

Book review. *Vida e Obra do Comendador Montenegro. Um Lousãense visionário no Brasil*, by Sônia Maria de Freitas (2013).

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The book "*Vida e Obra do Comendador Montenegro. Um Lousãense visionário no Brasil*", by Prof. Sonia Maria de Freitas, is a biographical account about João Elisário de Carvalho Montenegro. Even if highly praised by his contemporaneous, Montenegro is a relatively less known figure in the Brazilian historiography –except by the more classical studies–, despite his many contributions to technological adoption, contractual innovations in Brazilian labor markets, and active participation in benefit associations. Prof. Freitas' book is thus a welcomed work. It will consolidate as an important reference to scholars interested in the transition from slavery in Brazil; foster research about labor organizations in Latin American plantations; and provide a pleasant reading to a broader audience.

Born in Portugal, the future Comendador Montenegro immigrated to Brazil in 1841 as a salesman and later became a prominent figure in the transition from slavery. Montenegro settled in the municipality of Espírito Santo do Pinhal, in the countryside of São Paulo, where he



owned and operated a coffee plantation exclusively with immigrant labor hired in Lousã, in Portugal, his village of origin. The labor regime proposed by Montenegro was innovative and similar to a modern wage system – a fundamental contractual innovation in an economy then mostly based on slavery. Montenegro became also a distinguished public figure by his humanist and progressive views, which he translated into an active participation in benefit organizations on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly with contributions to the construction and maintenance of hospitals, schools, and libraries.

Prof. Freitas presents a chronological account of the life of Montenegro, which is contextualized by historical circumstances in the village of Lousã, in Portugal, and of Espírito Santo do Pinhal, in Brazil. The historical analysis is fluidly connected to the biographical account. The first part of the book deals with the Portuguese origins of Montenegro and the determinants of outmigration from Portugal in the nineteenth century. Interestingly to the academic literature, Prof. Freitas points to the relatively limited knowledge about the specific immigration of Portuguese to Brazil. An important gap in this literature then starts being filled in with what can be considered the second part of the book, where the author analyzes the foundation and operation of *Colony Nova Lousã*. This plantation of Comendador Montenegro was, at the time, praised for its many innovative features. Besides relevant innovations in technologies of production, discussed in detail in the book, the main novelty of this farm was to employ exclusively free laborers hired mainly in Lousã. This implied that the farm was not operated by a single slave and that an innovative labor arrangement was offered to the immigrants, similar to a modern wage system. This part of the book is richly illustrated, including a picture of the farm in 1880. After this analysis, the book contextualizes the history of the municipality of Espírito Santo do Pinhal and the way it was incorporated to the rural economy of São Paulo in the nineteenth century. Similar to the previous part, this section has a carefully selected and edited iconography; a panoramic picture of the municipality in 1926, covering two pages, is a highlight. This historical framework is then used to discuss the contributions of Montenegro to the urbanization of Espírito Santo do Pinhal, most especially via the promotion of an urban allotment named *Vila Montenegro*. Before concluding, Prof. Freitas uses the figure of Montenegro to bridge once again the histories of Lousã and Espírito Santo do Pinhal. The last part of the book discusses the various beneficent actions led by Comendador Montenegro in his village of origin and municipality of adoption. Particularly interesting are his initiatives, both in Brazil and Portugal, to promote basic education among the poorer, especially via the provision of nocturnal schools for adults. In the best spirit of the entire book and of the biography presented, Prof. Freitas concludes the work with an interesting detour that discusses some current educational projects related to the life and work of Montenegro. This is a reflection on how historical flows of labor, capital, and ideas have strengthened the Portuguese-Brazilian relations until today.

These various topics and the approach of the book make it interesting to the broad public and to scholars alike – even if these readers will probably disagree on where the main merits of the book lie.

On the one hand, the book is an important piece for those interested in the history of labor in Brazil. Historians, economists, and sociologists will benefit from the analyses presented in the chapters about *Colony Nova Lousã*. Furthermore, the book is richly illustrated with primary sources that the author makes readily available for further academic scrutiny. To cite the most

prominent example, the book includes nominal lists of immigrants, with marital status, date of entry and exit as laborers in the farm as well as region of origin and destination after leaving the farm. However, maybe even more important is the chapter on the intellectual publications and memorabilia written by and about Comendador Montenegro. Complemented by a list of books available in the *Fundo Comendador Montenegro*, in the municipal library of Lousã – founded under the initiative of Montenegro –, this is a precious inventory of sources for future research.

On the other hand, since this is more of an outreach book, no theoretical background or historiographical knowledge is required for a fluid and comprehensive reading. The general public will find an adequate contextualization of all historical circumstances that embed the book. Indeed, Prof. Freitas has a palatable style, where he discusses in an understandable manner the first phases of transition from slavery in Brazil, the determinants of international migration, the settlement of immigrants at destination, and the consequences for sending societies. Moreover, the writing of Prof. Freitas includes some personal touches that give a vivid spirit to her work. The description of a photography taken of Comendador Montenegro, in which a family member could not be present for being sick, is almost poetic.

The book has naturally some shortcomings. First, as the title by itself reveals, the author adopts a somewhat laudatory discourse about this historical figure. Apart from his participation in benefit associations apart, we can naturally still ask ourselves about Montenegro's motivations for never adopting slavery in his farm. The question on whether this resulted more from an economically rational decision than from Montenegro's convictions about slavery is never raised in the book. In this sense, the author misses a promising study of the economic rationale of the organization of *Colony Nova Lousã*. Second, some historical grey zones of the academic literature are treated as settled matters in her presentation of historical contexts. For instance, while Prof. Freitas unequivocally considers an important labor strike (the so-called *Sharecroppers's riot*) as the cause for the decline of sharecropping contracts in another pioneering farm, one could also consider this riot as the consequence of external forces that led to the decline of sharecropping as the main labor-rental arrangement prevailing in São Paulo. This is an important question for the book, considering the innovative contract offered by Montenegro. Furthermore, I find it hard to agree with the claim that the Brazilian industrialization process can be traced directly back to the government of Emperor Pedro II (as stated in p. 67).. Although simplifications are undoubtedly necessary to make the argument clear to a broader audience, the academic reader might find it difficult to agree with Prof. Freitas in points similar to these. Finally, there are some minor factual mistakes that the author will not find difficult to look over in a future edition. In particular, Freitas repeats in p. 64 a frequently incorrect interpretation of the *Rescript von der Heydt*. This documental piece of the Prussian government did not prohibit immigration to Brazil; it rather cancelled hiring licenses and prohibited the *propaganda* favoring emigration to that country.

These drawbacks, however, do not compromise at all the accomplishments of Prof. Freitas. *"Vida e Obra do Comendador Montenegro. Um Lousanense visionário no Brasil"*, like the historical character which it describes, is a fascinating work with many facets.

