



**From slavery to eligible citizenship:
The José Agostinho dos Reis's trajectory in defense of science and popular education¹**

Da escravidão à cidadania elegível:
a trajetória de José Agostinho dos Reis em defesa da ciência e da educação popular

De la esclavitud a la ciudadanía elegible:
la trayectoria de José Agostinho dos Reis en defensa de la ciencia y la educación popular

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect about the contributions of individuals who have been made invisible by traditional historiography but who played important roles in popular education and the Brazilian abolitionist process, through the José Agostinho dos Reis's trajectory. During the last decades of the 19th century, education and abolition began to be debated and, by some, considered necessary for the modernization process of the Empire to achieve the goals of civility and progress. Enslaved men and women, as well as people who had left captivity and even become free, invested in education as a possibility for social transformation and combating existing prejudice. Born into slavery, José Agostinho dos Reis became an abolitionist, graduated in Engineering and was a professor at the *Escola Politécnica*, assuming its interim directorship and achieving prestige and social recognition. Thus, his experience allows us to perceive the complexities of the relations established between slavery and freedom, in addition to the role of education in this configuration.

Keywords: José Agostinho dos Reis; History of Education of the Black Population; Slavery and Freedom.

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Resumo

O presente artigo visa refletir sobre as contribuições de sujeitos invisibilizados pela historiografia tradicional, mas que desempenharam papéis relevantes na educação popular e no processo abolicionista brasileiro, por meio da trajetória de José Agostinho dos Reis. Durante as últimas décadas do século XIX, a educação e a abolição passaram a ser debatidas e, por alguns, consideradas como necessárias ao processo de modernização do Império para alcançar os objetivos de civilidade e progresso. Escravizados e escravizadas, assim como pessoas que saíram do cativeiro e até livres, investiram na educação como possibilidade de transformação social e combate ao preconceito existente. Nascido na condição de escravidão, José Agostinho dos Reis tornou-se abolicionista, formou-se em Engenharia e foi professor na Escola Politécnica, assumindo sua direção interina e alcançando prestígio e reconhecimento social. Dessa forma, sua vivência permite perceber as complexidades das relações estabelecidas entre escravidão e liberdade, além do papel da educação nessa configuração.

Palavras-chave: José Agostinho dos Reis; História da Educação da População Negra; Escravidão e Liberdade.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo reflexionar sobre las contribuciones de sujetos invisibilizados por la historiografía tradicional, pero que desempeñaron papeles relevantes en la educación popular y en el proceso abolicionista brasileño, a lo largo de la trayectoria de José Agostinho dos Reis. Durante las últimas décadas del siglo XIX, la educación y la abolición comenzaron a ser debatidas y, por algunos, consideradas necesarias para que el proceso de modernización del Imperio alcanzara los objetivos de civilidad y progreso. Hombres y mujeres esclavizados, así como personas que salieron del cautiverio e incluso hombres libres, invirtieron en la educación como una posibilidad de transformación social y de combate a los prejuicios existentes. Nacido en esclavitud, José Agostinho dos Reis se hizo abolicionista, se licenció en Ingeniería y fue profesor de la Escuela Politécnica, asumiendo su dirección interina y alcanzando prestigio y reconocimiento social. De esta manera, su experiencia le permite comprender las complejidades de las relaciones que se establecen entre esclavitud y libertad, además del papel de la educación en esta configuración.

Palabras clave: José Agostinho dos Reis; Historia de la Educación de la Población Negra; Esclavitud y Libertad.

Received: 2024/07/24

Approved: 2024/11/18

Presentation

Gentlemen, you all ask for abolition so that there will be no more slaves: I ask for it too, because I want there to be no more masters.

And do you know why?

In my appearance, gentlemen, you see that I descend from the slave race.

But you still do not know everything, gentlemen.

You, gentlemen /addressing the professors/ of whom I have the honor of being a colleague in the teaching of this academy; you, gentlemen /addressing the students / of whom I have the honor of being a teacher; you do not know that our colleague and your professor were born slaves!

José Agostinho dos Reis

The words spoken by José Agostinho dos Reis at the opening session of the *Centro Abolicionista da Escola Politécnica*, in 1883, must have been a cause of astonishment for many. Surprise, admiration, contempt and aversion are some of the feelings that may have been generated in the audience. Dr. Reis certainly had the courage to admit, before his colleagues and disciples, not only his slave ancestry, but also his own birth condition, knowing all the stains that slavery had on black people at that time. He even admitted that he wished there were no more slaves, but also that there were no more masters, reflecting about a new social situation.

A native of the province of Pará and a fervent Catholic, he came to court with the aim of expanding his studies. He was a student leader and played an important role in the abolitionist movement. Perhaps one of his greatest daring acts was to go from being a non-citizen to becoming an eligible candidate in electoral campaigns. Even without the support of political parties, in an extremely conservative province, he assumed his status as an abolitionist and made public lectures his main form of electoral campaign. In this way, he became closer to the working classes, even though they did not have the right to vote. He participated in numerous abolitionist, academic, scientific and class organizations, using the tribune and the press as his main means of expression, and he also stood out as the director of the *Escola Politécnica* in Rio de Janeiro. Despite standing out for his activities, Agostinho dos Reis is rarely mentioned in the various areas in which he was involved. This condition reveals the means and modes of selection of our traditional history, which did not open spaces for differentiated forms of representation and identities.

Therefore, this study defends the intellectual work of José Agostinho dos Reis, due to his intense political/cultural articulation, which thought about the social world, his representations and constructions, being a producer, articulator, mediator and disseminator of certain issues in the public space (Sirinelli, 2003). His political and cultural participation, his activism for the end of slavery, his defenses and educational proposals are permeated by his experience marked by his color, which allowed him to have a different perception of the existing racial/social inequality, being understood as a black intellectual. According to Nilma Lino Gomes: “In their speech, in their written production, in their social, literary and academic intervention, these intellectuals express a view marked not only by their class condition, but also by their race” (Gomes, 2009, p. 428).

We take as a theoretical-methodological basis the combination of social history and micro-history, understanding that the questions of the present direct the writing of history (Block, 2001) and the path of excluded groups can allow the construction of new narratives

(Sharpe, 1992; Burke, 2005) in which individual trajectories can be meticulously observed and understood (Ginzburg, 1989).

As important factors for analyzing the research and understanding the specificities of the black population in the educational process, we highlight the contributions of contemporary black thought from hooks (2013), Davis (2016) and Silva (2021), who emphasize the desire and search for education of these subjects, as well as Santos (2014), who presents the anti-slavery struggle as a clash against racism itself, “given that racial prejudice and discrimination were inherent to Brazilian slavery” (SANTOS, 2014, p. 28).

Through bibliographic and documentary research, supported by press records from the period in the *Hemeroteca Digital* collection and the FamilySearch website, we reconstruct José Agostinho's trajectory, highlighting his education and professional and political activities in the last decades of the 19th century and early 20th century. This experience, in addition to the struggles and achievements, allows us to perceive the complexities of the relations established between slavery and freedom and the role of education in this configuration.

The Mrs. Leonarda's son

José Agostinho dos Reis was born in the province of Pará on October 11, 1853, the Leonarda Maria de Jesus's son. Most of the short biographies and obituaries published in various newspapers at the time of his death speak of his humble origins, without mentioning his condition as a former slave. On three occasions, José Agostinho dos Reis admitted to having been born into slavery: at an event organized by the *Club dos Libertos de Niterói*², at the founding of the *Centro Abolicionista da Escola Politécnica*³, which we mentioned in our epigraph, and in the letter to Councilor João Alfredo Correia de Oliveira⁴. In these sources, the memory of Mrs. Leonarda, his mother, is remembered as a worker, to whom he attributes the achievement of his freedom.

Due to her condition as a former slave, we infer that Mrs. Leonarda was enslaved and achieved her freedom and that of her son through her trade as a greengrocer. In the letter sent to counselor João Alfredo, shortly after the Abolition, Agostinho dos Reis mentions that he wrote that letter in the house where he was born as a slave and where his mother worked. For more than twenty years, she ran the grocery store located on Espírito Santo Street, having authorization from the Belém City Council to practice her trade (*O Liberal do Pará*, ed. 00033, 02/11/1872, p. 2; *O Liberal*, ed. 00023, 01/27/1889, p. 3). We remember that the trade of grocery store, a tradition of street trading, was initially and mainly practiced by enslaved women. According to Freitas (2022), at the beginning of the 19th century, the street trading scenario began to change. Until then, it was practiced by a majority of slaves for hire, employed by their masters or rented to third parties, and began to be dominated by freed women. This trade was also encouraged by the State, as it collected taxes and solved the problem of basic

² Abolitionist society created in 1881 in the city of Niterói, with Mr. João Clapp as one of its founders, whose main objectives were the liberation and education of enslaved and freed people. At an event in honor of José do Patrocínio, Agostinho dos Reis, in his speech, spoke of his origins and his mother's efforts, described in a publication of the club (*CLUB DOS LIBERTOS CONTRA A ESCRAVIDÃO. Tribute to José do Patrocínio, editor-in-chief and owner of "Gazeta da Tarde" on October 8, 1883: The celebration of the free Forty Citizens Restituted to Society*. Rio de Janeiro: Typografia Central de Evaristo Rodrigues da Costa, 1883).

³ Abolitionist association created by teachers and students of the *Escola Politécnica*, where Agostinho dos Reis mentioned his birth condition, at its inauguration, which, from his speech, was not fully known (*Libertador*, ed. 00194, 09/05/1883, p. 2).

⁴ João Alfredo Correia de Oliveira (1835-1919) was a Brazilian politician, abolitionist and monarchist. Linked to the *Partido Conservador*, he was involved in the formulation of the *Lei do Ventre Livre* and the *Lei Áurea*, in addition to presiding over the province of Pará for a few months, aspects that explain his contact with José Agostinho dos Reis.

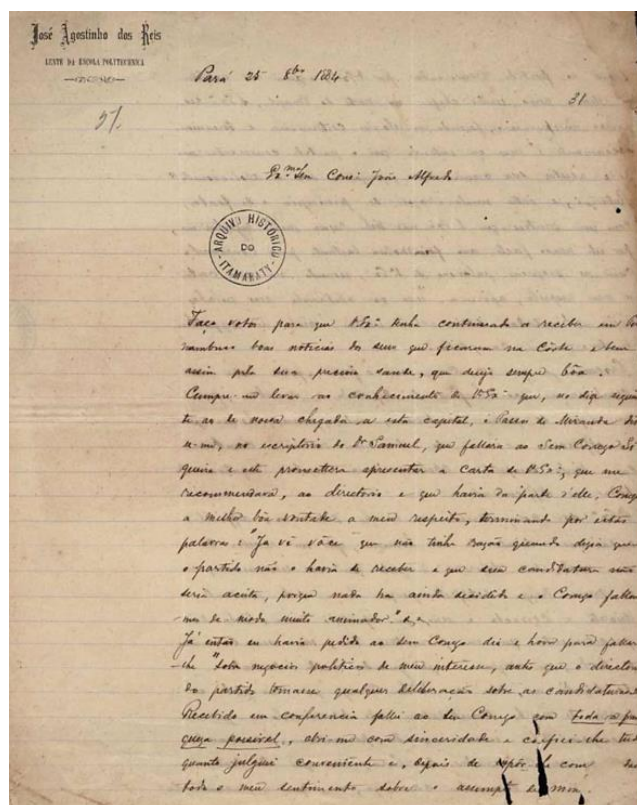
supplies. The author argues, demonstrating with examples, that the street vendors, despite being often persecuted by merchants, the administrative elite, religious brotherhoods and the property-owning class, were not passive in the face of conflicts and disputes in the public space. On the contrary, they were active and mobilized resources to protect their interests.

We can see that Mrs. Leonarda was a shrewd and probably literate woman, as she kept her business legal and spoke out in the press to defend her interests. The advertisement published twice in the *Jornal do Pará* states:

Leonarda Maria de Jesus declares that house no. 50 on Espírito Santo Street, belonging to the late Maria do Carmo e Sá, is mortgaged to the advertiser by deed drawn up in the office of the former notary Castello Branco, on April 5th, 1870; therefore, she warns the public, so that they may not claim ignorance, that no one should do any business with heirs or interested parties in the said house without knowledge of it. Pará, October 31, 1871 (*Jornal do Pará*, ed. 00249, 11/01/1871, p. 3).

In it, she makes clear the business deal that had been signed and documented, warning about possible negotiations. Despite her humble origins, and even though Mrs. Leonarda was illiterate, she recognized the importance of keeping her business regularized and recorded. Likewise, she used the written word and the press as a record and a means that allowed her to preserve the wealth she had acquired. It is possible that she had learned through social experience that the word of a black woman, coming from captivity, had to be backed up by documentation, such as the freedom letter required to prove her manumission. The property was located at 50 Espírito Santo Street, on the same street as her business, which may have been the birthplace of José Agostinho dos Reis, as mentioned in the correspondence.

Figure 1 – First page of the letter sent to Councilor João Alfredo



Source: Available at: <https://repositorio.ufpe.br/handle/123456789/14672>

We did not find any precise information about Agostinho dos Reis' father. Most of his children's birth records list Mrs. Leonarda as the only representative of the paternal grandparents. However, one of the birth records found on the FamilySearch platform lists the name José Custódio Barata, about whom we did not find any further information. José Agostinho dos Reis was adopted by his stepfather, Severino Dias Ferreira Portugal⁵ (*A Constituição*, 10/06/1886, ed. 00131, p. 3 and 4).

In a speech presented to the Chamber of Deputies, Deodoro de Mendonça⁶, in a vote of condolence for the death of José Agostinho, said that it was the hard work of a woman from the people that allowed the humble young man to study (*O Paiz* -RJ, ed. 16400, 14/09/1929, p. 2). As we have shown, Mrs. Leonarda recognized the importance of literature and awakened in her son the desire for education. Agostinho dos Reis' dedication to his studies at the *Seminário Santo Antônio* in Belém, where he graduated in Humanities, caught the attention of his teachers, especially D. Antonio de Macedo Costa, bishop of Pará, who allowed him to be a boarding student of the State to study Engineering (*O Paiz* - RJ, 13/09/1929, ed. 16399, p. 3).

Thus, in 1873, he transferred to the Court, where he was enrolled in the Central School, receiving a bachelor's degree in Natural and Physical Sciences and Mathematics in 1876. But Agostinho dos Reis did not stop; in the following years he continued his studies in Engineering, graduating as a geographic engineer and civil engineer from the *Escola Politécnica*.

In order to supplement his income and support himself at court, José Agostinho dos Reis, like other black students of the period, worked as a teacher⁷. His name is described as one of the teachers at *Externato Americano*, an educational institution that prepared young people for admission to *Colégio Pedro II* and *Escola Politécnica* (*Gazeta de Notícias* RJ, ed. 00081, 03/24/1878, p. 4).

He was an active student dedicated to scientific development in Brazil, being part of several associations that aimed to develop science, such as the *Instituto de Ciências Naturais*, the *União Politécnica* and the *Instituto Acadêmico de Engenharia*, of which he was one of the founders:

Yesterday, a society of young men from this school was set up in one of the rooms of *Escola Polythénica*, under the title *Instituto Acadêmico de Engenharia*, who meet to study this science. The installation partners were Misters. Dr. André Rebouças, Carlos de Menezes, Augusto Telles, Arthur Getulio, Azevedo Sodré, Versiani, Oscar de Gouvêa, Carlos Guedes, Osorio de Almeida, Van Erven, Arthur Cezar, Oliveira Bello, Eduardo Cotrim, José Rebouças, Rufino de Almeida França and Agostinho Reis (*Gazeta de Notícias*, ed. 00110. 04/23/1877, p. 2).

Another aspect that we can highlight is the closeness of Agostinho dos Reis with other black personalities. The announcement of the installation of the *Instituto Acadêmico de Engenharia* mentions the names of André Rebouças and his brother José Rebouças, black men who invested in Engineering as an area of knowledge within the *Escola Militar, Central* and

⁵ Born in Pará in 1833, civil servant who worked in the Education Inspectorate and died in 1886

⁶ Deodoro Machado de Mendonça (1889 – 1968), from Pará, lawyer, professor, journalist and Brazilian politician, was a federal deputy for Pará.

⁷ Alves (2023) highlights the teaching work of a black intellectuals group who were involved with the abolitionist movement, such as André Rebouças (1838-1898), José do Patrocínio (1856-1905) and Vicente de Souza (1852-1908), as well as José Agostinho dos Reis, and defended education as a distinct form of militancy against the slavery system. A heterogeneous group that, despite the social demarcation given by color in slave society, entered the imperial higher education centers, such as the *Escola Politécnica* and the *Faculdade de Medicina*, with a common focus: the defense of the abolition of slavery.

Politécnica. During the founding period, André was a professor at the *Escola Politécnica*, while Agostinho dos Reis and José Rebouças, still students, showed common interests, helping to structure, legitimize and value Engineering in Brazil.

During its formation, a major conflict arose between the *Escola Politécnica's* congregation and representatives of the imperial government, in which Agostinho dos Reis played a leading role. When Dr. Ignacio da Cunha Galvão⁸ was acting director of the school, as he was the oldest professor, the Imperial Minister Leôncio de Carvalho⁹ ordered compliance with some points established by the Reform of Primary and Secondary Education and Higher Education (*Decreto Governamental* No. 7,247, of April 19, 1879¹⁰). Acting in accordance with the institution's statutes, Professor Galvão submitted the decree to the congregation, and his attitude was seen as disrespectful, resulting in his dismissal from the position of acting director. The students mobilized against his dismissal, holding demonstrations, speeches, press releases and petitions to parliament. In these mobilizations, José Agostinho dos Reis led some of the speeches, representing the student body and helping to draft a petition sent to parliament explaining the situation and asking for intervention (*Jornal do Comércio* - RJ, ed. 00151, 01/06/1879, p. 1; *Jornal do Comércio* - RJ, ed. 00153, 03/06/1879). There were several moments of protest until the police forces were called in to prevent the demonstrations. As a way of finalizing the demands and resolving the impasse, the institution was punished with a thirty-day closure, the permanent director was fired, four teachers were laid off and substitute teachers were hired. Even so, the students continued to resist. According to a note published on July 19, the indicated professors The government would teach their classes, but the classrooms remained empty, as the students preferred to participate in the free courses taught by their former teachers (*Gazeta de Notícias* - RJ, ed. A00330(A), 07/19/1879, p. 3).

It is necessary to highlight, in this student mobilization, the leadership of a black student who left the condition of slavery. Alves and Silva (2022) mention black students who reached the imperial educational institutions, such as the Faculdade de Medicina, the Faculdade de Direito do Largo de São Francisco, the Academia Imperial de Belas Artes and the *Escola Normal*, breaking a system of exclusion, and were active subjects within these organizations. Not only did they break the barriers that hindered their entry, they also gained visibility, raising their voices against oppressive systems. On the other hand, these attitudes reveal the erasure of the Brazilian memory of certain black personalities. For example, in the book *História da Engenharia no Brasil - século XVI a XIX*, by Pedro Carlos da Silva Telles (1994), this conflict is reported, but the name of José Agostinho dos Reis is hidden. The author also refers to the involvement of the *Escola Politécnica* in the abolitionist movement,

⁸ Inácio da Cunha Galvão (1821-1906) was a soldier, teacher and engineer, born in Porto Alegre/RS. He directed the Dom Pedro II Railway, the *Agência de Colonização* and the *Escola Politécnica* of Rio de Janeiro, where he taught. He was also appointed president of the province of Santa Catarina in 1861.

⁹ Carlos Leôncio da Silva Carvalho (1847-1912) was a Brazilian lawyer, professor and politician who became known for being responsible for the first major educational reform in Brazil.

¹⁰ *Decreto Governamental* No. 7,247 of April 19, 1879, established the reform of primary and secondary education in the municipality of the court and of higher education throughout the Empire, and became known as the *Reforma Leôncio de Carvalho* or the *Reforma do Ensino Livre*. Broadly speaking, the reform regarding higher education can be summarized in five main points: it authorized the association of private individuals to teach subjects taught in official higher education courses; it allowed free colleges maintained by private associations to regularize themselves after seven consecutive years of operation; it suspended mandatory attendance at higher education institutions dependent on the Ministry of the Empire; it allowed free exams for subjects taught at colleges or schools dependent on the Ministry of the Empire; and it created free courses in state colleges related to subjects taught there by private teachers. With regard to students, we highlight two important changes: the release of attendance control and partial exams. With the decree, absences would not be counted and there would be no need to submit to partial exams, with access to final exams being free, considering all those who, even without having attended classes, obtained a satisfactory grade as having passed the subject, which was seen positively by the students.

highlighting the work of Paulo de Frontin¹¹ and André Rebouças, but does not mention anything about Agostinho dos Reis.

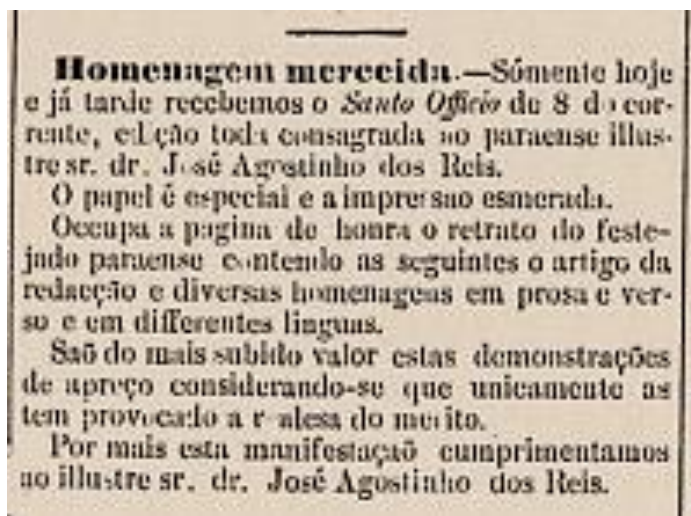
Returning to his education, Agostinho dos Reis had the honor of having the emperor present at his thesis defense (*Gazeta de Notícias* - RJ, 21/02/1979, ed. 00052, p. 1), in which he made proposals on economics, politics, form and remuneration of work, in addition to defending popular education:

Give freedom to the worker, guarantee their properties and especially the right to inheritance; educate the people, instill in their spirit the love of virtue and goodness, let the businessman understand that the second precept of the Decalogue tells us: Love one another – and thus we will have achieved, by the best possible means, through love and freedom, to give the world Social Peace (*O Liberal do Pará*, ed. 00254, 09/11/1880, p. 1).

Shortly after graduating in Geographical and Civil Engineering, Agostinho dos Reis took a competitive exam and became a substitute teacher at the *Escola Politécnica*.

In 1881, he returned to Pará, after eight years at court, with three degrees under his belt. He was enthusiastically received by his fellow countrymen; several expressions of appreciation took place at the time of his return, such as a ball in his honor, a popular demonstration and the exhibition of his thesis at the *Centro Comercial Paraense* (*A Constituição*, 03/02/1881, ed. 00027, p.2), which allowed him to have an issue of the *Santo Offício* magazine dedicated to him:

Figure 2 - *A Constituição* 11/01/1881, ed. 00034, p. 2.



Upon his return, he was invited to start the *Conferências Populares*, held at the Practical School, with the aim, in his own words, of “educating and instructing the people” (*A Constituição: Organização do Partido Conservador*, 17/01/1881, ed. 0013, p. 1).

The theme of the first conference would be the *Passagem de Vênus*, given that Agostinho dos Reis was part of a study commission on this subject at court. He began the conference by thanking his childhood teachers, many of whom were present, and emphasizing the importance of higher education. He continued his presentation by providing information

¹¹ André Gustavo Paulo de Frontin (1860-1933) was a Brazilian politician and engineer. He studied at the *Escola Politécnica*, where he became a professor. He was alongside Agostinho dos Reis at the *Escola Politécnica*, as well as at the *Clube de Engenharia*. He was a senator, mayor of the then Federal District and federal deputy.

about our Solar System, speaking about the importance of observing this phenomenon for science, demonstrating how the passage of Venus would be observed, and ending the lecture by calling on his fellow citizens to follow his example by dedicating themselves to their studies and the interests of their province, and to “speak to the people from the public platform, communicating their ideas and discussing why this is the best way to achieve true happiness for the people” (Idem, p. 1).

Agostinho dos Reis gave two more lectures on this subject. In the second, on January 23, 1881, he concluded by praising his homeland and asking for everyone’s help in setting up an observatory in the capital of Pará (*A Constituição*, ed. 00019, 01/24/1881, p. 1).

His interest in the development of the North of the country, especially in the provinces of Pará and Amazonas, was a constant in his life. Even though he was living in the court, he decided to represent Pará in his political life. Still in 1881, perhaps encouraged by so many demonstrations of admiration from his province, Agostinho dos Reis ran for a seat as a deputy, something that makes us reflect on the representation of blacks and freedmen in candidacies during the imperial period.

The candidacy of a freedman

The Constitution of 1824 established that elections throughout the national territory would be indirect and in two levels, composed of voters, in the first level, and voters, in the second level. In this system, the voter elected the elector, only those who were voters were eligible, and the elector elected the deputies and senators. Those over 25 years of age with an annual net income of one hundred thousand *réis* could qualify as voters, and two hundred thousand *réis* for voters. Despite this age limit imposed for voting, there was an exception for those who were married, as well as for military personnel and graduates, who only needed to be 21 years old. Servants and religious workers, women, slaves, indigenous people and children who lived with their parents, i.e., economically dependent, were excluded from the right to vote. Freedmen, as long as they were born in Brazil and obeyed the census criteria, could vote, but they would not be voters, and were therefore ineligible. According to Faria:

For nineteenth-century society, slavery was not an obstacle to the existence of representative government, since slaves belonged to the world of property and were not even counted in the calculation of the population that determined the number of representatives that each province should provide. In this way, representation concerned the universe of free men with a certain income. Despite this, Brazil innovated in relation to freedmen by allowing them to participate in the political process, even if only as first-degree voters. And an even greater innovation occurred in relation to the son of the freedman, who would enjoy full political rights, as long as he met the legal requirements (Faria, 2013, p. 2).

This innovation was further expanded with the Electoral Reform of 1881, at least in formal terms. Among other changes, the main changes were the establishment of direct voting and the ban on illiterate people, in addition to a little-debated aspect: the extension of the right to vote to freedmen.

In the *Lei Saraiva*, as it became known after being proposed by the cabinet headed by Councilor José Antônio Saraiva (1823-1895), any Brazilian citizen who had an annual net income of more than two hundred thousand *réis* and knew how to read and write was considered a voter. With the establishment of direct elections, only the condition of voters would exist,

thus freedmen would have full political citizenship, being able to vote and be voted for if they met the other requirements.

Hilton Costa (2015) analyzes the debates within parliament about the right to vote of former slaves, finding that few parliamentarians viewed this measure with concern. The author realizes, when researching the Annals of Parliament, that, broadly speaking, the full citizenship of freedmen did not bother and, for some, was even praised. The majority understood that this achievement would not be achieved any time soon, it would be a long process to go through the rigor of electoral registration. According to Costa:

the inclusion of the figure of the freedman as a full political citizen in the text of the legislation would be minimized by strict control of the verification of income and/or literacy criteria. Furthermore, in a series of legal specifications defined by Decree No. 3,029 of January 9, 1881 – the Electoral Reform – and Decree No. 7,981 of January 29, 1881 for voter registration, the new legislation still left much decision-making power regarding voter registration to the locality, therefore, the inclusion of freedmen could be “controlled” by the interests of local potentates, so as not to be something worthy of concern. Another way of understanding this process, which does not exclude the previous ones, is based on the hypothesis that from the point of view of political elites it would be more useful to publicly and politically assume a discourse that could propose the incorporation of freedmen, as this would be more interesting for the integration of the country (COSTA, 2015, p. 11).

Even though it extended the right to vote to freedmen, the law drastically restricted the number of voters, subject to social criteria based on income and literacy. José do Patrocínio, who already had ties to Agostinho dos Reis, was one of the main opponents of the reform, speaking out in the press since 1879. According to Carvalho:

Patrocínio was deeply irritated by the parliamentarism that was practiced at the time, denouncing an aspect that had never been revealed to me so clearly. He always mentioned the statistics related to the electoral reform of 1881, which introduced direct voting. Voting used to be done in two rounds. In 1881, direct voting was introduced by law. This law, supposedly democratic, reduced the electorate from 1 million or so voters to around 120 thousand voters. In other words, the 13% of the voting population up until 1881 dropped to 0.8%. Patrocínio drew attention to another consequence of the law: by reducing the electorate, it harmed abolitionist candidates. This is a very interesting statement. As a result, the gap between Congress, especially the Chamber of Deputies, and public opinion grew. As the abolitionist movement grew, changing public opinion (it was the first major public opinion movement in the country), Congress resistance also grew. Thus, the gap between the country and its representation increased (CARVALHO, 1996, p.95-6).

We recognize that the imperial political elite used strategies that allowed them greater control over voters, making it difficult for the poorest classes to access them.

However, with the electoral reform, Agostinho dos Reis had the opportunity not only to become a voter but also to be eligible, running for a seat as a deputy for his state. The professor/engineer, who was already part of the abolitionist movement, was a friend of

Patrocínio and certainly followed the debates and electoral reform projects proposed between 1879 and 1881. Agostinho dos Reis wasted no time, because, after the law was approved in January 1881, he ran for the 1st district of Belém in September.

The PhD. Reis did not receive the protection of the party directories, presenting himself freely as an independent candidate who was guided by his popular conferences. Before the end of the election, it was already known that victory would be practically impossible, but the *Diário de Notícias*, when presenting him as a candidate, did not fail to criticize the reform and its restrictions on voters:

S. s. However, he has only managed to rally voters from the old system, those whom the reform, with its requirement of civil suitability certificates, has driven away from the polls, denying them their moral capacity to be included in the voter registry.

If he is defeated, which he perhaps did not expect, because not everyone can win, at least Mr. Reis will have acquired the experience to not despair in the future... (*Diário de Notícias* - PA, 10/30/1881, ed. 00247, p.2).

Even though he was not elected, as he only received forty votes, something quite insignificant compared to the more than a thousand votes for the first place, his participation was significant, and, according to his words, it was this election that encouraged him to run again in 1884 (*Diário de Notícias* – PA, ed. 00249, 10/29/1884, p. 2).

By 1884, the abolitionist movement had already blossomed, several organizations were created, and a counter-slavery movement also gained strength (ALONSO, 2015). At that time, the abolitionist leadership decided to invest in candidacies so that their representatives could pressure political power, as the slave-owning elite had always done. Thus, the *Confederação Abolicionista*¹² issued a Manifesto to the electorate, from the court, criticizing the electoral reform for its restriction on the number of voters and preservation of the interests of the elite. even so, it nominated José do Patrocínio as a candidate as a possibility of breaking with this system:

It is out of respect for the law, and because it exclusively wants to stay within the law, that it decided to go to the polls to ask for the consecration of its ideas by the suffrage granted to its represented opinions as in the social issue that is currently being raised by its candidate.

The *Confederação Abolicionista* has no illusions.

Appealing to the electoral body of the capital of the Empire, it knows that it is addressing everything that the exercise of sovereignty has to offer; however, it also knows that a mistaken political notion has so restricted the exercise of popular sovereignty that in a municipality like the court of more than 600 thousand souls, only 6,793 citizens enjoy the electoral mandate, in the proportion of one voter for more than 100 inhabitants.

The narrow forms of our electoral organization have resulted in the persistence of a parliamentary system, all in the interest of castes rather than the development of order in freedom, the stability of institutions in respect of human rights, the foundation of public wealth in the most fruitful and solid of properties: the property of labor (*Gazeta da Tarde*, ed. 00216, 09/16/1884, p. 3).

¹² The *Confederação Abolicionista* was founded in May 1883, with the aim of bringing together abolitionists in a single, large national civil association, pressuring the government with symbolic and impactful acts. It played a very important role in the abolitionist movement from its creation, involving several associations, politicians and leaders.

In Pará, this strategy was clearly publicized, arguing for the need to elect candidates in that province who were in favor of the abolitionist cause (*Diário de Notícias* PA, ed. 00274, 11/28/1884, p. 2). Agostinho dos Reis played an important role within the Abolitionist Confederation, being one of the main speakers and its representative in the North of the country, as its correspondent in the Province of Pará.

In a letter published in the *Diário de Notícias do Pará*, José Agostinho presented himself as a candidate for deputy to the general legislative assembly for the 1st district of Pará, highlighting three major issues that he considered important for the development of the Amazon. The first concerned education and the need for solid foundations, especially in secondary education, in addition to defending the creation of a higher education institution in the far north of the empire. Second, he argued for the need for economic progress in the region, through scientific studies that would recognize the wealth and assist the extractive industry. And finally, as it could not be otherwise, he defended the abolition of slave labor, justifying that it was not interesting from an economic point of view (*Diário de Notícias* (PA), ed. 00182, 09/08/1884, p. 2). His proposals for candidacy, highlighted in the correspondence to voters, showed him to be a man of science who believed in education and free labor as necessary transformations for social development.

Despite his radical ideas for the society of the time, he had a connection with the Conservative Party. His primary education in a religious organization with conservative representatives and his fervent Catholicism help to understand his search for political support within the party. In a letter sent to counselor João Alfredo, Agostinho dos Reis explained the difficulties he encountered in running for the conservatives. Counselor João Alfredo was one of the main leaders of the Party in the country, had previously been president of the province of Pará, and, from the tone of the correspondence, we infer that there was a friendship between them. The counselor sent a letter of introduction to be delivered to Canon Siqueira, Manuel José de Siqueira Mendes (1825-1892), leader of the *Partido Conservador* in the province. Despite João Alfredo's nomination, the canon did not even raise the possibility of putting Agostinho dos Reis's name before the party's board, stating that this impediment would be for the sole reason that he was an abolitionist.

Among the liberals, there were rumors that the party would support the candidacy of José Agostinho dos Reis, which was approved by some members (*Diário de Notícias* - PA, ed. 00247, 10/26/1884, p. 3). The professor/engineer commented about the rumors of a possible nomination by the *Partido Liberal*, but reaffirmed his position, as he would remain in the race independently, exposing the fact to the press:

To the electorate of the 1st district

As my candidacy for general deputy was not accepted by the leader of the conservative party of this province, and the sole reason for this decision being the fact that I am an abolitionist, which led to my name not even being presented to the directory, despite the recommendation of one of the leaders of the same party in the country, I consider it my duty, by logical consequences of facts relating to my current candidacy, to declare to the electoral body of the 1st district of this province that I continue to be a candidate for this district as I was in 1881, calmly awaiting the judgment of the electorate.

As soon as possible, I will hold some political conferences in order to justify my procedure and to present to the public my ideas on the most pressing issues at the present time, and also to say how I kept my word by working, even without being a deputy, for the growth and prosperity of our province.

Pará, October 18th, 1884.

José Agostinho dos Reis (*Diário de Notícias* - PA, ed. 00241, 10/19/1884, p.2).

Even the veracity of the letter presented by Agostinho dos Reis with the indication of João Alfredo was questioned, proving political persecution against his candidacy. An editorial in the *Diário de Notícias do Pará* raises important questions for thinking about his first and second candidacies:

The small vote, which he then obtained, despite the parties having closed their ranks and demanding the utmost observance of discipline, to which voters considered free and independent obey; the small vote, we said, served as a lesson and fair compensation for the effort he had made to show the **path opened by the reform to the Brazilian voter**. It was a fair compensation, because he did not see his work and his hopes completely frustrated, since those few votes affirmed at the same time (...)

This or that attitude, this calm pronouncement of the electorate in relation to the appointees of the party directorates, demanding from each one their manifesto, the solemn declaration of their intentions, is nothing more than the necessary **result of the struggle waged from the heights of the people's tribune against the authoritarian regime, against prejudices, still sons of the old system** (*Diário de Notícias* (PA), ed. 000247, 26/10/1884, p. 3, author's emphasis).

In it, there are quotes about the electoral reform that allowed Agostinho dos Reis to run for office, uprisings about an authoritarian regime and the fight against prejudices coming from the old system. The figure of a black man, freed from captivity, should not be well regarded by representatives of parties that traditionally came from an elite that maintained itself by exploiting the labor of slaves. José Agostinho dos Reis represented the dream of this population for freedom, education and political participation.

The justification used by the canon was questioned by the abolitionist position of councilor João Alfredo, an important leader of the *Partido Conservador*, who nominated the engineer. However, in addition to being an abolitionist, José Agostinho dos Reis was a former slave, part of the captive black population, and social issues, race and racism itself weighed on this decision.

His condition as a freedman was not used, at least explicitly, in the campaign, given that the link with slavery was something used to depreciate black people, but his abolitionist position was demarcated and highlighted. Likewise, several newspapers reinforced the fact that he belonged to the working class, which some understood as an impediment to his acceptance by the political parties:

José Agostinho dos Reis is poor, so he could not impose his candidacy on the militant parties; but in compensation he has the most opulent wealth of knowledge and the enviable WILLPOWER that the wealthy and the already over-spent deputies of the militant parties will never have (*Diário de Belém*, ed. 00243, p.3).

Agostinho dos Reis had the courage to once again launch his candidacy independently, gaining the support of some representatives of the *Partido Conservador* and the *Partido Liberal*, who made this fact known to the press. He relied mainly on conferences and the press as tools of political propaganda, approaching the working classes without caring whether these people would be able to elect him. His campaign was based mainly on abolitionist ideals, on being a representative of the people of Pará and their interests, on the defense of education and

science and on his personal trajectory, because, despite his humble origins, he managed, through his own efforts, to achieve prominence and social prestige.

Even with the support of several fellow citizens, Agostinho dos Reis was once again defeated at the polls, being defeated by the representative of the *Partido Conservador*, who continued to defend slavery values. This fact was criticized by those who wanted a change in their state, which was constantly electing a representation more focused on for other regions, “that political interest would lead to the conversion of Pará into a branch of the slave trade predominance of the coffee men of the south” (*Diário de Notícias* - PA, ed. 00284, 12/12/1884, p. 2).

In his political platform, the defense of the Northern Region would come from several fronts, as shown in the public conferences, when he spoke on different topics. In one of them, held at the *Teatro da Paz*, in the presence of the *Barão de Maracujá*, president of the province, he addressed the following topics:

- I. rubber extraction, agriculture, industries and the social state;
- II. first industries: the sugar industry, government resolution about Central Sugar Mills;
- III. General plan for the establishment of industries in Pará (*Diário de Notícias*, ed. 00053, 11/03/1883, p. 3).

He also worked as an engineer at *Engenhos Centrais* (*Diário de Notícias*, ed. 00105, 11/05/1883, p. 2), was part of a committee to examine proposals for paving and sewage plans (*Diário de Notícias*, ed. 00051, 02/03/1884, p. 2) and reinforced the need for railway lines for the economic development of the region (*Diário de Notícias*, ed. 00178, 09/08/1887, p. 3). He also spared no effort to support his fellow countryman Julio Cezar, who created an aerial system that, according to his allegations, was plagiarized by two French captains, mobilizing a conference at the *Escola Politécnica* and calling for action from the Brazilian authorities (*Diário de Notícias* - PA, ed. 00261, 17/11/1885, p. 2).

Despite the defeats, there were signs of a possible nomination for president of the province of Amazonas (*Diário de Notícias* - PA, ed. 0043, 24/02/1887, p. 2). His name continued to be considered, being a candidate in other elections during the Empire and also in the Republic.

Considerations about the history and its erasures

Within the abolitionist movement, both in the court and in Pará, Agostinho dos Reis became one of its main leaders, participating in the creation of several abolitionist associations, making countless speeches, positioning himself in the press and defending education for the working class, including slaves and freedmen (ALVES, 2023).

A large part of his activism and his life was within the Polytechnic School. In this institution, while still an academic, he rebelled against the system of monarchical power exercised over the academies and found support for his abolitionist thoughts, associating himself with several scientific organizations. As a teacher, he entered the institution as a substitute professor and became a full professor, assuming interim management at various moments. At the celebration of the *Escola Politécnica* 50th anniversary in 1924, José Agostinho Reis held the position of vice-director, alongside Dr. Paulo de Frontin, the permanent director, a significant moment for him, who had been at the institution since the *Escola Central* became the *Escola Politécnica* in 1874. Despite his importance within the School, the participation of a former slave who became director is little known.

It was in this position that, in 1925, he received Albert Einstein (1879-1955). The physicist visited Brazil on two occasions: on March 21st, when he was heading to Argentina,

and between May 4th and 12th, 1925, when he was returning to Europe. Einstein had several commitments, being at various research institutions, such as the *Museu Nacional*, the *Instituto Oswaldo Cruz*, the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* and the *Observatório Nacional*. He also gave three lectures: at the *Clube de Engenharia* on May 6th, about the Theory of Special Relativity; at the *Academia de Ciência* on May 7th, about the Quantum Theory of Light; and at the *Escola Politécnica* on May 8th, about the Theory of General Relativity. We assume that Agostinho dos Reis was present at two of these lectures, since he was vice-president of the *Clube de Engenharia*, where he presided over the panel, giving a speech introducing the physicist.

Figure 3 - Agostinho dos Reis



Source: Available at: <https://dol.com.br/noticias/para/687339/os-negros-paraenses-que-lutaram-contra-a-escravidao?d=1>. Accessed on: February 21st, 2025.

He was accepted as a member of the *Clube de Engenharia* on March 17th, 1887, and served on committees and had his speeches published in the *Revista do Clube*. Agostinho dos Reis remained in the club until his death, having been vice president during Paulo de Frontin's administration and assuming the interim presidency on several occasions.

Reis died on September 11th, 1929, at his residence in Andaraí, Rio de Janeiro, leaving behind his wife, Clara Isaac dos Reis, and his six children: Aureliano Isaac dos Reis, Maria de Lourdes Isaac dos Reis, Leonarda Isaac dos Reis, Agostinho Isaac dos Reis, Tarcísio Isaac dos Reis, and Amália Isaac dos Reis. He was 75 years old, was vice-president of the *Clube de Engenharia* and a professor at the Escola Politécnica. There were several statements in the press and even in the Chamber of Deputies highlighting his humble origins, his dedication to studies, to the abolitionist and republican causes and his assistance to the poorest.

As a man of science, José Agostinho dos Reis encouraged and assisted in the development of academic and professional institutions and carried out studies and projects for the development of the country. As a teacher, he believed in the combination of education and abolition to transform social reality, committing himself to proposals for popular education. As a native of Pará, he was concerned about the political interests that were defended in his region, thinking and proposing improvements. The trajectory of José Agostinho dos Reis is extremely

significant, not only because he was a person who was born into slavery and achieved prominence and social prestige, but also because he was forgotten by Brazilian history. The issues of race and racism present in Dr. Reis's life, which were often concealed by the positions and social contacts he achieved, are evident in the concealment of his condition as a slave, as well as in the erasure of his historical importance.

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