

CEUB

EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR

ISSN 2237-1036

REVISTA DE DIREITO INTERNACIONAL
BRAZILIAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

**The Ghosts in our Products:
Slave Labor in Brazil portrayed in
Renato Barbieri's documentary
'Servidão'**

Nitish Monebhurrun

VOLUME 21 • N. 2 • 2024
INTERNATIONAL LAW FOOD

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The Ghosts in our Products: Slave Labor in Brazil portrayed in Renato Barbieri's documentary 'Servidão'

Nitish Monebhurrin*

1 Introduction

Servidão is a 75-minute documentary directed by the award-winning Brazilian producer Renato Barbieri. The title *Servidão* translates to “serfdom” or “bonded labor” in English, encapsulating the core subject of the film: modern slavery. Barbieri's documentary unearths a global issue that has deeply permeated Brazilian society since the abolition of slavery in 1888, the year Brazil became the last nation in the Americas to officially end the institution¹. As the documentary's preamble suggests, the day after slavery was abolished, modern forms of slavery began to take root², highlighting an ongoing and unresolved relationship between Brazilian society and exploitative labor practices.

Renato Barbieri is a socially conscious producer whose body of work—comprising both feature films and documentaries—aims to engage audiences on critical social issues. His approach compels viewers to confront uncomfortable realities, urging them to reflect on their collective responsibility in perpetuating or condoning the exploitation of slave labor. In this regard, *Servidão* serves as a mirror, confronting the audience with the pervasive presence of modern slavery in contemporary society.

As an award-winning documentary that has been showcased at numerous international film festivals³, *Servidão* is a powerful docudrama that she-

¹ Brazil officially abolished slavery on the 13th May 1888 by adopting the Aurea Statute. See also: Bales K. (2016) *Blood and Earth. Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, p.175.

² Sakamoto L. (2020), 'O trabalho escravo contemporâneo', in, Sakamoto L. (ed.), *Escravidão contemporânea*, São Paulo: Contexto, p.8.

³ *Servidão* won two awards, namely the 15^o Trinidad + Tobago Film Festival 2020 (Trinidad and Tobago) and the 25^o Rencontres du Cinéma Sud-Américain de Marseille et sa Région 2023 (France). It was showed at the following film festivals: 2nd Festival FIXE 2022 (Brazil); 7th Festival Internacional de Cine de Guayaquil 2021 (Ecuador); 12th FIA CINEFRONT -Festival Internacional Amazônida de Cinema de Fronteira 2021 (Brazil); 29th Ecocine – Festival Internacional de Cinema Ambiental e Direitos Humanos 2021 (Brazil); Festival Estação Virtual – 35 anos de Cinema Brasileiro 2021 (Brazil); 12th The Rânov Film and Histories Festival 2021 (Romania); 6th Santos Film Fest – Festival de Cinema de Santos 2021 (Brazil); 7th LECYT – Festival de Cine y Televisión Reino de León 2020 (Spain); 14th Marda Loop Justice Film Festival 2020 (Canada); 6th Festival Amazônia Doc 2020 (Brazil); 29th International Festival of Ethnological Film 2020 (Serbia); 7th FLACQ – Festival de Cine Latinoamericano de Quito 2020 (Ecuador); 7th Festival de Cinema de Caruaru 2020 (Brazil); 15th Harlem International Film Festival 2020 (United States); 43th Festival Guarnicê de Cinema 2020 (Brazil); 14th Alexandria Film Festival 2020 (United States); 11th Festival Utopia de Cinema Português 2020 (United Kingdom); 14th Atlantidoc – Festival Internacional de Cine Documental del Uruguay 2020 (Uruguay); 9th Mostra Audiovisual Wallace Leal Valentin Rodrigues 2020 (Brazil); 11th Festival Pachamama – Cinema de Fronteira 2020 (Brazil); 10th FICIP – Festival Internacional de Cine Político 2020 (Argentina); 26th Afrika Film Festival 2020 (Belgium); 52nd Festival de Brasília do Cinema Brasileiro 2019 – Mostra “Território Brasil” (Brazil); 24th Inffinito Brazilian Film Festival 2019 (United States).

* PhD-International Law (Sorbonne Law School, France); Tenured Law Professor (University Center of Brasília, Brasil).
E-mail: nitish.monebhurrin@ceub.edu.br

ds light on the “invisible” forms of exploitation in the modern world. Two forms of invisibility are central to the documentary’s narrative. The first is the direct invisibility of enslaved workers, whose labor is concealed within the value chains of everyday consumer products. The second, more subtle form of invisibility, concerns the corporations and business entities that profit from such exploitation, positioned further downstream in the value chain but benefiting directly from these hidden labor practices.

This review will explore both of these invisibilities—those of the exploited laborers and the corporations that profit from their work. The subsequent sections will analyze (2) the portrayal of modern enslaved workers in *Servidão* and (3) the exploitation of their labor as a source of added profit for downstream companies.

2 The invisible modern slaves portrayed in ‘Servidão’

There are hidden “ghosts” embedded in many of the products we consume, products that are sometimes the result of modern-day slavery. These are workers reduced to a state of servitude through unpaid and forced labor, inhumane and degrading working conditions, restricted freedom of movement, debt bondage, overt surveillance, and the retention of personal documents to coerce workers into remaining at their places of employment. These conditions are outlined in Article 149 of the Brazilian Criminal Code as indicators of slave labor. In Brazil, the legal category of ‘slave labor’ extends beyond and encompasses forced labor. Key value chains in Brazil known to be tainted by traces of slave labor include, but are not limited to, the meat, coffee, sugar, steel, and textile industries. These slave-contaminated products are not confined to the domestic market; many are exported and can be found on supermarket shelves around the world.

Renato Barbieri’s documentary *Servidão* provides critical insight into the modus operandi used to lure workers into situations of slavery. The film outlines the profiles of workers who typically come from impoverished backgrounds in remote areas of Brazil, where they are recruited by agents — known as *gatos*⁴ — who pro-

mise them decent wages and good working conditions⁵. Desperate due to their extreme poverty, these workers accept the offer. They then embark on journeys of hundreds or even thousands of kilometers, often traveling by chartered buses or trucks, to their new workplaces, which are typically isolated farms or factories located in Brazil’s interior countryside. Upon arrival, their documents are confiscated, and they are provided with basic tools and equipment. At this point, their initial hope begins to transform into an unrelenting nightmare.

The workers are housed in overcrowded and unsanitary dormitories, often lacking potable water. In some instances, they are forced to drink and bathe from ponds used by the farm’s animals. Their meals are minimal, and their physical well-being deteriorates rapidly. Trapped in a cycle of bondage and malnutrition — oftentimes in farms — the workers rarely exhibit the Orwellian desire for revolt or rebellion. One notable case described in the documentary involves a farm where potable water is stored in reserved tanks, but the workers are denied access to it. Instead, the water is reserved exclusively for the animals — usually cows. When the workers attempt to claim their wages at the end of the month, they are informed that their earnings have been diverted to cover inflated costs for transportation, tools, food, and lodging⁶. This debt trap locks them into a cycle of servitude, leaving them with no escape unless and until they are rescued.

In the context of the meat value chain, for example, the animality of the cows seems to outweigh the humanity of the workers. *Servidão* uncovers the lives of these workers, exposing the process through which what is presented to them as an opportunity turns out to be a path to enslavement⁷. Renato Barbieri presents a stark portrayal of their ‘social death’, a concept coined by Orlando Patterson, who described the slave as “ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable

dos principais atores envolvidos no trabalho escravo rural no Brasil, ILO Publication, p.15 (available at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@americas/@ro-lima/@ilo-brasilia/documents/publication/wcms_227533.pdf)

⁵ This supply side of the slave labor is discussed in: Hess D. (2021), ‘Modern Slavery in Global Supply Chains: Towards a Legislative Solution’, *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol.54, no. 2, p.250.

⁶ See also Kevin Bales’ report (Chapter entitled ‘As with Trees, so with Men’) in: Bales K. (2016) *Blood and Earth. Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, p.185.

⁷ Bales K. (2016) *Blood and Earth. Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, p.24.

⁴ Bales K. (2016) *Blood and Earth. Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, p.184; ILO, *Perfil*

as the master wished”⁸. *Servidão* focuses on a modern-day workforce that is ‘imprintable’, ‘disposable’, and, crucially, invisible.

In the vast geographical expanse of Brazil, which is roughly the size of a continent, these workers are pushed into invisibility. The farms that recruit them are often situated deep in the countryside, isolated from broader society. Slave labor is, therefore, supply-driven: impoverished workers, often from the hinterlands, are desperate for any form of income and accept employment under subhuman conditions⁹. These workers are so isolated that even if they were to escape, they would likely be unable to find their way to the nearest town or village, due to the remoteness of the locations. Cases of modern slavery only come to light when they are reported to the authorities — sometimes anonymously. However, even when workers are rescued, some experience re-enslavement, as depicted in *Servidão*. The documentary highlights the curious case of a worker who had been enslaved thirteen times in the northeastern region of Brazil. Due to the harsh living conditions and high unemployment rates in the region’s rural areas, slave labor is supply-driven: people are willing to work for below-minimum wages in exchange for the mere possibility of survival. The forces of supply are matched by the demand pressures from downstream industries, where cheap labor increases the profit margins for the invisible forces that control and manage these exploitative value chains.

3 The Invisible Forces Benefiting from Slave Labor as Inferred by the Documentary *Servidão*

The documentary *Servidão* alludes to a series of invisible forces that benefit from the exploitation of slave labor, specifically large landowners and private corporations that typically operate within national and global value chains. While these entities are not overtly highlighted in the documentary — hence their characterization as ‘invisible’ in this article — their involvement is inferred through the broader socio-economic dynamics

presented. The enslaved workers depicted in the film are often found in isolated, remote agricultural settings where their labor is exploited to produce goods or raw materials that are subsequently purchased by both domestic and international companies as part of global supply chains.

The use of underpaid or unpaid labor provides these corporations with a competitive advantage by lowering production costs, thus contributing to their profitability¹⁰. This is a known as the demand side of slave labor¹¹. The documentary highlights the widespread demand for goods produced through such exploitative labor practices, including commodities such as meat, coffee, sugar, cotton, soy, wine, steel, cocoa, and textiles. These products, whether sold in domestic or international markets, carry with them the legacy of enslaved labor, as do the profits generated by the companies involved. From a legal standpoint, these profits may constitute either illegal or unjust enrichment.

A critical aspect of modern slave labor lies in the complex, fragmented nature of global supply chains, wherein corporations at various stages often attempt to distance themselves from the responsibility for human rights abuses. Through outsourcing, companies in the downstream segments of these chains frequently evade liability for crimes or damages committed upstream. The intricate structure of corporate entities — each with its own legal personality — complicates the potential for holding the parent company accountable for abuses occurring elsewhere along the value chain. Despite recent legal efforts, such as the European Union Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (2024), which aims to address this issue, legal frameworks remain insufficiently binding to resolve the problem comprehensively.

While due diligence obligations are becoming more widely discussed, particularly for transnational corporations, binding regulation is still lacking. Consequently, corporate networks — including companies, financial institutions, banks, shareholders, and investors — continue to benefit, albeit indirectly, from slave labor embedded within their supply chains. This situation mirrors

⁸ Patterson O. (1982) *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp.7-8.

⁹ Suzuki N. and Plassat X., ‘O perfil dos sobreviventes’, in, Sakamoto L. (ed.), *Escravidão contemporânea*, São Paulo: Contexto, pp.90-91.

¹⁰ Sakamoto L. (2020), ‘O trabalho escravo contemporâneo’, in, Sakamoto L. (ed.), *Escravidão contemporânea*, São Paulo: Contexto, p.11.

¹¹ Mcgrath S. and Mieres F., ‘Escravo contemporâneo: um negócio lucrativo e global’, in, Sakamoto L. (ed.), *Escravidão contemporânea*, São Paulo: Contexto, p.131.

the interconnected 'network of interests' that fueled the transatlantic slave trade of the 19th century, which involved a vast array of stakeholders such as commercial agents, suppliers, insurance companies, shippers, banks, and religious institutions¹². In the case of modern slavery, a similarly complex network exists, although the business and financial entities at the downstream end of the chain are less likely to directly orchestrate or oversee the enslavement process as was the case in the past. At times, these entities may remain unaware of the presence of slave labor in their supply chains, raising the question of whether stricter and more effective due diligence laws are required. In other instances, they may engage in a form of willful blindness, choosing not to confront the issue despite clear indications of its existence. In either case, holding these companies legally accountable remains a significant challenge.

In this context, *Servidão* invites reflection on the need for reform within both corporate structures and the broader production and market systems that enable these exploitative practices to persist with impunity. The documentary underscores the complicity of consumers, who, in seeking competitively priced products, often overlook or remain indifferent to the exploitation embedded in their production. By tacitly accepting the existence of slave labor in supply chains, consumers also somehow contribute to the normalization of modern slavery.

In preparing this review, I interviewed Renato Barbieri, the director of *Servidão*, to gain insight into the objectives he hoped the documentary would achieve. His response provides a poignant conclusion to this reflection:

"I hope that *Servidão* will offer the public and policymakers a historical understanding of how slavery is perpetuated in a country that remains colonial in its social and economic structures. I created this film to provide a 'familiar and personal historical' perspective, helping people realize that racism and the mentality of slavery are legacies of a colonial project that continues to influence Brazilian society. If the film can achieve this, particularly for the most marginalized members of society, then *Servidão* will have fulfilled its purpose."

¹² Gomes L. (2019) *Escravidão. Vol.1. Do primeiro leilão de cativos em Portugal até a morte de Zumbi dos Palmares*, Rio de Janeiro: Globo Livros, pp.223-224.

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