

European Workers in Brazilian Coalmining, Rio Grande do Sul, 1850–1950

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ABSTRACT: Coalmining in Brazil began in the mid-nineteenth century in the municipality of São Jerônimo, Rio Grande do Sul, the country's southernmost state. European workers were brought in and joined Brazilian workers, mostly local peasants with no experience in mining. This article discusses the role played by the immigrants in the making of a working class in the coalfields of southern Brazil. The research on which this article is based draws on numerous sources, including lawsuits and the application forms used to request professional licences. It focuses on ethnic and racial ambiguity, and on political strategies. The identity of the miners in the region is commonly represented as an amalgam of all ethnic groups, but this article shows that this self-propagated solidarity and cohesion among workers had its limits.

In the Brazilian city of Arroio dos Ratos, on a small hill surrounded by wooden houses and cobblestone streets, a bronze, slightly larger-than-life statue of a coalminer, wearing ankle-length trousers, an undershirt, a cap, and bearing a haversack, symbolizes the greatest pride of this small town of 13,000 inhabitants. The monument was inaugurated by the local city council in 1974, during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1984), to glorify local workers, who, according to the bronze plaque at the foot of the statue, had done such “fruitful work during a century of coal extraction, for the sake of the wealth and progress of this region and of the country”.¹

The statue evokes a distant past of wealth and struggle in Arroio dos Ratos. Coalmining in Brazil started in this area in the nineteenth century, with the country's first coalmine; it subsequently also saw the construction of the country's first coal-fired power plant. This coalmining was concentrated in just a few towns, including Arroio dos Ratos and Butiá, all in the former municipality of São Jerônimo. By 1943, when coal production in the region peaked, there were over 7,000 workers in the mines. Today,

1. All translations from the Portuguese are mine.

some coalmining in a few opencast pits continues in neighboring towns, but the Arroio dos Ratos mines are exhausted, and former underground mines in the region are now used for purposes considered less noble: to store the domestic garbage produced by the 1.4 million inhabitants of the nearby city of Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state of Brazil.

The statue represents the miner as a proud, but at the same time humble, worker. He seems calm and obedient, but also courageous; he is a hero. What is more, the coalminer's identity prevails over all other ethnic, racial, and cultural identities; he is an amalgam of them all. As with all stereotypes, this representation obscures differences and tensions among the diverse groups of workers who had arrived at the mines in Rio Grande do Sul in waves.

Contrary to the established image of harmony and assimilation, the construction of the working class in these mining localities started from the initial exclusion of the locally available workforce – referred to in Brazil as *trabalhadores nacionais*,² or “national workers” – who were generally viewed as incapable and indolent. From the start, European workers were recruited, many of them, but not all, experienced miners. These workers had to face appalling working conditions and authoritarian working relations inherited from centuries of slavery in the country. Because of the specific characteristics of underground coalmining, immigrants started to interact with laborers from diverse origins, generating conflicts but also solidarity among them.

European newcomers to Brazil were generally valued, not only because of their expertise, but especially as promoters of the “whitening” of Brazilian society.³ In a country where “work” was associated with slavery and the Afro-Brazilian population, those workers had to differentiate

2. This expression has different meanings according to the historical context. In the late nineteenth century it referred to the “national element” (born in Brazil, generally of mixed race or former slaves), always viewed unfavorably compared with immigrants. By the 1930s and 1940s, “national worker” had more positive connotations, and was increasingly used in the context of a state policy that aimed at controlling and incorporating immigrants into the “national element” through repression and acculturation. Currently, the expression “national worker” is most commonly used in economic and demographic research as meaning available labor in Brazil (irrespective of where people are born). On discussions of the “national element”, see Manoel Luís Salgado Guimarães, “Nação e Civilização nos Trópicos: o Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro e o projeto de uma história nacional”, *Estudos Históricos*, 1 (1988), pp. 5–27. On the policy of “nationalizing” immigrants, see Giralda Seyferth, “Os imigrantes e a campanha de nacionalização do Estado Novo”, in Dulce Pandolfi (ed.), *Repensando o Estado Novo* (Rio de Janeiro, 1999), pp. 199–228.

3. On whitening policies in Brazil, see Thomas Skidmore, *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (Durham, NC, 1993), as well as Lília Moritz Schwarcz, *The Spectacle of the Races: Scientists, Institutions, and the Race Question in Brazil, 1870–1930* (New York, 1999), and Andreas Hofbauer, *Uma história de branqueamento ou o negro em questão* (São Paulo, 2006).

themselves from people of African or mixed descent, with whom they often worked side by side.

This article seeks to understand the part played by European workers in the making of a working class in the coalfields of southern Brazil between 1850 and 1950 by looking at their role in social practices and coalminers' struggles. How did they relate to other groups and identities in southern Brazil's mining population in this period? As in other mining societies, as Stefan Berger has pointed out, the Brazilian coalfields were characterized by an intense "ideas interchange" among different nationalities of workers, which "led to the selective appropriation of 'foreign' models by indigenous societies".⁴ For copper mining in Chile, Thomas Klubock observes that "the structures of feeling and political culture of the community were composed by often competing and contrasting ideological formations and by interpenetration of both class and non-class discourses and practices".⁵

Characteristics pertinent to mining work in general were, of course, also present in Brazil, such as intensive work, dangerous and unhealthy working conditions, large mining companies, company villages, strict control of work and family life, political activism, and solidarity. The peculiarity and wealth of experience of the Brazilian miners, however, resided in the fact that their working community was created in a cultural context marked by ethnic and racial ambiguity. In Brazil the "mixing of races" is considered a primordial value in defining national identity, but racism is as much denied as it is present.

COALMINING IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL

The coal outcrops in southernmost Brazil were discovered in the late eighteenth century but remained unexplored until the mid-nineteenth century. Located at the border with Uruguay and Argentina, the province of Rio Grande do Sul was one of the last territories of Brazil to be populated. In the south of the region, bordering Uruguay, large farmers raised livestock on extensive landholdings. In the north, colonies of immigrants, who had started to arrive from Germany and Italy around 1835, owned smaller properties. These immigrants were involved in agriculture and commercial activities, but often lived a culturally isolated life.

Rio Grande do Sul is a border region and in preceding centuries had been the location of several wars with the *platinos* countries of Uruguay,

4. Stefan Berger, "Introduction", in Stefan Berger, Andy Croll, and Norman LaPorte (eds), *Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies* (London, 2005), pp. 1–11, 4.

5. Thomas Miller Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904–1951* (Durham, NC, 1998), p. 6.

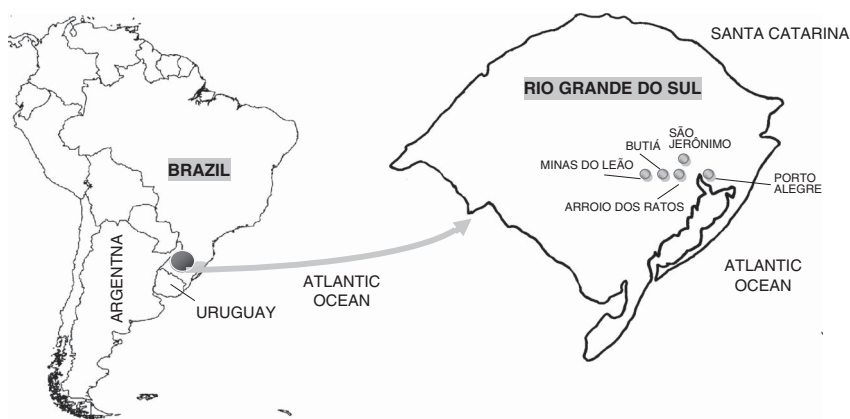


Figure 1. Coal extraction in Rio Grande do Sul (to 1950).

Argentina, and Paraguay. Its indigenous population had been practically decimated, or mixed with immigrants from the São Paulo region, other Latin American countries, Portugal, and Spain. A beef jerky (dried meat) industry had prospered in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was based on slave labor and had generated a concentration of Afro-Brazilians, especially around the city of Pelotas.⁶

The coalmining region is located in the centre of the state, near its capital Porto Alegre (Figure 1). Before the mines were opened the area was sparsely populated by subsistence farmers of mixed descent. Around 1889 new immigrant colonies were created in the region of Barão do Triunfo, within the municipality of São Jerônimo, with German, Italian, and Spanish immigrants. This diversity was not accidental: “there was a prevalence of favoring mixture, to avoid the potential formation of racial and national minority communities”.⁷

It was a British miner, James Johnson, who first introduced excavation techniques and established a coalmining enterprise in the region in the mid-nineteenth century. Born in Cornwall and brought to Brazil by a Brazilian aristocrat, Johnson encouraged British investment in coalmining in Brazil.⁸ After discovering coal seams in Rio Grande do Sul and in the neighboring region of Santa Catarina, he started exploration himself.

6. For a general overview of the region's history see Sandra Pesavento, *História do Rio Grande do Sul* (Porto Alegre, 1997); Fábio Kuhn, *Breve história do Rio Grande do Sul* (Porto Alegre, 2011).

7. Carlos Alfredo Simch, *Monografia de São Jerônimo* (Porto Alegre, 1961), p. 97.

8. Mário Belolli, Joice Quadros, and Ayser Guidi, *História do carvão de Santa Catarina* (Florianópolis, 2002), p. 35.

In 1853, Johnson brought ten to twelve families of miners from Wales to work in the first coalmine.

The president of the province of Rio Grande do Sul, Cansação de Sinimbu, subsequently put Johnson in charge of all local coal extraction.⁹ Mine operations were still extremely primitive. Coal was transported in horse-drawn wagons or shipped on waterways to the centre of the town of São Jerônimo, and later to Porto Alegre. In 1866 the regional government granted Johnson and a Brazilian associate the right to explore the area of Arroio dos Ratos. In the following years, Johnson returned to London, where he succeeded in raising the capital he needed to start a mining company. The Brazilian Imperial Collieries Company Limited was created in 1872 and built a railroad connecting the coalfield to São Jerônimo town. This first initiative soon backfired, however: Johnson's company went bankrupt the following year.

A subsequent company, Holtzweissig & Co., brought workers and tools from Europe,¹⁰ using German capital, but it, too, failed. In 1883 it was succeeded by the Companhia das Minas de Carvão de Pedra de Arroio dos Ratos, the first with Brazilian capital. After the collapse of the Brazilian monarchy and the advent of the republic in 1889, the company changed its name to Companhia Estrada de Ferro e Minas de São Jerônimo (CEFMSJ).

In the 1930s coalmines in the region started to expand vigorously, supported strongly by tax incentives granted by the federal government. In 1932, an important Brazilian group took ownership of all Arroio dos Ratos and Butiá coalfields (exploited since 1906 in a rudimentary way) and began to explore them more intensively through the Carbonífera Riograndense. The founding of the Consórcio Administrador das Empresas de Mineração (Cadem) in 1936 paved the way to further growth. After Cadem had merged with CEFMSJ and the Carbonífera Riograndense, it virtually monopolized Brazilian production until 1945. In the 1930s and 1940s the mining villages of Arroio dos Ratos and Butiá grew in size and became more urbanized, under the watchful eye of these mining companies. From cemetery to police department, from grocery store to cinema, everything depended on or was controlled by Cadem. From 1932 to 1939 the region produced 82 per cent of all coal mined in Brazil.¹¹ In 1936, as part of the nationalist policies of the first presidency of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945), a federal decree increased the minimum consumption of Brazilian coal in the country from 10 to 20 per cent. Production at Rio Grande do Sul's

9. E.S. Eugenio Dahne, *A mineração de carvão e as concessões da Companhia no estado do Rio Grande do Sul – Brasil* (Porto Alegre, 1893), p. 8.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

11. Ministério das Relações Exteriores (Brazil), *Brazil 1940/41: An Economic, Social and Geographic Survey* (Rio de Janeiro, 1941), pp. 271–272.

coalmines peaked in 1943, when 1.34 million tons of coal were mined there (around 65 per cent of all Brazilian coal production).¹²

After World War II, oil began to replace coal, and demand for coal decreased. In 1947 the state created a publically owned coal company. After a few years, Santa Catarina, a state neighboring Rio Grande do Sul, took over as the country's leading coal-producing state, producing coal more suitable for use in steel mills. The underground mines in Rio Grande do Sul were decommissioned in the first few years of the twenty-first century. Today, there is only surface mining in a few cities in the state (Butiá, Charqueadas, Cachoeira do Sul, Candiota, and Minas do Leão). They are exploited by Copelmi (formerly Cadem) and Companhia Riograndense de Mineração (a publically owned company).

EUROPEAN IMMIGRATION, MINING SKILLS, AND THE "WHITENING" OF THE LABOR FORCE

Coalmining demanded a large workforce. Faced with this challenge, in 1889 CEFMSJ agreed with the government to establish five settlements in the region, each with 1,000 workers, to provide dwellings for the workers to be recruited for the coalmines. These would come from Europe, from the remaining Portuguese or Spanish colonial possessions,¹³ or from other Brazilian regions, in a proportion of 80 per cent "foreigners" to 20 per cent "nationals". As a consequence, a large number of immigrants were engaged, both in agriculture and coal extraction. In exchange, the government awarded the company a range of benefits, such as public lands and tax reductions.¹⁴

The immigrant miners initially enjoyed some advantages owing to their skills. In 1892, CEFMSJ management justified a wage increase by the difficulty of "finding in the land practical miners for the service".¹⁵ Foreign miners were seen as potential instructors to the locals, and were always considered superior to the local population – who were not even considered "workers". To the government, employers guaranteed that they would bring to Brazil only miners "selected on the basis of their qualifications and morality, whose teaching and example has already formed local people who once lived in inactivity".¹⁶

12. Clarice Gontarski Speranza, *Cavando direitos: as leis Trabalhistas e os conflitos entre os mineiros de carvão e seus patrões no Rio Grande do Sul (1940–1954)* (Porto Alegre, 2014), pp. 50–51.

13. The intention of the company, expressed in the text of the agreement, seems contradictory to the general Brazilian policy which encouraged European immigration and tried to prevent the arrival of immigrants from other world regions, especially from Asia and Africa, where there were numerous Portuguese colonies. Whatever the intentions of the company, there is no evidence of mineworkers from any region other than Europe.

14. Dahne, *A mineração*, p. 53.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

The beginnings of coalmining in Brazil coincided with the onset of industrialization in the country. This was a particularly significant moment in Brazil's labor relations, marked by a reconfiguration of the working classes after the abolition of African slavery in 1888, and the rise of pro-immigration policies. It is impossible to talk about labor in Brazil without referring to the enduring role of slavery in the country. Brazil was the most important destination for African slaves in the Americas, with an estimated 5.5 million people brought from Africa between 1550 and 1866,¹⁷ and it was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. At the same time, the Brazilian slave system showed high numbers of manumissions, especially in the nineteenth century. Free and slave labor coexisted throughout the nineteenth century, and there was significant mobility between slavery and freedom. While manumissions were frequent, freedom was precarious and re-enslavement common. In 1872, of Brazil's 9.93 million inhabitants 58 per cent were Afro-descendants (*preto*, or *pardo*), totalling 5.76 million people. Of this total, 1.51 million were slaves and 4.25 million were free (either because they had obtained freedom for themselves or because they were descendants of former slaves).¹⁸

In the years before the abolition of slavery, the Brazilian elite began to defend the idea that black people had been “corrupted” by slavery, a logic sustained by a eugenic discourse. Political measures were taken to promote racial “whitening”. European immigrants, considered synonymous with “white people”, became the workers of preference for the fledgling industry. European immigration was encouraged, while immigration from Africa, the Middle East, or Asia was severely repressed.¹⁹ Although slaves had never been deployed in the coalmines, social relations in the region cannot be understood without taking the prevalent cultural perspective of that period into account, which regarded the “white” (equated to European) population as superior to the native mixed population.

Among the various nationalities arriving at the Brazilian coalfields, the Spaniards were the most numerous. The largest influx of Spaniards to Brazil was from 1891 to 1920, when over 431,609 immigrants arrived from Spain. Brazil had established a recruiting office in Malaga in 1896.²⁰ In the 1920

17. Based on <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces>, accessed 31 December 2014.

18. *Censo Demográfico 1872*. <http://www.nphed.cedeplar.ufmg.br/pop72/index.html>, accessed 31 December 2014. On manumissions see, for example, Sidney Chalhoub, “The Precariousness of Freedom in a Slave Society (Brazil in the Nineteenth Century)”, *International Review of Social History*, 56 (2011), pp. 405–439; Robert Slenes, “A ‘Great Arch’ Descending: Manumission Rates, Subaltern Social Mobility, and the Identities of Enslaved, Freeborn, and Freed Blacks in South-eastern Brazil, 1719–1888”, in John Gledhill and Patience Schell (eds), *New Approaches to Resistance in Brazil and Mexico* (Durham, NC, 2012), pp. 100–118.

19. Skidmore, *Black into White*; Jeffrey Lesser, *Immigration, Ethnicity, and National Identity in Brazil, 1808 to the Present* (New York, 2013), pp. 60–88.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–110.

Brazilian census, the town of São Jerônimo was listed as the third most important destination for Spanish immigrants in Rio Grande do Sul, after the state's capital Porto Alegre and the industrial centres of Rio Grande and Pelotas. São Jerônimo had a population of 22,719, with 1,318 foreigners. With 504 Spaniards, almost 10 per cent of all Spanish immigrants were concentrated in Rio Grande do Sul.²¹

A sample based on files of requests for professional licences in Rio Grande do Sul between 1933 and 1943 shows the predominance of Spaniards among immigrant coalminers (see Table 1).²² The thirty-nine files relating to immigrant miners in São Jerônimo contain data from the following countries: Spain (15); Poland (6); Portugal (4); Uruguay (4); Lithuania/Russia (4); Germany (2); Austria (1); Romania (1); Czechoslovakia (1); Hungary (1). Although these data should be viewed with caution,²³ they indicate that several Spanish workers came from traditional coalmining towns in northern Spain (Ourense, Leon, Lugo), or from near Leon and Asturias,²⁴ which suggests that they were skilled workers. Most of them had arrived between 1910 and 1920, aged between twenty and thirty. The presence of children points to family migration. After 1920 the arrival of Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian immigrants became more common. The proximity of the Uruguayan border explains the presence of Uruguayans from the border towns of Rivera and Treinta y Tres.

21. I am grateful to Regina Weber (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul) for allowing me to use these data, which she has compiled in the context of her research project "Spaniards in Southern Brazil: Immigration and Ethnicity".

22. In 1932 the Brazilian government created the professional licence (*carteira profissional*), a booklet recording data on the identity of the individual worker and on his professional life. Such licences were not new, but they had previously been issued by unions and associations. The new licences enabled Getúlio Vargas's government to gain more effective control of information on workers. The licence was issued by the regional labor departments on request for workers aged over sixteen who worked in commerce and industry. The licence application forms contained questions on, for example, name, place and date of birth, skin color, nationality of spouse, number of children, name of employer, position held, and wages (after 1944). The regional labor departments (Delegacia Regional do Trabalho, DRT) were government agencies responsible for issuing the professional licences in each state; until 1940 the agencies were called regional labor inspectorates (Inspetoria Regional do Trabalho). The DRT archive contains around 627,200 application forms for professional licences in Rio Grande do Sul, dating from 1932 onward. They are held by the Historical Documentation Centre (Núcleo de Documentação Histórica) at Pelotas Federal University (UFPel) (hereafter, DRT-NDH/UFPel). Data taken from documents dated between 1932 and 1943 have already been processed to a digital database.

23. The files for the period 1933 to 1943 have been only partially preserved (about 25 per cent of all licences issued during the period in Rio Grande do Sul). Furthermore, professional licences were not mandatory at that time, and workers had to pay for them. Nevertheless, many workers and unions chose to promote the licences, because the documents were seen as a way of ensuring the effective implementation of labor legislation (such as the Vacation Law). The professional licence, or *Carteira de Trabalho e da Previdência Social* is still in use today in Brazil.

24. For an account of the politically highly contentious history of coalmining in Asturias, see Adrian Shubert, *The Road to Revolution in Spain: The Coal Miners of Asturias, 1860–1934* (Urbana, IL, 1987).

Table 1. *Sample of foreign coalminers in Rio Grande do Sul, 1933–1943*

Country/city of birth	Year of arrival	Age on arrival	Number of children	Age at registration	Year of registration
Spain					
Tudela de Navarra	1899	23	0	61	1937
Lugo	1908	8	3	34	1934
Ourense	1910	20	2	43	1933
Rodelas	1912	20	2	42	1934
Ourense	1913	20	0	44	1937
No information	1913	24	6	53	1942
Brollon	1914	29	2	49	1934
Leon	1917	21	4	38	1934
Ourense	1925	15	0	25	1935
Almeria	1927	19	1	27	1935
Cotova (Córdoba?)	1928	25	0	31	1934
Melon	1928	18	0	25	1935
Barcelona	1929	34	0	42	1937
Cristina	1929	26	0	31	1934
Ourense	1936	33	0	34	1937
Poland					
Opole	1912	17	4	40	1935
Plonia	1927	23	0	30	1934
Ulów	1929	23	2	28	1934
No information	1929	26	2	32	1935
Zakopane	1938	53	3	56	1941
Unknown	Unknown	–	0	20	1942
Portugal					
Villa da Feira	1905	11	5	40	1934
Coimbra	1913	3	1	24	1934
Pinheiro Novo	1913	23	5	44	1934
Unknown	1939	27	0	27	1939
Russia					
Marijampolė (now Lithuania)	1922	21	2	33	1934
Unknown	1923	35	1	48	1936
Kaukas (Kaunas?) (Lithuania)	1929	27	0	32	1934
Germany					
Unknown	1891	2	6	45	1934
Lehne (Lehnstedt?)	1927	28	0	36	1935
Austria					
Hulweis (?)	1913	19	0	41	1935
Hungary					
Badonos (?)	1924	27	3	37	1934
Lithuania					
Tanlichen (Šalčininkai?)	1928	18	0	25	1935
Czechoslovakia					
Unknown	1927	20	0	28	1935
Romania					
Kiseenev (Kishinev?) (now Moldova)	1924	26	1	36	1934
Uruguay					
Rivera	1909	4	1	28	1933
Treinta y Tres	1910	9	1	33	1934
Rivera	1921	26	3	39	1934
Unknown	Unknown	–	0	28	1933

Source: Author's survey created from a database based on files at the Regional Labor Department (Delegacia Regional do Trabalho), DRT-NDH/UFPel. The forms were apparently completed by Brazilian officials on the basis of information given orally by workers. Foreign languages were usually "translated" according to Portuguese orthography, and in some cases it is difficult to identify the city of origin.

As the years went by, expertise and skill became less important as a reason for recruiting immigrants. Attracted by advantages such as low-priced housing, electric lighting, medical assistance, education, and salaries higher than those in agriculture, many inhabitants of nearby immigrant colonies or local rural workers began to seek employment in the mines. The arrival of workers from Europe after 1935 had the goal of replacing striking workers, often summarily dismissed. Immigration was also considered a strategy to cope with high turnover and mortality rates.

After World War II, Brazilian mining companies started to recruit workers from European countries affected by the war. In 1945, for example, Cadem asked the Brazilian federal government to permit 500 Poles to enter Brazil who apparently wished to leave Poland following the Soviet occupation of their country. A director of one coalmining company contacted a Polish troop commander in London, trying to attract former Polish soldiers to the Brazilian mines. In the following years, many Poles, Ukrainians, and Yugoslavs would arrive in order to work in the Brazilian coalfields.²⁵

STRIKES AND RIOTS

European immigrants faced a harsh life and poor working conditions in Brazil. Rioting in response to working conditions was serious and frequent throughout the country. The exhausting work, carried out in such a cramped underground environment, with high rates of disease and workplace accidents, combined with low wages, were the main reasons for this disaffection. Because of these low wages, double or even triple shifts were common among the miners – the fact that this practice was called *doble* (the Portuguese word *duplo* was never used) is an indication of Spanish influence in work practices.

The first miners' strike in Brazil occurred in 1895. A group of twenty European workers from the nearby immigrant colonies of Jaguari and Lucena²⁶ were the leaders of the movement. "They were workers, *but* socialists",²⁷ said a CEFMSJ report, adding:

[...] desiring to earn too much quickly, and always disaffected, they completely disorganized the service. Whenever national staff were recruited, they took the opportunity to compel the manager to increase the prices paid per ton of coal

25. Marta Cioccarri, "Do gosto da mina, do jogo e da revolta: um estudo antropológico sobre a construção da honra numa comunidade de mineiros de carvão" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rio de Janeiro, Museu Nacional, 2010), p. 109.

26. The Lucena settlement was located in the north of Santa Catarina, a state (at that time, province) neighboring Rio Grande do Sul. It was founded between 1890 and 1891 with British, Polish, and Russian immigrants. The Jaguari settlement, consisting mostly of Italians, Poles, and Germans, was established in 1889 and was located in the mid-west of Rio Grande do Sul (in what today is the municipality of Jaguari).

27. My italics.

mined, and the wages of all staff. By the end of 1893, when our staff had been recruited for the third time, we had to pay them 1\$200 *réis* per ton and 8\$000 *réis* per square metre of underground gallery in the *Fé* coal pit.²⁸

The report mentions earlier episodes of repeated mobilization among miners under European immigrant leadership. Apparently, disaffection peaked in June 1895, when the strike began, with massive support from Brazilian workers, including children and older miners:

[...] on 1 May, they presented new demands, organizing marches with red-coloured flags and anarchist demonstrations, and in early June they recruited all our national miners, train drivers and locomotive stokers, blacksmiths, carpenters, national and foreigner employees, including old people and 13-year-old boys. They took horses, mules, and carts from the company. When they were alone in the field, they declared they would not work anymore and would not allow any employee to work without a raise of 25 per cent! So they remained on strike for over 15 days.

This strike occurred during the final days of the Federalist Revolution.²⁹ That “national” workers, engaged in this revolution, apparently also supported the strike seems to have alarmed employers. Consequently, “at this dangerous moment, the manager decided to pay the most quarrelsome workers [their remaining salaries] and lay them off”, the company report said. The report also expressed concern among employers about European miners and their integration in Brazil: “From this fact, we learned that immigrant miners are socialists expelled from the coalfields in Europe, because miners in Europe are well-paid workers, surrounded by comforts and only expatriate themselves spontaneously if attracted by greater advantages than those in their home country”. At least four other strikes before 1934 pointed to the growing organization among miners and their dissatisfaction with working conditions and wages.³⁰

Little by little, from the beginning of the twentieth century the positive view of immigrants began to change. Both in the mines and in the country as a whole, Europeans began to be seen not only as useful trainers of local labor

28. São Jerônimo Railroad Company and Coalfield Report, regular session 1895 (Rio de Janeiro, *Jornal do Brasil*, 1895), pp. 12–13, Rio Grande do Sul State Museum of Coal Archive. The following quotations are from the same document. The *réis* was Brazil’s currency from 1833 to 1942. Due to devaluation, the *mil-réis* (Rs 1\$000) became the common basic currency unit in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1942 the *réis* was replaced by the *cruzeiro* (Cr\$).

29. The Federalist Revolution was a bloody civil war (which left an estimated 10,000 dead) fought in Rio Grande do Sul in 1893. See Joseph Love, *Rio Grande do Sul and Brazilian Regionalism, 1882–1930* (Chicago, IL, 1971); Luiz Alberto Grijó, *Capítulos da História do Rio Grande do Sul* (Porto Alegre, 2004).

30. On the strikes in the 1930s see Felipe Figueiró Klován, “Sob o fardo do ouro negro: as experiências de exploração e resistência dos mineiros de carvão do Rio Grande do Sul na década de 1930” (M.A. thesis in history, UFRGS/PPG, 2014).

but also as dangerous elements that could menace discipline at work. Between 1907 and 1921 several laws were passed allowing for the deportation of foreign workers involved in riots. The legislation also allowed for the dissolution of any union-type group performing actions considered harmful to public order. In 1931 a law was issued that prescribed a mandatory proportion of two-thirds native Brazilians to one-third immigrants for employment in industry. In the late 1930s, during the Estado Novo dictatorship (1937–1945), ethnic community building was forbidden so as to promote assimilation and ethnic mixing as an expression of Brazilian nationality.³¹

Because of repression by the mining companies and the intense control of workers and their families, it was only in 1934, long after the first clashes mentioned above, that a miners' union could officially be founded.³² Before, workers were forced to meet secretly in the woods at night, hiding from the company's management. In later interviews retired miners commented on the decisive importance of Spanish workers in this organization.³³ In fact, the union's first president was Deotino Rodrigues, who had been born in Ourense (Spain) and migrated to Brazil in 1910 at the age of twenty.

The miners' union did not restrict membership by ethnicity or nationality. Nonetheless, many of its leaders were from Europe. In 1937, for example, among the eighteen union leaders laid off because of a mobilization three years earlier, five had surnames denoting a European origin or ancestry (Wodacik, Caldellas, Martinez, Covalles, and Splanick).³⁴ It is noteworthy that the most popular miners' leader, Manoel Jover Telles, was the son of Spanish migrants. He led strikes during the Estado Novo dictatorship (1937–1945), was elected to parliament in 1947, and was an important leader of the Brazilian Communist Party from the 1950s to the 1970s. His father, Jeronimo, had come from Linares, an Andalusian town in Spain, settling first in São Paulo before moving to Rio Grande do Sul in the early 1920s. Like Asturias, Andalusia had a strong mining tradition, with a powerful anarchist and socialist movement. In spite of his Brazilian nationality, one of the nicknames given to Jover Telles was "Spanish prince".³⁵

31. Endrica Geraldo, "O 'perigo alienígena': política imigratória e pensamento racial no governo Vargas (1930–1945)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Unicamp, 2007); Giralda Seyferth, "The Diverse Understandings of Foreign Migration to the South of Brazil (1818–1950)", *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology*, 10:2 (2013), pp. 118–162.

32. The union's official name was Sindicato dos Trabalhadores na Indústria em Extração do Carvão de São Jerônimo; see Alexsandro Witkowski and Tassiane Melo Freitas, *Sobre os homens desta terra – A trajetória de fundação do sindicato dos mineiros de Butiá no Rio Grande do Sul* (Porto Alegre, 2006).

33. Testimonies were given to the Oral History Centre (CHO) of Rio Grande do Sul, in 2002, and are available at the Archive of Museu Estadual do Carvão (State Coal Museum).

34. Klován, "Sob o fardo do ouro negro", p. 197.

35. Éder da Silva Silveira, "Além da traição: Manoel Jover Telles e o comunismo no Brasil do século XX" (Ph.D. dissertation, Unisinos, São Leopoldo, 2013), pp. 83–85 and 213.

Strikes and demonstrations for higher wages and better working conditions became more frequent after the end of World War II, when democracy was restored at the end of the Estado Novo dictatorship and the Communist Party was briefly legalized (from 1945 to 1947). In June 1947, Cadem complained to the local police that sixteen of the fifty-nine European immigrants who had recently arrived from Austria, Poland, and Ukraine³⁶ had refused to work owing to “incitement by bad elements”. The group had arrived in Brazil through the mediation of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (founded in 1938 and becoming, in the immediate postwar period, a predecessor to the UNHCR).³⁷

To gain support in its confrontations with employers, the miners’ union sponsored and encouraged lawsuits in the labor courts (established in 1941), and contacts with political leaders. The union called for the intervention of the Ministry of Labor and the Regional Labor Office, both created during the first government of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945), to improve working conditions in the mines.³⁸ This legal strategy adopted by the miners’ union did not in any way mean a break with past struggles. The first Vargas government (which ruled dictatorially from 1937–1945 as the Estado Novo) intervened in industrial relations, inspired by a corporatist perspective aimed at promoting “harmony between capital and labor”.³⁹ Despite its fascist inspiration, this model offered scope for action and claims by workers, and some protection against employers. More importantly, it sought social appreciation of the worker and of work, something unheard of in a country where these concepts had always been associated with slavery.

During World War II coalminers were considered “heroes” and “soldiers of production” by sacrificing themselves in work. Although they were controlled and repressed, they were valued as citizens, on condition of their obedience to employers and loyalty to the government. However, as this discourse was appropriated by the workers themselves, this did not lead to harmony but, combined with poor working conditions and the ineffectiveness of most of the newly created protection laws, instead sharpened conflicts between employers and employees. The use of the law and legal instruments in the labor courts became important in the formation of class-consciousness among miners, as well as among other Brazilian workers.⁴⁰ It counteracts the idea of passivity, which, through the lens

36. According to a local historian, the population offered food and clothing to help the foreigners upon their arrival; Gertrudes Novak Hoff, *Butiá em busca de sua história* (Butiá, 1992), p. 62.

37. Cioccarì, “Do gosto da mina”, pp. 122–123.

38. Speranza, *Cavando direitos*, pp. 132–138.

39. Robert Levine, *Father of the Poor? Vargas and his Era* (New York, 1998), p. 81.

40. On the importance of the law and the system of labor courts in regulating (formal) labor relations in Brazil over many decades, see John French, *Drowning in Laws: Labor Law and*

of “populism”, had previously been attributed to workers in Brazil during that period.⁴¹ In the case of coalminers, the use of labor courts was never dissociated from direct action such as strikes, demonstrations, and occupations, almost all of which attracted broad support among workers.⁴²

VULNERABILITY, DIVERSITY, AND SEGREGATION

The situation of immigrants in the mines clearly reflected the Brazilian dynamics of assimilation and the differentiation of immigrant workers. As Jeffrey Lesser claims, the identity of origin often accompanied later generations born in Brazil. Foreign-born Brazilians are not usually referred to as, for example, “German-Brazilian” or “Italian-Brazilian”, but mostly as “Germans” or “Italians”. A foreign origin is seen as a status symbol, however poor migrants had been at the time of migration itself.⁴³ An immigrant background may, however, also be used pejoratively. Alexandre Fortes has shown how in southern Brazil immigrants from eastern Europe were called indistinctly *polacos*, generating confusion and ethnic ambiguity.⁴⁴ One example is an incident during the 1946 strike, when the miner Alexandre Kalinski, who had abandoned the strike, was repeatedly called *polacos* by labor activists, despite his being born in Brazil.⁴⁵

Assimilation and acquiring a “Brazilian” identity did not exempt immigrants from vulnerability in industrial relations, especially during World War II. The war gave companies a pretext to dismiss non-nationals perceived as subversive. In August 1943, for example, Cadem asked the police to arrest the Hungarian worker Axis Vassal, who was actually known by his Brazilian name, José Varga. He had come to Brazil long before the war and had worked in the mines since 1925. The main problem

Brazilian Political Culture (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); Angela de Castro Gomes and Fernando Teixeira da Silva (eds), *A Justiça do Trabalho e sua história* (Campinas, 2013).

41. On “populism” and the ensuing debates in relation to labor in Brazil, see Francisco Weffort, *O populismo na política brasileira* (São Paulo, 2003); John French, *The Brazilian Workers’ ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992); and Jorge Ferreira, “O Nome e a coisa: O populismo na política brasileira”, in *idem* (ed.), *O Populismo e sua história: debate e crítica* (Rio de Janeiro, 2001). For another view, denoting the political culture of Brazilian workers as *trabalhismo* (laborism), see Jorge Ferreira, *Trabalhadores do Brasil – o imaginário popular* (Rio de Janeiro, 1997).

42. Speranza, *Cavando direitos*, pp. 275–283.

43. Lesser, *Immigration, Ethnicity, and National Identity*, p. 3.

44. Alexandre Fortes, *Nós do Quarto Distrito – A classe trabalhadora porto-alegrense e a Era Vargas* (Rio de Janeiro, 2004), pp. 119–176.

45. Lawsuit 84/46, São Jerônimo Court Labor Lawsuits (1938/1947), Memorial da Justiça do Trabalho no Rio Grande do Sul (Labor Courts Archive in Rio Grande do Sul, hereafter, MJT-RS). These lawsuits have been made available on CD-ROM.

seemed to be that he had “anarchist tendencies” and caused “agitation among the workers”.⁴⁶

In contrast, other immigrants played an important role in the coalfield hierarchy, disciplining workers or punishing strikers. Examples can be found in labor lawsuits since the 1940s. In a labor lawsuit filed by a Brazilian worker against the Companhia Carbonífera Riograndense in 1941, a Spaniard acting as a mine foreman testified in favor of the company. He had already been living in Brazil for twenty-eight years. In 1947, another Spaniard, in charge of a drilling crew, appeared as a key witness for the mining companies in several labor lawsuits.⁴⁷ He had arrived in Brazil from Asturias in 1917, at the age of twenty-one. The trajectories of these two Spaniards exemplify how some immigrants became company men, while others openly challenged their employer’s authority.

In the early twentieth century, the Catholic Church had few supporters among miners in the region. The workers were exposed to only “the smallest degree of religious instruction”, and most families had “almost complete religious indifference and were devoted to spiritualism and Protestant practices”, wrote Edmundo Rambo, the first chaplain of Arroio dos Ratos in 1932.⁴⁸ The Catholic Church could count on employers for support however. They financed the construction of the churches of St Theresa in 1930 (in Butiá) and St Joseph in 1944 (in Arroio dos Ratos). They also promoted the feast day of St Barbara (4 December). Furthermore, Carbonífera Riograndense and the archdiocese signed an agreement to establish religious services in Butiá, with the company paying the costs.⁴⁹ In 1955 a chapel dedicated to St Barbara was built in Butiá at the initiative of a chief engineer, who also organized annual celebrations for the saint.⁵⁰

As in other mining communities, São Jerônimo workers founded leisure associations (mostly with the support of employers). The oldest, Última Hora [Last Hour], was founded in 1933 in Arroio dos Ratos by Spanish workers as a typical Brazilian carnival club. This society congregated workers of several nationalities, including native Brazilians. As in other Brazilian cities, there was also a club for black workers only: Tesouras [Scissors].

Because mining company documents have been lost, and in the absence of specific government data, it is hard to find information on black workers in

46. José Varga Dossier, Archive of Museu Estadual do Carvão (State Coal Museum), Arroio dos Ratos (Rio Grande do Sul).

47. Lawsuit 02/41; 6/46; 142/46; Declaration 23.005, 5 Series, Book 461, São Jerônimo Labor Court Lawsuits (1938/1947), MJT-RS.

48. Quoted from Ervino L Sulzbach, *Arroio dos Ratos – Berço da Indústria carbonífera nacional* (Arroio dos Ratos, 1989), p. 132.

49. Hoff, *Butiá em busca*, p. 58.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 65.



Figure 2. Miners working underground.

Archive of Museu Estadual do Carvão (State Coal Museum), Arroio dos Ratos (Rio Grande do Sul). Used with permission.

the mines. Photographs taken in the mines clearly show white and black miners working together. However inadequate, our sample of 472 miners (which is based on applications for professional licences between 1933 and 1944) includes 114 people of Afro-Brazilian descent. The vast majority originated from nearby villages.

In Brazil the social and ethnic criteria for considering someone “white” or “black” are complex and fluid. There are several classifications and categories within these groups, and they reflect important social differences. Referring to terms such as “white”, “black”, “European”, “Indian”, or “Asian” (among others) in Brazilian culture, Lesser points to the fact that “as different people and groups flowed in and out of these ever-shifting categories, Brazilian national identity was often simultaneously rigid (whiteness was consistently prized) and flexible (the designation of whiteness was malleable).”⁵¹

This Brazilian ethnic ambiguity seemed to be clearly established, too, within the mining sphere. In my sample of requests for professional licences, which included a racial identification, there are several ways of designating non-whites, by categorizing them as *negro*, *preto*, *pardo*,

51. Jeffrey Lesser, “A Better Brazil”, *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos*, 21 (2014), pp. 181–194, 185.

moreno, or *mulato*. These different classifications are by no means synonymous and meant more than just “non-white”. *Pardo* and *moreno* seem to be the terms whose meaning was closest to “white”, while the terms *negro* and *preto* were located at the other end of the racial scale. Being “white” thus implied a higher status in Brazilian society, in almost binary opposition to all other groups, whereas within the latter differentiations between *negro* (black), *mulato* (mulatto), and *moreno* (light brown) were of paramount importance.⁵² This diversity in racial classification reflected an organized structure in which the perceived closeness to “white” was directly proportional to the possibilities of social ascension. On the other hand, there is no mention of “Indian” or “indigenous”, demonstrating the absence, or perhaps social invisibility, of this ethnic group among miners (“mixed” Indians immediately ceased to be understood as such).

Figure 3 overleaf shows photographs of eight coalminers appended to forms requesting professional licences in 1933. The first three in the bottom row (left to right) were born in Brazil and were all classified as *morenos* (a glance at the pictures gives an idea of how little relation attributions such as *moreno* actually had to skin complexion). The first on the top row (left to right) came from Spain, but he curiously appears as *moreno* too. The others, also from Europe (Russia, Portugal, and Spain), were termed *brancos* (white). Interestingly, the *moreno* Spanish wore a scarf around his neck, like the Brazilians. This is a traditional custom of the region (dating back to the Federalist Revolution). The Spaniard and one of the Brazilian men are wearing a red scarf, a sign of regional political partisanship associated with the *maragatos* faction (opposed to the white-scarfed *chimangos* faction).⁵³

In a series of interviews given by retired miners, Afro-descendants denounced racism only in relation to leisure, referring to their inability to enter “white” clubs. Retired miner Frontino Rodrigues Oliveira, aged seventy-three, said that he was not going to the white clubs “because I was of the black race, like they say”. His colleague Cerílio Soares, aged

52. See Hebe Mattos, “‘Pretos’ and ‘Pardos’ between the Cross and the Sword: Racial Categories in Seventeenth Century Brazil”, *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, 80 (2006), pp. 43–55.

53. These two factions were on opposite sides during the 1923 Revolution, an eleven-month insurgency in Rio Grande do Sul. The supporters of the state president, Borges de Medeiros, fought against the allies of the farmer João Francisco de Assis Brasil, leader of the Federalist Party. The revolt followed an election to the state presidency that awarded victory to Borges de Medeiros for a second term. The opposition between the two factions had its origins in the Federalist Revolution of 1823. Borges’ supporters wore white scarves and were called *chimangos*. Assis Brasil’s allies were termed *maragatos*, and were identified by their red scarves. Some authors claim that the origins of the expression *maragatos* go back to a certain region in Spain (which might explain the use of the red scarf by *Yugueiros*). See Love, *Rio Grande do Sul*; and also Gunter Axt, “Coronelismo indomável: o sistema de relações de poder”, in Tau Golin and Nelson Boeira (eds), *História Geral do Rio Grande do Sul – República – República Velha* (1889–1930), III (1) (Passo Fundo, 2007).



Figure 3. Miners' photographs, identification data from professional licences, 1933–1943. Top row, left to right: Alexandre Yagueiros, Spanish (born 1896, arrived in Brazil 1917); Andre Kopaeff, Russian (born 1901, arrived in Brazil 1922); João Pires, Portuguese (born 1890, arrived in Brazil 1913); Avelino Franso, Spanish (born 1885, arrived in Brazil 1914). Bottom row, left to right: Edemar Firmo da Rocha, Brazilian (born 1913); Laudelino Marques dos Santos, Brazilian (born 1890); Osmar Strada, Brazilian (born 1906); Ramão Peres, Spanish (born 1900, arrived in Brazil 1908).

Archive DRT-NDH/UFPeL. Used with permission.

seventy-two, reported that “the balls started at 10 or 11 p.m. and would go on until 5 in the morning. I went more often to the Tesouras Club. It was the ball of the blacks. Now, it must be all mixed up, but in the old days, whites and blacks did not mingle.”⁵⁴

Although they worked side by side in the mines, were members of the same union, and stood alongside each other during strikes and in protest movements, European descendants did not admit the descendants of slaves to their leisure clubs. Although exploited together with the descendants of slaves by corporate control and forced to accept poor working conditions, immigrants had a better position in mining society, and acted to maintain this differentiation.

CLOSING REMARKS

In many parts of Brazil, in particular in Rio Grande do Sul, the concentration of immigrants from certain ethnic groups favored the

54. The two testimonies were given to the Oral History Centre (CHO) of Rio Grande do Sul, 21 June 2002. Interviewer: Ulysses B. dos Santos; Archive of Museu Estadual do Carvão (State Coal Museum), Arroio dos Ratos (Rio Grande do Sul).

formation of communities with relatively isolated cultures and practices. During the Estado Novo, these groups were repressed; the teaching of foreign languages was forbidden, and several ethnic associations were abolished.⁵⁵ However, immigrant isolation seems not to have been a feature of the coalmining areas of Rio Grande do Sul. Although a large number of European immigrants arrived in the region, their varied origins hindered the formation of closed ethnic groups. This was partly the result of a conscious policy by mine operators and authorities. The prevalence of Spaniards in the mines may also have contributed to a low degree of segregation – here the linguistic similarities might have helped immigrants to “blend” into Brazilian culture.⁵⁶

The diverse ethnic groups – both “nationals” and “foreigners” – in the Rio Grande do Sul coalmines are today often regarded as the founders of an alleged mining “race”,⁵⁷ or “a class founded on virtues that had permeated generations, reaching a race-like condition”.⁵⁸ Their sense of belonging to the same craft supposedly gave them a uniform identity as “miners”, based on an amalgam of all the ethnic groups involved. The statue of the miner at the entrance to Arroio dos Ratos is a clear indication of this point.

This idea of the miners as a distinct group – also in terms of “class” – dated from when production at the mines peaked in the 1930s and 1940s, and coincided with the populist appreciation of the “national” worker as a key element in the progress of the nation. The populist ideology viewed “work” as a core value in a country with a heritage of slavery. At the same time, it enabled miners to shape their collective struggles in their own way. However, the construction of a distinct mining identity, often forged in terms of “class” but sometimes (and tellingly) even in terms of a mining “race”, cannot hide its contradictions. The open segregation of Afro-Brazilian miners during their leisure time shows that solidarity and cohesion among workers had its limits. The social exclusion of the descendants of the slaves endured long after slavery had ended, even under the pretext of constructing a single mining “race”.

55. See Geraldo, “O ‘perigo alienígena’”, ch. 3.

56. For the special situation of Spanish immigrants in the region, see Regina Weber, “Espanhóis no sul do Brasil: diversidade e identidade”, *História: Questões e Debates*, 56 (2012), pp. 137–157.

57. See, for example, Benedito Veit, *Mineiros: uma raça* (São Jerônimo, 1992).

58. Juarez Adão Lima, “Mineiros” (unpublished manuscript, 1999). Lima was a former miner, Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (PTB) politician, and local historian. He kindly gave me access to his writings after an interview at his home in 2008.