

SLAVERY, ABOLITION, AND EMANCIPATION IN THE NEW WORLD

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ODIOUS COMMERCE: BRITAIN, SPAIN, AND THE ABOLITION OF THE CUBAN SLAVE TRADE. By DAVID R. MURRAY. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. Pp. 423. \$44.50.)

SLAVERY ON THE SPANISH FRONTIER: THE COLOMBIAN CHOCO, 1680–1810. By WILLIAM FREDERICK SHARP. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976. Pp. 253. \$9.95.)

EMANCIPATION, SUGAR AND FEDERALISM: BARBADOS AND THE WEST INDIES, 1883–1876. By CLAUDE LEVY. (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980. Pp. 208. \$13.50.)

The historiography of the black experience in this hemisphere is still in its infancy. There has been, to be sure, a significant number of books addressing important aspects of black life and culture published within the last decade. Specialists in the study of the slave trade and slavery have seen a reformulation of the questions asked of the sources, and the methodology has undergone considerable refinement. North American historians in particular have been most creative in their reconstruction of these aspects of the black man's past. Not surprisingly, they have had some impact on their counterparts working on similar subjects in Latin America and the Caribbean.

It is now generally recognized that Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas*, published in 1946, opened a new phase in the study of the black experience by placing the study of slavery in a comparative framework.¹ This was the first of two influential works (the second was by Stanley Elkins) that compared the condition of the slaves in what the authors defined as two different slave systems: the North American and the Latin American. The authors attempted to demonstrate that slavery in Spanish and Portuguese America was more humane than in North America. It was Tannenbaum's opinion, for example, that slaves in Latin America were well treated because, unlike the English in North America, the Spaniards and the Portuguese both had a tradition of slavery prior to their establishment of colonies in the New World. Consequently, the two peoples had developed a body of laws that defined the status of the slave, gave him certain rights, and

delineated his master's responsibilities towards him. Tannenbaum argued that the Spanish code, the *Siete Partidas*, with its liberal measures for the protection of the slave, became the foundation of the slave laws in Spain's overseas possessions. As he put it, "Spanish law, custom and tradition were transferred to America and came to govern the position of the Negro slave."² Furthermore, the institutional protection offered to the slave by the Church and the administrative bureaucracy served to ensure that his treatment was humane.

Like Tannenbaum, Elkins held that the institutional protection that the Church and the state provided the slave in Latin America served to protect him from the excesses of his master. He also contrasted the "liberal, Protestant, secularized, capitalist culture of America" with "the conservative, paternalistic, Catholic, quasi-medieval culture of Spain and Portugal and their New World colonies."³ He found that the forces of "unmitigated capitalism" ensured that the slave's treatment in North America was quite oppressive in comparison to that of his brothers in the "quasi-medieval" societies of Latin America.

It gradually became clear to many scholars that before the Tannenbaum-Elkins thesis could be embraced fully, their assumptions and conclusions would have to be tested against the evidence uncovered by a series of case studies of Latin American slavery. Thus the questions raised by those two historians and the unsatisfactory nature of some of their answers had the salutary effect of stimulating empirical research on slave life in several societies. Within the last several years, significant studies have appeared from such scholars as Klein, Knight, Bowser, Degler, and Hall.⁴

The contribution that these works have made to the historiography of slavery cannot be denied. There is, however, a continuing need for more microhistorical studies of slavery in Latin American societies that will provide the basic information upon which broader generalizations about the nature of that institution may be based. It may well be that scholars should now begin to deemphasize, at least temporarily, the comparative focus in the study of slavery. We still do not know enough about its practice and evolution in many societies in Latin America to make meaningful comparisons with North America. Such comparisons, based as they often are on inadequate data, may tend to mislead rather than produce insightful generalizations that can be sustained. One must also question the value of placing all of Latin America within a unitary and sometimes static slave system. Slavery, wherever it existed, varied in accordance with time, occupation, place, and a whole complex of other factors such as the personality of the masters, the social and political institutions, and the stage of economic development of the society in which it existed. Historians may also do well to reconsider their concept of a unitary slave system for the United States, a theoretic-

cal construct that obscures much of the variation within the institution during the more than two centuries that it existed in North America.

One of the more positive recent developments in the historiography of slavery, however, has been the focus on the social institutions that slaves and free people created to sustain themselves. North American historians such as Eugene Genovese, John Blassingame, George Rawick, and Herbert Gutman have explored such important issues as the slave family and slave religion to determine how these individuals were able to preserve their humanity under oppression.⁵ The emphasis is not so much on what was done to the slaves, although this can never be ignored, but rather on their resilience and on their struggles to order their own lives. Using the same approach, Leon Litwack has recently enriched our understanding of free blacks during the years immediately after Emancipation in the United States.⁶

Historians of slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean, with few exceptions, have not dealt with these issues with the depth or subtlety of their North American counterparts. We are, for example, still lacking a comprehensive treatment of the slave family. There are, as yet, no first-rate studies of the belief systems of the slaves. Nor is there any creative analysis of the postemancipation experiences of the various black populations. Until such studies are undertaken, we cannot begin to understand the diversity of the creative responses of the peoples of African descent to their enslavement and to their emancipation.

Although much of the recent literature has been devoted to a consideration of slavery, the study of the slave trade has not been neglected. In fact, aspects of the trade have been reexamined in major works by Curtin, Anstey, Bethell, Klein and others.⁷ These recent studies have eschewed the moralistic tone that characterized many of the older works and, where appropriate, are quantitative in their methodology. Issues such as the African origins of the slaves, the distribution patterns in the Americas, mortality rates during the Atlantic passage and after arrival in the New World, profitability, and abolition have constituted the primary emphases of the works published during the last decade. In general, these studies show that the various national branches of the trade shared many similarities in the mortality rates of slaves and crew, diet, sexual composition of the cargoes, and the tonnage of the ships. Yet much more research needs to be done before we can begin to understand fully all of the dimensions of that traffic in human merchandise.

The three works being reviewed here can be best evaluated when placed within the context of the recent trends in the historiography of the slave trade, slavery, and the postemancipation era. David Murray's excellent study of England's persistent efforts to get the Spaniards to end the slave trade to Cuba during the nineteenth century represents a

major addition to the literature on abolition. The broad outlines of this struggle have been generally known but Murray provides the first detailed account of the British pressure and the intransigence of the Cubans and the Spaniards. Murray's study gives vigorous support for the view that the British were inspired essentially by lofty humanitarian ideals in their half-century long crusade. His arguments are supported by a wealth of new data from the Public Record Office, the British Museum, the Archivo General de Indias, the Archivo Histórico Nacional, and other smaller archival collections. The work will undoubtedly be criticized by those who would ascribe to the British less highminded motives. Yet Murray's point of view is persuasively presented and seems to be entirely plausible.

Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807 was followed by an energetic campaign to persuade other slave-trading nations to do likewise. Murray focuses on the extensive diplomatic pressure that the British exerted upon the Spaniards but he wisely situates this diplomatic warfare within the context of Britain's relationship with the other European nations. This campaign had the support of British public opinion, the abolitionists, and the West Indian planters who, particularly after the abolition of British slavery in 1833, feared the competition of Cuban slave-grown sugar.

British pressure on the Spaniards to abolish the trade was rewarded with some measure of success in 1817 when Spain acquiesced. This agreement was embodied in a treaty signed by the two nations. Under the terms of the treaty, Spain received £400,000 in compensation from England with final abolition to take place in 1820. In addition, the treaty provided for a mutual right of search of suspected slavers and the creation of mixed tribunals to punish violators of the ban. Murray shows that Spain's decision to end the trade was not inspired by humanitarian ideals but was prompted by the necessity to obtain the compensation to purchase Russian-made vessels.

Spain's behavior after 1820 indicated that she was not committed to an abolition of the trade to her most valuable colony. Patriotic Spaniards took umbrage at England's interference in what they considered to be a domestic matter. Cuban planters, who were dependent upon slave labor for their economic sustenance, resisted any attempts to end the trade. As they saw it, economic catastrophe would result from the cessation of the human traffic to their sugar-producing island. Bureaucrats in Spain and Cuba actively connived with the traders or closed their eyes to infractions of the treaty. Accordingly, the slave trade to Cuba actually increased after 1820. Clearly, humanitarian ideals were superseded by the economic interests of the colonists.

This meticulously researched work underscores the various subterfuges Spain employed to avoid ending the trade. Spain's reluctance

to honor her obligations stemmed in part from the fear that an aggressive campaign to end the trade might stimulate an independence movement and lead to the loss of her valuable colony. Spanish officials strenuously resisted making additional concessions to the British that would contribute to a more effective implementation of the treaty. For example, Spain never declared the slave trade to be piracy, a step which would have accelerated its demise. On their part, the Cuban Creoles suspected British officials of fomenting slave rebellions and of wanting to "Africanize" the island. Some flirted with the idea of annexation by the United States so as to place them beyond the reach of England's tentacles.

When the slave trade to Cuba finally ended, it came primarily as a result of a constellation of international forces. The outbreak of the Civil War in the United States and the emancipation of the slaves in that country played principal roles in this regard. In 1862, while the Civil War raged, the United States and England signed a mutual right of search treaty, paving the way for an effective cooperation by both nations in the fight. No longer would the American flag provide a sanctuary for illicit slave traders. When the United States allowed the execution of a convicted slave trader in 1862, this was one further indication of the Lincoln administration's commitment to abolition. American emancipation gave the coup de grace to the Cuban trade. Spanish officials feared that if the trade, and ultimately slavery, were not ended the island could be engulfed by a violent rebellion that could lead to its loss as a colony. A new bill to abolish the slave trade was promulgated by the Spanish monarch in September 1866, approved by the Cortes in May 1867, and proclaimed in Cuba the following September. The first steps toward emancipation would not be long in coming.

William Sharp's *Slavery on the Spanish Frontier* is an important discussion of the patterns of black and Indian labor in the Choco, a mining region in Colombia. In addition, the work is a close analysis of the economic and administrative systems that the Spaniards established in the Choco during the colonial period. Based on research conducted in the Archivo Histórico Nacional de Colombia, the Archivo Central de Cauca in Popayán, and the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, the book advances our understanding of slavery in Spanish America in general and in the local mining area in particular.

Sharp devotes about one third of his study to a description of Spanish rule in the Choco, the development of gold mining, and the subjugation of the Indian population. Few whites settled permanently in this mining frontier owing to the inhospitable climate and difficult topography. Yet the story of Indo-Spanish relationships in the Choco is a familiar one. The whites came to exploit, not to settle. The Indian population declined as a result of their exposure to Spanish diseases much as it did elsewhere in the Americas. Blacks were imported to

contribute their sweat to the mining enterprises and by the late eighteenth century they constituted a majority of the population in the Choco. Each of the three groups had an assigned place in society. The Spaniards ruled, the blacks worked in the placer mines, and the Indians grew the food.

The author demonstrates that the mining economy in the Choco could not have been sustained without the labor resources of the blacks. He notes that Spanish laws and institutions did not mitigate the nature of slavery on the frontier. The master remained king. The Church also failed to perform an ameliorative function given the small number of resident priests and its consequent institutional weakness. As was the case in other Spanish American societies, slaves had relatively easy access to manumission and males and females benefitted equally. The freedperson, however, did not find a secure place in the larger society.

The strength of this work resides not only in its modification of the Tannenbaum-Elkins thesis, but in its close examination of the experiences of slaves within a specific region and occupation over a number of years. Sharp's contribution to the field cannot be questioned given the difficulties inherent in reconstructing the early black presence in this hemisphere. Yet the work is not without its weaknesses. The author's failure to show how slaves ordered their own lives is regrettable. There is no internal picture of slave life presented, no sustained discussion of their coping strategies during difficult times, no analysis of their social institutions. In short, a flesh-and-blood portrait of black life and culture would have enhanced the importance of this work.

Claude Levy's book is primarily a study of postemancipation conditions in Barbados, one of the Caribbean islands with a high density of slaves. The work, which unfortunately is chronological rather than thematic in approach, covers the years 1833–76. Its principal contribution rests in its insightful discussion of the economic health of the island in the aftermath of slavery. Based primarily on information derived from manuscript sources at the Public Record Office in London, the study is particularly impressive in the statistical evidence presented on sugar production in Barbados and on the island's import and export trade.

Levy shows convincingly that emancipation did not result in the economic ruin of the planters as many of them had feared. Given the small size of the island, the freedpersons had no choice but to continue working on the sugar plantations for their former masters. Consequently, Barbadian wages, in contrast to those paid in some of the other islands, were low. In order to ensure that the island would continue to have a large labor supply, the local authorities effectively restricted the emigration of blacks to British Guiana and to the other islands. Levy's work not only underscores the symbiotic relationship between the whites and the freedpersons, but it stresses the determined efforts of the

planters to retain control of the island and of the destinies of their former slaves.

This study, however, does not provide a picture of the freedpersons as they struggled to create a place for themselves in Barbadian society. The blacks are seen largely through the eyes of the planter class and the reader never quite gets a picture of how these men and women worked out solutions to their problems, how they sustained themselves, what kinds of social organizations they were able to create, and so on. Levy does not probe deeply the obviously biased comments of white observers who regretted the passage of the Emancipation Act. One example will suffice. Noting that the living quarters and arrangements of the freedpersons were unsatisfactory and "not conducive to stable family conditions," Levy cites the observations of a physician to buttress his argument. Referring to the blacks, the physician wrote, "There is absolutely less of home feelings, and of affections, and attachments, and less of domestic comfort, and even of domestic cleanliness than existed in the conditions of slavery" (p. 115). Clearly, observations of this nature cannot be accepted uncritically by the historian. Works by Gutman on the black family and Litwack on freedpersons have been well received precisely because they delved beneath the simplistic comments of contemporaries and examined a wide variety of sources in very creative ways. Levy's work fails to capture the dynamism that characterized Barbadian society as the freedpersons grappled with the problems of creating a new society in which they would ultimately find a place.

These three studies have, in different ways, made significant contributions to our understanding of the black presence in the New World. Much work still needs to be done but it is reassuring that serious scholars are currently engaged in the task. Historians of slavery, and of the freedperson in particular, will undoubtedly refine their methodology and change their questions and assumptions as new research is conducted and more and more subtle minds begin to assess the evidence. The black person must remain at the center of these works, not as the battered and broken victim who merely responded to the white man, but as someone who creatively ordered his life in spite of his awful circumstance.

NOTES

1. Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York, 1946).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
3. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1958), p. 37.
4. See Frederick Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru 1524–1650* (Stanford, 1974); Franklin Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1970); Gwendolyn Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Baltimore, 1971); Herbert Klein, *Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative*

- Study of Virginia and Cuba* (Chicago, 1967); Carl Degler, *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York, 1971).
5. Consult Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1979); George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, 1972).
 6. Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979).
 7. Some of the best works on the slave trade include: Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969); Herbert Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton, 1978); Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760–1810* (London, 1975); Leslie Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade: Britain, Brazil and the Slave Trade Question, 1807–1869* (Cambridge, 1970).