall rest with the competent central authorities of the territory concerned. (LoN 1926b: 263)*

The Convention did not end slavery, but it

represents a crucial momentum in the fight against slavery because, until that time, the “Colonial Clause” allowed the continued subjection of people (Maul 2012: 23-27).

In 1930 before a complaint about slavery in Liberia, the Temporary Committee returned to discussing the person’s property in the definition of Slavery. The understanding of slavery ended up being relaxed because it was difficult to apply. In 1936 the Convention was discussed again, establishing that bondage and debt work was a situation analogous to slavery and not slavery itself. Part of the conquests was left aside to serve the colonizing countries (Allain 2012: 203).

The approval of the Slavery Convention did not imply the elimination of forced labor, women and children’s trafficking, or other forms of the subjugation of people. What it did was to provide a legal and normative definition that could be applied by central and colonial governments.

Slavery seemed in Western definitions to be a cultural phenomenon, a product of a civilization's perceived backwardness. In reality, what the Convention did not consider was the societal and economic dislocation caused by colonial domination and capitalist production in traditional societies. These disrupted the existing society and caused outbreaks of poverty. Traditional inhabitants needed to access goods and services through the market, but they did not even receive wages and became clients on the local labor supply. Poverty conditioned people’s entry into the labor market and forced. At the same time, forced the submission to those who controlled resources that were previously common access.

Forced Labor and the ILO

Once LoN approved the Slavery Convention, debates focused on the forms of forced labor mentioned in article 5. The authorities had the right to demand compulsory labor in case of public utility that was acceptable whenever it was temporary, paid, and the worker did not have to change residence. Compulsory work was a colonial reality. As it concerns labor, this issue was referred to the ILO, reinforcing that the use of forced labor should not become a form analogous to Slavery, which was placed in the preamble of

the Convention and Article 5 (International Labor Organization 1930b).

Forced labor was of concern to both workers and employers because part of the workforce was diverted to the enjoyment of some rural entrepreneurs who received a certain number of workers and unbalanced the colonial labor market (Alcock 1971: 19-23).

ILO’s interest was centered on free labor, and its rights. In the debates for the approval of a Convention that deals with forced labor, the word “Slave” was not used as a specific category, but rhetorically. If the League dealt with the issue of loss of freedom and Slavery as the property of human beings, ILO looked at how work resulted in the temporary loss of worker freedom. “Ownership” seems to be the keyword to distinguish between the two perspectives. Forced labor, with all the limitations mentioned above, had been recognized as crucial to achieving an adequate degree of civilization, the other keyword.⁶

The ILO was not interested in slavery even when the secretary general, Albert Thomas, joined the Temporary Committee, as we have seen before. However, when the Slavery Convention was approved, Article 5 obliged ILO to address the issue. The mention of “forced labor” was related to conditions similar to those of slavery. ILO, which was financially dependent and reported to the League, took a stand on the matter. Until that moment, his efforts were focused on urban and industrial work. None of the conventions or resolutions considered rural, colonial, or any form of subjection linked to the labor sphere.⁷ From 1926, ILO started to consider indigenous, native, or colonial workers, that is, workers were forgotten by colonialism, to deal with forced labor and going beyond the colonial clause of LON. The Colonial Clause created a double standard between corresponding to the metropolises and the colonies. As the Italian representative, Di

⁶ In the Conventions, Recommendations and Resolutions the term used by ILO was “forced labor”.

⁷ In the book published by ILO to commemorate its first ten years, this lack and the emphasis “... in economically advanced countries instead of tropical countries” was recognized, see INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE 1931: p. 221.

Palma Castiglione would say, amid a dispute over the accreditation of countries defeated in World War I:

“Our organization should therefore be open to all nations which have reached that degree of development which makes them feel their responsibility in these matters we are discussing, and that membership should not be limited eventually in any way by territorial or colonial considerations.” (International Labor Organization 1919: 85).

For Castiglione, it was essential to define the degree of development and responsibility, regardless of what type of administrative control was exercised in the territory. These policies concerned some of the English colonies that were the ones that could claim development and responsibilities, characteristic of civilization.

Once LoN approved the Convention against slavery, ILO opened the debate on forced labor leading to a new front of research and laws. Forced labor was reduced to a colonial issue by government officials, arguing that it did not affect metropolises or independent countries. The defense of metropolitan countries was in the very constitution of the League of Nations than in art. 22 of the League of Nations Convention and in art. 421 of the Versailles Treaty placed them as guardians of countries that we are unable to govern themselves. This article gave them the prerogative to decide which legislation approved by ILO could or could not be applied to each regional reality, that is what we know as the Colonial Clause. See article 421 of Part XIII of the Versailles Treaty:

Article 421

The Members engage to apply conventions which they have ratified in accordance with the provisions of this Part of the present Treaty to their colonies, protectorates and possessions which are not fully self-governing:

- 1.- Except where owing to the local conditions the Convention is inapplicable, or
- 2.- Subject to such modifications as may be necessary to adapt the Convention to local conditions.

And each of the Members shall notify to the International Labour Office the action taken in

respect of each of its colonies, protectorates and possessions which are not fully self-governing. (LoN, 1919).

The debates showed that there was a related category that needed to be resolved along with forced labor: ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ work. They were called indigenous workers were because they were not Europeanized or the aborigines of the European colonies in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Nevertheless, this opened up a front of conflict with representatives from Latin America. To use this category seemed to be contrary to the liberal spirit of its National Constitutions, where citizenship corresponded to all citizens. This position prevailed until the crisis of 1929. From that moment on, the denomination of indigenous labor started to have connotations specific to the region. Therefore, it presented a more complex reality that demanded different treatments. (Ferrerias 2012: 305-324).

The ILO tried to assimilate forced labor to indigenous labor by relating both to specialized workers who were not part of the labor market. Although they were not proletarians, they were in the process of proletarianization. This condition of impermanence created a certain tension expressed by the dichotomy civilizing-preserving: Did civilizing and educating imply racial breakdown through incorporation into the labor market? Or should native communities be preserved? This question was not the question of businessmen or colonial countries that had their own: How to add value to the colonies without work? How to civilize an entire continent without workers? Free labor within the market system was seen as the necessary condition to bring development and civilization to colonial territories. That was an issue that ILO needed to consider.⁸

The approval of the 1926 Slavery Convention led ILO to step up work to achieve specific legislation for cases of compulsory labor. The League

⁸ In the commemorative book of the first decade of ILO, the need to consider the different factors involved in the hiring of these workers from the family economy to the native customs was presented, given that the hiring of any worker in a community implied its entire reconfiguration. Ver INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION 1931: 222 e 223.

Convention dealt with the property of human being, and ILO should be concerned with recruiting and coercive forms of worker control. From 1922 onwards, the board of directors began to gather information on the subject to support its decisions. The next step was the creation of a group in 1926, the same year that the League approved the Slave Labor Convention, and as a consequence of that approval.⁹

The 1926 ILO Conference proposed to research forced labor among indigenous people in Africa and America. The research would correspond to the Native Labor Committee, making it clear that the topic was a colonial or semi-colonial issue. Latin American delegates rejected that initiative for the region because they denied the existence of forced labor, arguing that that issue could not be restricted just to these two continents.

The reason why Latin Americans rejected the research was given by the Brazilian government delegate, Fonseca de Montarroyos: "...dans toute l'Amérique latine, il n'existe pas de main-d'oeuvre de couleur ni de main-d'oeuvre indigène. Ce qui existe, e'est de la main-d'oeuvre tout simplement. Que les hommes soient noirs, jaunes, de toutes les couleurs que vous voudrez, bleus, verts, cette distinction n'existe pas. Tous sont des citoyens. Par conséquent, nous ne pouvons accepter d'aucune façon cette proposition. Elle pêche par sa base même, c'est-à-dire par son affirmation. Je conteste cette affirmation."¹⁰ According to him, slavery could be a colonial reality, but it had no relation to American countries.

The natives of the colonies showed no interest in entering the labor market or considering European producers' demands, so select measures had to be taken.¹¹ The justification was

that without indigenous labor, it was not possible to sustain the colonial administration and, therefore, lead the natives to 'civilization'. Civilization implied working beyond simple survival, so the natives would have to work.

The solution was to resort to certain forms of coercion, such as the militarization of workers, compulsory work, community work, and other denominations that implied service to the colonial state. At the same time, other measures were sanctioned, such as limits on the ownership of community land or laws to repress vagrancy. Extra-economic coercion was not accepted by the natives even though it was a road to progress. They were refractory to free labor, making it difficult for colonial administrators to act. Force ended up being the central resource for recruiting workers. In 1925 in both Syria and Lebanon, the locals organized revolts against compulsory practices for the benefit of metropolitan governments. Albert Thomas identified a causal relationship between revolts and exploitation (LoN 1926c: 443).

To force aborigines to work, practices were devised that would allow the colonies to be valued. Forced labor was also used in agriculture, industry, and commerce (LoN, 1926c: 438-442). Forced labor benefited vast sectors, from local business people to metropolitans, through bankers, industrialists, and even workers in the metropolis, whose cost of living was made cheaper by the consumption of colonial commodities (Hobsbawm 1984). Colonial workers were to be protected, but they could not remain outside civilization. Official regulations established that natives should be encouraged to work, without stimulation the work would not be voluntary, as it appeared in a French report: "...nous avons le devoir de ne faire appel à la main-d'œuvre forcée que dans les limites vraiment humaines et hautement rémunératrices. Un indigène comprend forte bien cela, et il ne tient aucune rigueur à celui qui, le forçant au travail, du même coup prend en main ses intérêts pécuniaires".¹²

⁹ See INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE, 1924: p. 737; and INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE 1931: p. 223.

¹⁰ Translation: "... throughout Latin America, there is no color workforce of indigenous work. What exists is the workforce. That men are black, yellow, any color they want, blue, green, this distinction does not exist. They are all citizens. Therefore, we cannot accept the proposal in any way. It signs on the same basis, that is, on its affirmation. I contest that statement". Montarroyos' position was followed by delegates from Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Uruguay, and Venezuela. LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1926: pp. 263-264.

¹¹ On the value of indigenous labor MAUL 2012: 479. To understand this tension and the difficulties in finding work within the parameters of the market, see: BECKERT 2005.

¹² This text is part of the French report on colonies entitled "Extrait du Rapport politique 769 de septembre 1920 au sujet de la main-d'œuvre" *Apud* FALL 1993: p. 13.

Latin Americans, who rejected the category of indigenous labor throughout the 1920s, based their denial on the fact that aboriginal communities were not isolated from national society.¹³ They did not reject the civilizing process, they claimed control over the process. The same was seen in Japan and India. Government delegates from these countries refuted the criticisms made by labor delegates or those from other countries, reaffirming their path towards civilization, understood as industrialization and adaptation to Western labor parameters.¹⁴ The claim to control the process also implied regulating the forms of work, including forced labor.

ILO had to regulate the way it recruited workers in the colonies, reaching an agreement between the different colonial countries, be they formal or informal colonies, or independent countries like Liberia, for example. This regulation was based on the above mentioned Native Labor Code, which was associated with the Colonial Clause (Maul 2012: 23-27), and aimed to civilize native workers through work. This paternalistic and Darwinian reading of colonial territories would be complemented later by forming an informal Code for indigenous workers through conventions and recommendations approved during the 1930s.¹⁵

Finally, ILO discussed forced labor in 1929. The process was initiated by proposing research on the topic. Latin American members decided not to

participate in the Committee that discussed the Convention and underestimated this measure.

The 1929 debates for consulting on indigenous and forced labor are central to understanding the arguments about what should be considered forced labor. The 1929 LIC discussed five issues that could be included in the questionnaire: 1) work for community authorities; 2) the relationship between forced labor and taxes; 3) freedom of association and unionization; 4) the number of hours that should be worked, and 5) the creation of an instance of control of forced labor. In this study, the socioeconomic situation of those affected by forced labor was not considered, as well as poverty was not considered as one of its main causes.

After these debates, ILO was able to approve Convention No. 29, "On Forced Labor," in 1930. The debates were difficult, to the point that a large number of delegates voted against it. The number of abstentions or absences was also significant. Of the eight great colonial powers, five governments were in favor (Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Holland, and Spain) and three against (Belgium, France, and Portugal). The Portuguese position was based on a question of principles but France and Belgium resorted to small bureaucratic obstacles, such as that community work were not limited to sixty days or the possibility of using the Armed Forces in public works (International Labor Organization 1930a: 333).

Along with Convention 29, two other legal instruments were approved that would be considered as part of the Native Labor Code, Recommendations No. 35 "Forced Labor (Indirect Compulsion)" and No. 36 "Forced Labor (Regulation)." ILO Central Administration intended to deal with the colonial worker contract and its duration to clarify and delimit what coercion was. However, the opposition of the French delegation prevented further progress in the matter.

Forced Labor in the Americas

Colonial countries stipulated the agendas and approaches that would be dealt within international organizations, but there were other possibilities for understanding labor and Slavery. In the case of Latin American countries, ILO ended

¹³ Uruguain delegate, César Charlone, claimed that at least in his country there were no more indigenous people, just as the Argentine delegate, Manuel Pinto, defended the thesis that the signing of the ILO Constitution was understood as a way of not establishing differences between the different groups of workers. See LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1926a: pp. 267-268.

¹⁴ See, for example, the defence of Japan's government delegate, Mr. Takada, on working conditions in his country and the relationship with the advance of industrialization, INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE 1919: p. 159.

¹⁵ The conventions approved in the period are as follows: C029 - Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29); C050 - Recruiting of Indigenous Workers Convention, 1936 (No. 50); C064 - Contracts of Employment (Indigenous Workers) Convention, 1939 (No. 64); C065 - Penal Sanctions (Indigenous Workers) Convention, 1939 (No. 65). The Recommendations are: R035 - Forced Labour (Indirect Compulsion) Recommendation, 1930 (No. 35); R036 - Forced Labour (Regulation) Recommendation, 1930 (No. 36); R058 - Contracts of Employment (Indigenous Workers) Recommendation, 1939 (No. 58); R059 - Labour Inspectorates (Indigenous Workers) Recommendation, 1939 (No. 59).

up having to reformulate part of the metropolitan perspectives, and address the indigenous issue as it was understood by these countries, separating this nomenclature from forced labor. After the approval of Convention 29, "On Forced Labor," the governments of Latin America tried to disconnect the indigenous issue of forced labor. The indigenous issue would be increasingly Latin American heritage and forced labor a colonial issue. The nomenclature, or the establishment of a particular legal subject, made the best way out for Latin America was to highlight its peculiarity by redefining what should be considered as "indigenous." During the first decade of ILO's existence, the words "indigenous," "native," and "colonial" were used interchangeably, but it was necessary to stabilize the meaning of these terms, refine the analysis and incorporate ethnographic studies to define the categories better (FERRERAS 2012).

As a whole, America maintained a strained relationship with the Geneva system, mainly with LON. The United States actively participated in creating the League, but Congress never ratified the 1919 agreements. Mexico was not invited to participate in creating the activities of the League of Nations, and Argentina and Brazil had moments of approximation and disputes with Geneva. These two countries signed the Versailles Treaty initially; however, Argentina withdrew in 1921 in response to the lack of full integration of all sovereign countries, and Brazil left the League in 1928 for not getting a seat on the Board of Directors. Argentina reincorporated in 1933, Brazil never returned, and Mexico was admitted in 1931. Therefore, none of these countries participated in the debates related to the Convention on Slavery, approved in 1930. The regional representation in the debate was on account of Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela (LEUCHARS 2001: 123-124).

Due to its technical characteristics, ILO managed to retain the members of America and integrated those who were not part of the LON. Mexico joined ILO and LoN in 1931. In 1934 the F.D. Roosevelt joined ILO only, in a gesture of rapprochement with Geneva. The United States' relationship with ILO had its moments of tension.

Americans complained about the issues they were asking, as well as of the lack of interest in the Americas.

For this reason, the region's representations in the ILC were generally incomplete, and the annual payments for maintaining the institutions were inconsistent. From this ambiguous relationship, a series of meetings specific to American countries arose with the auspices of ILO. In these meetings, called the Conferences of the American member countries of ILO, the problems they understood to be their own and different from other regions were raised. At these meetings, those practices that could be considered forced labor in the region were discussed (Ferreras 2015).

Two American Conferences from ILO member countries were held in the interwar period. The first in Santiago de Chile in 1936 and the second in Lima in 1939. The agenda established that specific and regionally rooted forms of forced labor should be analyzed. At the Santiago de Chile meeting, a form of work obligation that affected all types of workers was analyzed, which was the so-called Truck System or debt peonage. In that same meeting, parameters were also established. The need to understand the specific forms of work of the indigenous population in the Americas was presented, with studies on the particular being carried out, especially the relationship with agriculture.

Therefore, throughout this article, we have seen that slavery, forced labor, and indigenous labor have been transformed over the interwar period within international organizations. In the Americas, the loads established for indigenous workers were slowly abolished. The last country to abolish this practice was Bolivia during the Revolution of 1952. Therefore, for American countries, it was necessary to move from doctrinal liberalism to a socioeconomic understanding of the reality of the population of indigenous origin. While for international organizations, a better understanding of the reality of member countries that were outside the nuclear region and had no colonial interests was needed.

Conclusion

Forced labor had a socio-economic component that cannot be forgotten. Who was subjected to forced labor? What were the victims of this practice? Legal studies do not concern the origin of victims because they are universally thought about, although it always underlines that they may be the target of these practices. To advance on the issue in Latin America, we have to look at reports, research and narratives on the topic and present who were the victims of this crime. It is impossible to cover all of Latin America, but we will mention a few cases that reveal the relationship between poverty and Forced Labor in that region.

Each of the complaints made about forced labor in the first decades of the 20th century in Latin America presented the living conditions of workers and we can see a previous depletion that led to the exploitation of labor in a captive labor regime. Before constructing the international legal framework, a series of reports circulated in Latin America that brought data on the constitution of groups of workers in conditions similar to slavery. Some of these reports are *El Informe Sobre la situación de las Clases Obreras en el interior de la Argentina* by the Spanish Juan Biale Massé (1904), *À Margem da História on the Amazon region of Brazil* by Euclídes da Cunha (1909), *Mexico Bárbaro* by American journalist John Kenneth Turner and *El Dolor Paraguayo* of Spanish Rafael Barret (both from 1911), among several others.

The authors mentioned were journalists and writers, except for Biale Massé, a physician, who conducted field research on the lives of workers on behalf of the Argentine government. The main concern was to denounce practices that they considered aberrant, and for that, it was necessary to mobilize society against them. All the cases referred to the relationship between the work of harvesting wild products and the conditions similar to slavery in which the workers were, who were mostly indigenous or mestizos, and took place in regions far from large urban centers: the forests of Yucatan, in the Amazon, Paraguay, and Argentina.

Conditions analogous to slavery were possible because workers were dispossessed of their means of production, which caused these workers to suffer a process of impoverishment. As these workers were mostly indigenous, they first needed to be expelled from their place where they provided the elements for food, clothing, and other products for exchanges with national societies. This loss of resources caused severe cases of impoverishment. The situation will continue with each report on indigenous or rural workers' living conditions. Latin American societies were urbanized and industrialized, but in contrast to the rural sector, forced labor continued as the primary way of organizing labor.

Poverty was a consequence of the free market system's implementation because it implied the alienation of workers' subsistence means and the spread of debt as a way of obtaining food, clothing, work tools, etc. The debt was the form of disciplining workers in marginal regions. The systems of forced labor changed from place to place, had different denominations in each country. At the base of all of them were the debt and the impoverishment of the worker. This poverty could have different characteristics from place to place. In all cases, it was evident in the loss of quality of housing and the obligation to live in places defined by the boss, in monotonous and scarce food, and the limitation of the worker's autonomy. The indebtedness had the consequence of the obligation to produce what the boss determined, in most cases products extracted from the forests.

The reduction of indigenous and traditional communities to poverty was not a concern of international organizations in the inter-war period, but it was a necessary component for the imposition of new living conditions and the loss of productive autonomy for rural workers. Poverty was the previous step towards forced labor in Latin America and the production of those commodities available on the new productive frontiers. International organizations were not interested in this issue because it was related to each society or because it was not a concern in central countries. The depletion of workers is a debt of international organizations in this period

and less of a concern because of the impossibility of regulating issues related to formal work.

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