

**SILVA, Uiran Gebara da. *Rebeldes Contra o Mediterrâneo: Revoltas rurais e a escrita da história das classes subalternas na Antiguidade Tardia*. São Paulo: FAPESP Humanitas, 2016. 414 p.<sup>1</sup>**

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Resulting from a very productive research work aiming the Ph.D. title in Social History granted by the University of São Paulo, I believe the work of Uiran Gebara da Silva can be summarised in two words: indignation and rescue. Indignation because the author constantly shows the deficiency of the scholarship about the late antique rural world in seeing what becomes obvious through his analysis: the existence of at least two popular movements, composed mainly of rural workers and small property landowners, that get organised in order to question the social order they were part of. Those groups are known as “circumcellions” and “bagaudae”; the first one acting in North Africa, while the second one must be located in a less defined area between Tarraconensis and Armorica. Rescue because, from the identification of the scholar deficiency mentioned above, the author proposes to initiate a new line of research about the movements, having their social origins and aims more clarified from the comparative analysis between them.

In view of that, the subtitle given to the work is justified: “Rural riots and the writing of History of subaltern classes in Late Antiquity”. In fact, much more than producing a mere narrative or analytical proposal over the circumcellions and bagaudae, with their respective origins, aims, and forms of collective action, Uiran Gebara dedicates himself to understanding the reason why such groups were considered in so diverse ways by the most part of 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship (as strong-arms for the local overlords, as fanatic monks, as nativist rebels, etc.), but not as mobs composed of rural workers (with the possible inclusion of slaves, though not certain) and landowners of small properties. That explains why a whole part of his work is dedicated to the theoretical and historiographical discussion both about the more strict study of the two

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rioted mobs, as well as the land, rural production, and work relations in Late Antiquity. In the face of such a profitable debate that has so much to say about the 20<sup>th</sup> century itself, the final analysis, in which the author really leans over the documentation (originated, as always, from the elites, which serve as a filter to the information about their subordinates), shows up as a proposal aiming to stimulate other researches about the same topic rather than as a definitive exposition of it. Surely this is one of the greatest virtues to be highlighted in his work.

In account of his disposition in criticizing most of the researches about social relations in late antique countryside involving bagaudae and circumcellions, the author dedicates the first chapter to the presentation and problematization of the scholarship he debates with. The central point in that part is the elucidation of theoretical assumptions about late antique rural environment that can be seen in conceptions of what the two mobs consisted in. Uiran Gebara shows as basic explanatory model of such readings the one that defines social relations in the countryside as fundamentally marked by a decrease in peasantry's life quality, in the same pace as the ascension of the rural patronage which would gain legal expression in the institution of colonate, largely considered as the basis of Medieval feudalism. In that sense, the autonomy of the peasants who were members of the mobs in question is severally demoted by the preference for a reading that turns itself to the identification of patronage relations in the mobs. The consequence is the tendency in understanding the bagaudae as mere militia for rural powerful leaders with traces of personal power, and the circumcellions as groups of religious fanatics put together by Donatist bishops in the context of the main North African Christian conflict in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Uiran Gebara, however, proposes a different reading of both historical phenomena. He doesn't intend to read them as simple strong-arms for the local overlords, as if they were merely manipulated masses, but as peasants making up a subaltern class in the social spectre of late antique Gaul, Hispania, and North Africa. Nevertheless, in societies in which the major part of literary material is produced by dominant classes, such a historical approach obviously faces severe limitations. The second chapter is dedicated to the identification of those limitations and to the theoretical and methodological options at the disposal of the historian who aims to avoid them.

If the second chapter approaches theoretical and methodological questions for the analysis of documentation about peasantry originated from dominant classes, the third chapter turns to praxis. The author's aim

here is to demonstrate that ancient authors tend to present the two mobs in a very similar way in various aspects. In order to reach that aim, Uiran follows basically two paths, even if they are not always so delimited in relation to each other: On the one hand, he seeks to show that there exist some literary *topoi* generally presented by narratives about real or symbolic empowerment moments (via rebellion) to subaltern classes (the *topoi* being three: the authority inversion, the egalitarian Golden Age, and the reversion of lines of authority) and how they are used to treat the analysed mobs; on the other hand, he wants to make clear that (differently from what would most scholarship prefer) the documentation has no general tendency to refer to bagaudae and circumcellions as *latrones*, which, if true, could be an indication of their binding to local overlords through patronage relations. Maybe the main conclusion of the third chapter documental analysis is that the rural patronage, instead of being in full ascension (as would be defended by the major historiographical tendency in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), apparently faced a hegemony crisis, of which the very existence of contestant mobs as the bagaudae and the circumcellions appear as symptomatic examples.

The author resumes questioning models in the fourth chapter. There, Uiran Gebara seeks to clarify the social origins of the rebels under analysis, nominally the rural communities of Gaul, Hispania, and North Africa. Also there his analysis takes two paths: firstly, he confronts historiographical models, highlighting Chris Wickham's, due especially to his updated utilization of all the rural archaeological research regarding Late Antiquity, to his questioning of rural patronage predominance, and to his view of the generalized diffusion of colonate in all the regions of the Mediterranean; secondly, the author presents the characterization of bagaudae and circumcellions made by sources more or less contemporary to the events as well as the goals and interests behind those narratives. In that sense, for example, the information given by Augustine that the agonistic circumcellions were basically the Donatist bishops' strong-arms is questioned, considering the ancient author's interest in vilifying his Donatist adversaries, ignoring that there were registered conflicts between both groups as well as that the circumcellis sometimes worked with the consent of bishops that belonged to the same group as the bishop of Hippo.

To conclude, in the fifth chapter the author turns himself again to the documentation, this time to propose a new narrative about the actions of bagaudae and circumcellions, having as background both the historiographical updating and the analysis of the literary

characterization regarding the mobs, aiming to elucidate their methods, area of action, and goals. From that analysis, Uiran Gebara proposes a new explanatory model about the two social phenomena, “which sees a politicization process of the social relations in the countryside when traditional forms of ideological and political domination faced a crisis” (p. 276)<sup>3</sup>. Bagaudae and circumcellions are no longer examples of the continuous ascension to power of local overlords or examples of patronage in a process that ends in Medieval feudalism and serfdom, but they are symptoms of the hegemony crisis of such powerful groups, which allows that popular movements of political confrontation (without any apparent centralized leadership, which is another relevant information brought up by the author) organize themselves and fight for their aspirations and interests. One possibly notable example of relatively lasting success can be identified in the case of Armorica, whose inhabitants start being referred to in some documents as barbarians for having abandoned Roman order (a possible reference to the demolition of the ideal Roman order of land property and work exploiting).

Notably one of the most fascinating points in the work of Uiran Gebara da Silva is its political nature, beyond a mere well done academic research. The author himself makes explicit that that is (or should be) the case not only of his work, but of every research approaching the History of subaltern classes. In the case of *Rebeldes contra o Mediterrâneo*, in my opinion, the politicization turns to the two words mentioned in the beginning of this review. On the one hand, the indignation not as simple feeling of inconformity towards an established tendency, but as a conscious academic and scientific positioning of permanent critique regarding the historiographical production that serves or reflects the *status quo* of its time. In that sense, nothing is more representative than the author’s own words in his conclusion: “... but the great discovery that I’ve made with this research is that, in what concerns the history of those below, more overshadowing than the ancient authors is the action of historians at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more sympathetic to the injustices of the Roman Empire than even some members of the own Roman elite” (p. 277). On the other hand, there is the rescue, product of such indignation and arising from the political positioning that looks more to the capacities and agency of those “below” than to the fantastic (and sometimes “modern”) domination apparatus by the part of the Roman elites, to the point of not being possible to face rioted groups as something more than rabbles manipulated by the powerful. As a consequence, the clear result of Uiran Gebara da Silva’s research has a

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<sup>3</sup> The translations are my own.

certain scent of truism because of the logical sense that guides the whole work. However, it is precisely the works that state the obvious against all the efforts to ignore it that deserve to be considered masterpieces.