

Slavery and Politics: Brazil and Cuba, 1790-1850

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Recommended Citation

Izecksohn, Vitor (2016) "Slavery and Politics: Brazil and Cuba, 1790-1850," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.3.15

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss3/14>

Review

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Summer 2016

Marquese, Rafael and Parron, Tamis and Berbel Marcia. *Slavery and Politics: Brazil and Cuba, 1790-1850*. University of New Mexico Press, \$95.00
ISBN 9780826356475

Fighting for slavery under Empire and Nation.

Originally published in Brazil, this translated volume organized by three professors at the University of São Paulo brings a fresh contribution to the literature on slavery. The book fits in a long line of transnational comparisons, focusing this time on the making of plantations in the era of Constitutional representation. It emphasizes the active dynamics and adaptability of the Iberian main centers of tropical agriculture in what authors define as “the age of mass slavery” (262).

Brazil and Cuba endured the longest experiences with African slavery in the Western Hemisphere. In both societies slave-owners emerged in the 19th century eager to maintain and expand the coercive forms of labor they had inherited from each region’s respective colonial past. Transformations in the nature of slavery took place in response to the industrialization of the world economy, with the expansion of markets for cotton, sugar and coffee. These changes altered work rhythms, intensified the scale of labor and demanded a constant increase in the size of the slave population. Keeping international slave traffic open was essential to the new conditions of expansion, once endogenous growth was generally absent in most regions outside the U.S. South. But during the first half of the nineteenth century transformations in the Atlantic world made international conditions adverse to slaveholders’ interests. This book tells about their fierce resolve to resist and the strategies employed in defense of their right to capture and enslave human beings: a story that connects slavery and liberalism in deep, oftentimes weird ways.

In defending what they believe to be their property rights, masters had to confront an expanding international abolitionist movement as well as growing

British diplomatic and military pressures against the transoceanic traffic in slaves. With the abolition of slavery in the newly independent Latin American republics and, especially, after British Caribbean emancipation, foreign conditions turned decisively against transatlantic traffic in slaves. Consequently, the problem of slavery was at the center of national/colonial debates and that circumstance led to acceleration in the formulation of arguments in defense of the institution in both Brazil and Cuba.

The book covers a long time period, starting during the last phase of enlightened imperial reforms in the Iberian world and ending with the final abolition of international slave traffic in Brazil, in the mid-nineteenth century. Arguments in favor of slavery are scrutinized through the analysis of a wide range of memoirs, speeches, personal letters and parliamentary sessions. The authors link arguments in favor of slavery with different conceptions regarding local and national sovereignty emerging after the Haitian revolution and the crisis of Iberian absolutisms. In Cuba slavery was justified through racial arguments while in Brazil it was vindicated in the name of economic steadiness and racial peace. Those arguments matter because they engaged with a crucial period of institutional and economic changes during which slavery was viewed both as a threat to social stability and a source of economic growth, depending upon the sector. They also matter because defenders of slavery engaged in a permanent comparison between their use of slaves and the exploitation of wage work in industrialized England and her possessions. As observed by a Brazilian congressman: "What a sad picture Ireland offers us! Slaves do not suffer that much (240)."

Slaveholder elites in both Brazil and Cuba had to deal with adjustments in the structure of imperial/national government due to the crisis of the Iberian monarchies. Those changes weakened their defense, although diplomacy was widely used as a tool to negotiate and postpone more drastic measures, sometimes just ignoring international treaties and compromises. Whenever possible, governments ignored illicit contraband activities, exempting slaveholders from the legal punishments prescribed by the treaties.

The research in this book explores the institutional spheres of the Courts and Parliament emerging from the crisis of the Iberian system. Representation was a central feature of modernization in both Empires. A strong point of the book addresses how Brazilians and Hispano-Cubans discussed the incorporation of freed slaves and pardos into the political arena. The Brazilian Constitution of

1824 was more inclusive than codes established by the Spanish courts for Cuba and other dominions. Freed slaves and mixed people, as long as they were born in Brazil were considered as citizens, and no racial restrictions were applied to their participation in the lower ranks of the Army and the National Guard. Hispano-Cubans adopted a more restrained approach regarding the extension of citizenship to the "black castas". Consequently the development of a public sphere was meager on that island when compared to the freedom of opinion prevalent among freed-urban Brazilians, especially through the press and the Parliament. Brazilian inclusiveness sometimes functioned in defense of slave traffic, as the great amount of manumissions taking place could be used to justify the annual admissions of thousands of enslaved Africans, while the Haitian Revolution seems to have made Hispanic-Cubans more cautious toward threats of an alliance between slaves and free people of color.

On their part, Cubans danced around the instability of the Spanish peninsula. To maintain their power over the slaves they even accepted a special status, giving up representation at the Cortes, as long as their bondage prerogatives were defended in small circles, through special channels of consultation. The Spanish Empire's unity, slavery and the contraband slave trade were preserved through "an alliance between the slaveholding anti-constitutionalist groups in the colony and constitutionalist antislavery poly politician in the metropolis (183)".

Despite similar demographic conditions (in terms of race distribution), differences were accentuated by Brazilian independence and changes in the dynamics of the Spanish empire. Brazilian independence in 1822 brought problems connected with territorial integrity, social order, and economic stability, thus deteriorating the country's capacity to resist British diplomatic and military efforts to destroy the traffic. The defense of unity and the contraband trade were affected by internal changes that initially weakened the influence of slaveholders in the arenas of political decision. The emergence of a conservative political leadership connected to "Regresso," stimulated a revival of the contraband slave trade. These pro-slavery politicians formulated the strongest argument against foreign impositions during the late 1830s and 1840s until British raids definitively turned the tide against the trade, forcing the Imperial government to abolish it in 1850.

Of course there is too much background to address here. A book written by three authors made for a narrative rich in details and very well researched. But the long archaeology of pro-slavery arguments sometimes made this reader

question if the narrative could not have been synthesized in favor of concision, especially by concentrating on the rich discussion of the post-1826 period when British pressure put slaveholders on the defensive in both societies. Despite these qualifications, the book offers much interesting information and deserves careful attention.

Vitor Izecksohn is Associate Professor of History at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, is author of Slavery and War in the Americas: Race, Citizenship and State Building in the United States and Brazil, 1861-1870. University of Virginia Press, 2014. He is currently writing a book about Confederations in the 1860s.