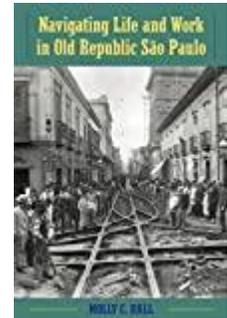


**Molly C. Ball.** *Navigating Life and Work in Old Republic São Paulo*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2020. Illustrations, tables. 292 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-68340-171-1.



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São Paulo, Brazil, is one of the world's largest megacities. With a greater metropolitan population of around twenty-two million, it is the largest city in the Americas and the Western Hemisphere and Latin America's financial center as well as home to the region's most prestigious universities. It is also an unequal city, one whose fantastic growth has not been distributed evenly. Between 2012 and 2019, for example, the average monthly salary for the formal sector increased by 14 percent, yet there was a 12 percent reduction in formal sector jobs in the city. The city's richest families make 3.6 times more per month than the city's poorest families.[1] On a global scale, São Paulo ranks as one of the most unequal using the Palma ratio, a statistical tool to measure inequality.[2] And all these measurements came before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated already existing structural weaknesses and whose impact the city's poorest residents have felt disproportionately.[3]

This inequality has much deeper roots. A hundred years ago, however, São Paulo was not even

Brazil's largest city. The growth of coffee plantations in the state's fertile interior throughout the nineteenth century began to change this. As the century progressed, and the institution of slavery became less viable, Paulista elites (as residents of the state are called) turned toward a program of state-sponsored immigration, which served the dual purpose of providing laborers in the lead-up to and aftermath of the abolition of slavery in 1888 and "whitening" the population in line with scientific racism and later eugenic currents swirling across the globe. During the country's First Republic (also called the Old Republic, from 1891 to 1930), the city's population rapidly expanded due to first immigration streams and then internal migrant streams from northeastern Brazil. Within the city, a nascent industrial sector, in textiles and autos, for example, grew.

How did São Paulo become the city it is today? Molly C. Ball's brilliant new book, *Navigating Life and Work in Old Republic São Paulo*, provides some important answers. Ball's deeply researched look into the early twentieth-century history of the

city and its residents (called Paulistanos) explores the intersection of immigration, labor, and capital in the lives of working-class Paulistanos from all walks of life during this crucial period of development. Ball comes to several important conclusions, which all demonstrate the need to bring much more specificity to our study of the working class. First, she finds that unlike immigration trends to other American destinations, in São Paulo, the family unit was a defining characteristic. This trend had serious implications for working people's lives as the family wage became a crucial strategy for survival, and thus the family was a "base collective unit" (p. 5). Second, Ball asks us to complicate the often-binary view of Brazilian history based on race. In a country that imported nearly five million enslaved Africans and was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish the institution, racial discrimination was a marked feature of Brazilian life in the early twentieth century. (It remains so today.) Historians have often approached this history as one of white versus nonwhite, combining all whites into a group in comparison with Brazilians of darker skin. Ball finds, however, that both Afro-Brazilians *and* white Portuguese immigrants faced discrimination at the hiring level in Old Republic São Paulo. In other words, we must investigate differences both between groups and *within* groups (here white immigrant groups) to get a more accurate picture of the historical evolution of discrimination. Finally, Ball traces change over time and pinpoints World War I as "an important inflection point for the working class" in the city (p. 5). Economic disruptions stemming from the conflict changed immigrant and migrant streams; cut short previous advancements in education and quality of life, which negatively affected women and Afro-Brazilians; and "accentuated a cleavage within the working class" that endured long after the war ended (p. 16). By the 1920s, "a tale of two working-class São Paulos emerged" (p. 20). Those with social connections, a lighter skin color, and the correct gender had access to working-class

jobs with opportunities for mobility. Women, Afro-Brazilians, and those working in the informal sectors (often one and the same) were left out of the wonders of development.

*Navigating Life and Work* is a much-needed correction to histories of immigration, labor, economic development, and gender and race in Latin America's largest country. Focusing on the city of São Paulo, Ball intervenes in the history of immigration and development studies. Her examination of development, in particular dual market theory and quality-of-life indicators, brings São Paulo, and Brazil, into discussions on urbanization and industrialization in the United States. In addition to becoming a core part of the Brazilian canon on labor and economic history, the book will appeal to a wide audience, including scholars studying the history of the family, labor history, economic history, and immigration studies.

The book's most important intervention comes from its innovative methodology and rich empirical source base. Ball, in her own words, "bring[s] economic history and social history into conversation" to provide one of the most comprehensive pictures of historical development we have to date (p. 15). In Latin America, social histories of labor, particularly those focused on questions of gender and race, have often disavowed statistical analyses. The new economic history that arose in the 1990s, in combining quantitative history and applied economics, debunked dependency theory (which argued that external relationships structured underdevelopment in "peripheral" world regions, in particular the unequal relationship between raw materials, inexpensive labor, and expanding markets in non-industrialized countries and manufactured goods in industrialized countries) while eschewing individuals' lives. In contrast, Ball shows how you can combine robust statistical methods with a social historical reading of workers' lives for a wider audience. We should not relegate the study of "historical experience" to social and cultural historians. Rather, as

Ball argues, “It is time to reencounter and reconsider economic history. Studying working-class families in São Paulo is the perfect place to start” (p. 3). The statistical context provides specificity; mapping out the “big data” allows us to accurately situate people’s lives within their historical realities.

To do so, Ball compiled two original data sets. The first, taken from immigration records from 457,811 individuals who arrived in São Paulo city between 1903 and 1927, includes a representative sample of 2,232 immigrants contracted directly with the city for the period. Her second data set, drawn from painstaking archival research into employee records from four different Paulistano firms, comprises a real wage series. Ball created a representative database of more than five thousand workers from a power company, a railway company, a textile factory, and a department store. She complements these original data sets with immigrant letters, interview transcripts, and newspaper advertisements to bring a human face to the numbers and to help create mini-biographies of Paulistano workers. Her clear explanation of the statistical methods is easy to understand even if the reader is less adept at the actual mathematical equations behind them (see: me). Ball provides just the right amount of explanation within the chapters themselves to allow readers to understand both the data and her findings, relegating the more sophisticated methodological descriptions and analyses for the appendices.

The book, divided into six chapters, proceeds roughly chronologically, with chapters 1 and 4, based on econometric methods, spanning the entire period. In all chapters, Ball focuses on the important role the Hospedaria de Imigrantes, the city’s receiving station for all immigrants, played in the lives of working-class Paulistanos. She finds that the Hospedaria was both social safety net and exploiter; it helped desperate workers find jobs but also helped capital exploit those same laborers during periods of labor unrest or oversaturation.

The Hospedaria had serious implications for economic development in the city. As Ball argues, “Ultimately, the continual cheap supply of labor discouraged investment in technological improvements and training at a critical point in São Paulo’s development” (p. 23).

Chapter 1, based on her representative sample from the Hospedaria records, details how there was no “single” immigrant experience and how early trends, for example, the arrival of unskilled Portuguese prewar, affected employees’ implicit biases later. Importantly, Ball contributes to a growing historiography on regional identities in Brazil by pinpointing that migrants from northeastern and northern Brazil, a stream that solidified during the war, were more literate and had more skills and experience than both southeastern migrants and some immigrant groups. This finding pushes back on the view, which developed in twentieth-century São Paulo and Brazil as a whole, of northeast Brazil as a “backwards” region, socially and racially inferior to the rest of the country and in particular the “whiter” Southeast. [4]

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the prewar and wartime eras, finding that, generally, working-class Paulistanos (both immigrant and Brazilian alike) had opportunities and stability until the start of the war. The war caused a change in strategies with families relying on the family wage, for instance, taking daughters out of school at younger ages. These trends continued even after the war ended. Chapter 3 is particularly innovative, as Ball looks at the city’s first major general strike in 1917 from the perspective of non-strikers and strikebreakers. The most marginalized workers in the formal sector were also the most likely *not* to strike or to cross the picket line. Ball’s nuanced discussion of strikebreakers humanizes those so often demonized in top-down labor histories: workers working to survive.

Chapter 4 draws on Ball’s real wage series to ask questions about discrimination at the hiring

stage and in relation to persistent wage disparities. She finds that in the formal labor market, Portuguese immigrants, Afro-Brazilians, and women all faced discrimination at the hiring level. Women also faced lower wages and reduced opportunities, which “over a lifetime ... amounted to considerable sums” (p. 94).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the postwar era. There was a marked downturn from the hopefulness of the prewar era, but this downturn was not equally distributed. Chapter 5, on the textile industry, demonstrates how women faced lower wages and higher levels of exploitations. Industrialists’ focus on cheap labor further stifled innovation and efficiency. At the end of the Old Republic, as chapter 6 shows, a stratified working class existed, in which certain immigrant and national groups had access to better-paying jobs with hopes of mobility while the remainder toiled in exploitative conditions and for subpar wages.

Ball’s discussion of racial and gender discrimination is important. At times, however, her writing seems to separate women and Afro-Brazilians into two discrete groups, disavowing intersectional identities. The phrase “women and Afro-Brazilians” is indicative of this semantic position. Although chapter 4 outlines the specific discrimination Afro-Brazilian women faced (see, for example, pages 112-13), this comes late in the book. Up until that point, it appears all women are white, and all Afro-Brazilians are men. Moreover, are all women of color Afro-Brazilian, as the book suggests? This appears to be the case even though Ball expertly details European men of color. This is partly due to Brazilian vagaries about recording race (included haphazardly or often not at all) and the relegation of most women of color to the informal labor market, in particular domestic service. But this discussion should have come much earlier in the text, and a more explicit labeling of what “women” meant in the data, even if a conjecture, is necessary. Similarly, Ball at times lumps all Brazilians of color together. Her discussion of how

the rise in help-wanted advertisements that included stipulations for “good appearance” coincided with the arrival of northeastern migrants to São Paulo is indicative of this. This is a fascinating finding, but the description appears to delegate all regional migrants to an indiscriminate “darker” category, without defining what that was. Again, Ball *does* go into the regional specificities of racial differences later in the book, but this is lacking throughout the previous chapters. Of course, these are tiny quibbles about organization and definition that do not take away from Ball’s masterful text.

*Navigating Life and Work* could not come at a more opportune moment. Ball argues that it is crucial to go beyond GDP when studying development. Quality-of-life indicators and workers’ own perceptions must be included. As Ball writes, “This approach is key to understanding Latin America’s underdevelopment, for while GDP per capita can demonstrate the growth associated with capital markets, railroads, and industrialization, it cannot speak to the distribution of that wealth” (p. 14). By expanding beyond the GDP, we can find, as Ball demonstrates, that gender inequality continues despite educational advancements and that expanding the franchise does not necessarily lead to racial equality. And, in a world of rising income inequality that is unequally distributed (one can only think of the “shecession” of the pandemic), her approach toward development could not be more salient or urgent.

#### Notes

- [1]. Rede Nossa São Paulo, “Mapa da Desigualdade 2020 revela diferenças entre os distritos da capital paulista,” October 29, 2020, <https://www.nossasaopaulo.org.br/2020/10/29/mapa-da-desigualdade-2020-revela-diferencas-entre-os-distritos-da-capital-paulista/>.
- [2]. Fransua Vytautas Razvadauskas, “Income Inequality Ranking of the World’s Major Cities,” *Euromonitor International*, October 31, 2017, [ht-](https://www.euromonitor.com/income-inequality-ranking-of-the-worlds-major-cities)

[tps://blog.euromonitor.com/income-inequality-ranking-worlds-major-cities/](https://blog.euromonitor.com/income-inequality-ranking-worlds-major-cities/).

[3]. Lauro Miranda Demenech, Samuel de Carvalho Dumith, Maria Eduarda Centena Duarte Vieira, and Lucas Neiva-Silva, “Desigualdade econômica e risco de infecção e morte por COVID-19 no Brasil,” *Revista Brasileira de Epidemiologia* 23 (2020): E200095, <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-549720200095>.

[4]. For example, Stanley Blake, *The Vigorous Core of Our Nationality: Race and Regional Identity in Northeastern Brazil* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011); Sarah Sarzynski, *Revolution in the Terra do Sol: The Cold War in Brazil* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018); and Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Duke, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

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