Brazilian Abolition in Comparative Perspective

SEYMOUR DRESCHER*

On the eve of the age of abolition, even intellectuals who were morally opposed to slavery were far more impressed by its power and durability than by its weaknesses. Adam Smith reminded his students that only a small portion of the earth was being worked by free labor, and that it was unlikely that slavery would ever be totally abandoned. Across the channel, the Abbé Raynal could envision the end of New World slavery only through a fortuitous conjuncture of philosopher-kings in Europe or the appearance of a heroic Spartacus in the Americas. No historical trend toward general emancipation could be assumed.¹

Little more than a century later, the passage of the “Golden Law” through the Brazilian legislature—to the accompaniment of music, public demonstrations, and street festivities at every stage—was regarded as only a belated provincial rendezvous with progress. Until then, Brazilians had been humiliated by condescending references to their country as the last Christian nation that tolerated slavery, on a level with “backward” African and Asiatic slaveholding societies.² Brazilian emancipation was hailed as

*I would like to thank George Reid Andrews, Stanley L. Engerman, Frederic C. Jabot, and Rebecca J. Scott for their helpful suggestions.


² David Brion Davis, Slavery and Human Progress (New York, 1984), 298; Robert E. Conrad, The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery, 1850–1888 (Berkeley, 1972), 71. It was, of course, European-oriented members of Brazil’s elite who felt most strongly that their country was humiliated by slavery and that it was a nation which played no role in building civilization or prosperity. See Joaquim Nabuco, Abolitionism: The Brazilian Antislavery Struggle, Conrad, trans. (Urbana, 1977), 4, 108, 117–118. On the influence of European and U.S. models on Brazilian concepts of progress and slavery, see Richard Graham, Britain and the Onset of Modernization in Brazil, 1850–1914 (Cambridge, 1968), esp. chaps. 6 and 10, and “Causes for the Abolition of Negro Slavery in Brazil: An Interpretive Essay,” HAHR, 46:2 (May 1966), 123–137; and E. Bradford Burns, The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley, 1980), chap. 2.
opening a new stage in the “civilizing” of Africa and Asia. Counting from
the formation of the first abolitionist societies in the late 1780s, the Bra-
zilian action almost precisely marked a “century of progress.”

Perhaps because it occurred so late in a world dominated by a con-
cept of libertarian progress, Brazilian abolition received relatively little
attention from those who wrote general histories of slavery.3 The demise
of Brazilian slavery seemed to follow a path roughly prescribed by a dozen
predecessors in the Americas and Europe. This impression may have been
due in part to the fact that until recently there were few extensive analyses
of the Brazilian case,4 a lack which was compounded by the “North At-
tlantic” or even national orientation of most North American and European
historians of slavery. Moreover, when Brazilian slavery has been treated
in comparative perspective, the contrast is almost invariably with the U.S.
South.5 In this study, I shall expand the range of cases to include a number
of emancipations in areas which were subject to European polities during
the nineteenth century.

3. For good general syntheses which treat Brazilian abolition primarily as a mopping-
up operation by modernizers, see C. Duncan Rice, The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery
(London, 1975), 370–381; and Edward Reynolds, Stand the Storm: A History of the Atlantic
Slave Trade (London/New York, 1985), 90–92. The historiography of Brazilian abolition
is sometimes elaborated within a broader model of social progress in which the inherent
inefficiencies or “contradictions” of slave labor utilization converge with other causes of
 technological and economic retardation. For a good example of this “convergence” thesis,
see Emília Viotti da Costa, The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories (Chicago, 1985), 148–
171 and Da senzala à colônia (São Paulo, 1966), chap. 5. The issue of the efficiency of slave
 labor is sometimes not distinguished from the issue of technological progress in general.
See the perceptive discussion in Peter L. Eisenberg, The Sugar Industry in Pernambuco:
Modernization Without Change, 1840–1910 (Berkeley, 1974), chap. 3 and n. 18, below.

4. But recently, see da Costa, Brazilian Empire, chap. 6; Robert Brent Toplin, The
Abolition of Slavery in Brazil (New York, 1972); and Conrad, Destruction. The pervasive
structural foundations of Brazilian slavery are presented in greatest detail by Stuart B.
Schwartz, Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550–1835 (Cam-
bridge, 1985), esp. chap. 16 and Robert Wayne Slenes, “The Demography and Economics

5. Carl Degler, Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the
United States (Madison, 1986); Frank Tannenbaum, Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the
Americas (New York, 1947); Stanley Elkins, Slavery, a Problem in American Institutional
and Intellectual Life (Chicago, 1959); Arnold Sio, “Interpretations of Slavery: The Slave
308; Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (Ithaca, 1966), chaps. 8 and 9.
Even Rebecca J. Scott who analyzes Cuba, the other late emancipation in Latin America,
makes only a passing reference to Brazil (Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to
Free Labor 1860–1899 [Princeton, 1985], 284). However, Scott recognizes the comparative
opportunities afforded by the Cuban and Brazilian cases in her comments on Eric Foner,
Emancipations: A Review Essay,” Journal of Social History 20:3 (Spring 1987), 565–583,
esp. 574–575. See also Davis, Slavery and Human Progress, 294–297. For U.S.-Brazilian
comparisons, see also Eugene D. Genovese, The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays
in Interpretation (New York, 1969), part one.
Historians of abolition usually approach causal discussions along a range of analytical categories: demographic, economic, social, ideological, and political. The historiography of abolition in Brazil, as elsewhere, is usually embedded in implicit or explicit theories about the relative weight to be assigned to each of these facets of social development and to their long- or short-term significance in the outcome. This essay will address two major elements of Brazilian abolition in comparative perspective—the demographics and economics of late Brazilian slavery, and the peculiar characteristics of Brazilian abolitionism and its opposition. I should say at the outset that I am entirely dependent on the existing historiography for the details of Brazilian development.

Demographic Dependency and Economic Viability

Slave Trade Abolition

As elsewhere in the New World, Brazilian slavery was stimulated by a shortage of labor relative to opportunities for rapid expansion in specialized commodity production. Like that of the Caribbean slave systems, the relative decline of the institution in Brazil was initially a consequence of external political pressures for the restriction of slave recruitment.\(^6\) Exactly as in Cuba, Brazilian imports of African slaves had actually reached an all-time peak just before the enforcement of abolition in 1851.\(^7\)

The impact of slave trade abolition on Brazil was similar to West Indian terminations in two other ways. Insofar as Brazil continued to expand its staple production, it increasingly had to rely on some combination of free and slave labor and a redistribution of its diminishing slave labor. The slave population inevitably declined, as a percentage both of the total labor force and of Brazilian capital. After 1851, that trend was inexorable and predictable.

Moreover, market pressures alone assured that, as in the British colonies and Cuba after ending slave importation from Africa, slave labor would be concentrated toward commodity production which could optimize the output from that form of labor. Certain economic sectors had to become less dependent on slavery. Without such inhibiting political

---


restrictions on the flow of slave labor as occurred between islands of the
British Caribbean in the decades after slave trade abolition in 1807, there
was a shift of Brazilian slaves from the city to the countryside in expand-
ing frontier regions. This type of redistribution occurred even in the U.S.
South, where there was a positive and high rate of postabolition natural
increase.

In Brazil, local expansions of the slave labor force could come only
from redistribution. Shortly after African migration ended, the north-
easter provinces which were losing slaves vainly attempted to follow
the “British” model by prohibiting the interprovincial slave trade. As the
northeasterners noted, the interprovincial flow of slaves created growing
differentials of dependency on, and commitment to, slavery. But, by the
time political fear became more important than economic interest to the
importing south-central region (in the early 1880s), it was too late. By
1884, fewer than half the provinces of Brazil had populations of more
than 10 percent slaves, and more than one-fourth of the provinces (mostly
northern and northeastern) were even below 5 percent, the level at which
many northern U.S. states had opted for immediate emancipation.

8. Eltis, “The Traffic in Slaves between the British West India Colonies, 1807–1833,”
Economic History Review, 25:1 (Feb. 1972), 55–64. For the urban decline in the British
West Indies after 1807, see B. W. Higman, Slave Populations of the British Caribbean,
1807–1834 (Baltimore, 1984), 92–99; for the urban decline in Brazilian slavery, see Mary C.

9. Compare the percentage reductions in numbers of slaves in Ceará, Pernambuco,
Bahia, and Sergipe in Brazil’s Northeast from 1864 to 1884 with those in the northern tier
of U.S. slave states—Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri—from 1840 to 1860. Also
compare Conrad, Destruction, app. 3 with Bureau of the Census, Negro Population in the
toward the South-Center, see also da Costa, Da senzala, 132–137. For the impact of slave
trade constriction and concentration of ownership in Cuba, see Jordi Maluquer de Motes,
“Abolicionismo y resistencia a la aboliciún en la Espauna del siglo XIX,” Anuario de Estudios
Americanos, 43 (1986), 311–331, esp. 323–324.

10. Conrad, Destruction, 65–69. According to Conrad, the nonimporting areas of the
Northeast might have begun to consider the potential increase of prices for their slaves
even before abolition of the trade in 1850–51. The abolitionist “Barbacena Project” of
1848 was opposed by some representatives of the northern provinces. See Conrad, “The
Struggle for the Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade: 1808–1853” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia
University, 1967), 289–303. Some indication of the impact of slave trade abolition on the
northeastern planters is the fact that, circa 1850, slaves normally outnumbered free laborers
on Pernambuco sugar plantations by more than 3:1. But “by 1874 free workers outnumbered
slaves in all occupational categories, from 14:1 in unskilled labor and 5:1 in agricultural
labor, to 3:1 in domestic labor.” See Eisenberg, Sugar Industry, 180.

11. Conrad, Destruction. Just ten years earlier, in 1874, 14 of the 21 provinces of Brazil
had slave populations of more than 10 percent, and only 2 had levels of under 5 percent.
In the declining regional economy of the Northeast slavery became a relatively more urban
phenomenon. See Thomas W. Merrick and Douglas H. Graham, Population and Economic
Development in Brazil, 1800 to the Present (Baltimore, 1979), 69–71.
By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the free population of the Northeast had grown sufficiently to facilitate the transition to free labor in that less dynamic region. Within southern Brazil itself, a new regional differentiation developed in the mid-1880s. As foreign immigration to São Paulo increased rapidly, the Paulista planters joined the ranks of the abolitionists, leaving the slaveowners of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais in isolation.12

Two comparative demographic points can be emphasized. The regional divisions in Brazil developed over a much shorter period than in the southern United States, because of the different reproduction rates in the two slave societies. Also, free immigrants were few compared to those of the antebellum United States. As an alternative agricultural labor force they seem to have played a last-minute role, relieving the labor crisis of the Paulista planters, and helping to convert them to abolition in 1887–88. It would thus appear that highly organized foreign labor recruitment was more a response to the prospect of imminent abolition in the mid-1880s than a long-term causal variable.13 For the generation after abolition of the slave trade, free mass immigration was an uncertain potential rather than an actuality.

Brazil’s situation resembled the Caribbean model more than that of the United States in that abolition of the African slave trade condemned slavery to a speedy relative decline. The political significance of redistribution seems to have been dramatically borne out in only one generation. It reduced urban interest in the system and it stimulated higher slave prices and concentration of ownership. The frequently remarked Brazilian planters’ acceptance of the “inevitability” of slavery’s decline (even when used as a political argument against the need for further abolitionist legislation) was based on a logical assessment of the data and an accurate reading of Caribbean history.14

13. Toplin, Abolition, 162.
14. The relative demographic decline of U.S. slavery was different from that of Brazil and the Caribbean area primarily in that it was drawn out over a longer period because of a high rate of natural reproduction. Without African imports to match free European migration in the half century before 1860, that decline became progressively more apparent. Peter Kolchin’s recent comparison of U.S. and Russian masters interestingly concludes that the U.S. slaveowners were both more entrepreneurial and more paternalistic than their absentee and rentier-minded counterparts among the Russian nobility. The decisive division of slaveowner “mentality” therefore occurs between the capitalist-paternalist masters of the U.S. South, on the one hand, and the capitalist-rentier lords of Russia, on the other. In Brazil, too, entrepreneurial and paternalistic characteristics are arguably combined. Kolchin, Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 126–156, 357–361; Slenes, “Demography,” chap. 11.
A glance at the Cuban example reinforces both the general causal weight assigned to the ending of the slave trade and the political significance of regional differentiation resulting from its termination. The constriction of the African slave supply was a more drawn out and fluctuating process in Cuba than it was in Brazil. Cuban import flows were generally more volatile.\footnote{15} Cuban slave prices rose about as rapidly as Brazil’s between the 1830s and 1860, but Cuban prices were always higher, and the total value of its staple exports grew faster. This indicates that market pressures for finding alternative sources of labor were felt more keenly in Cuba than in Brazil, and may explain Cuba’s earlier recourse to non-African labor. In regional terms, Cuba’s poorer eastern provinces were less able to afford either slave or Asiatic labor, and as in Brazil’s Northeast, those Cuban provinces produced movements more willing to add elements of abolitionism to their political agenda in the 1860s and 1870s.\footnote{16}

Everywhere in the Euro-American bound labor systems except the southern United States, recruitment from without played a crucial role. For centuries, expansion had been effected via the transoceanic slave trade, as in the case of Afro-Caribbean slavery; by binding the native population, as with Russian peasants; or by combining both methods, as in the Brazilian recruitment of both Indians and Africans. During the nineteenth century, Brazil followed the circum-Caribbean pattern which required transoceanic transfers of Africans for expansion.\footnote{17} Without such recruitment, all the systems (with the one exception noted) faced deteriorating active population ratios, as well as a variety of other difficulties. If, as David Eltis cogently argues, the “natural limits” of slavery (in

\footnote{15} One can measure the comparative volatility of these two most important slave-importing areas of the Americas during the last generation of the transatlantic slave trade. During the period 1826–50, Brazil’s average quinquennial importation of slaves was 192,500. The widest deviations from this mean were a low of 93,700 (or 49 percent of the average) in 1831–35, and a high of 257,500 (or 139 percent) in 1846–50. By contrast, Cuba’s quinquennial average importation in the period 1836–60 was 53,500 slaves. The widest deviations from this mean were a low of 15,400 (or 29 percent) in 1846–50 and a high of 95,700 (or 179 percent) in 1836–40. Three of Cuba’s five quinquennia fell outside the Brazilian extremes. The same general conclusion holds if the time span is doubled. During the 50 years between 1801 and 1850, Brazil’s highest quinquennial average importation (1846–50) was 2.75 times greater than its lowest (1831–35). During the 50 years between 1811 and 1860, Cuba’s highest quinquennial average (1816–20) was 8.3 times greater than its lowest (1846–50). My calculations are derived from figures in Eltis, Economic Growth, 243–244, tables A.1 and A.2.

\footnote{16} Between 1862 and 1877, the slave populations of Cuba’s eastern provinces declined by 77 percent, while in the great sugar provinces of the West the decline was only 31 percent. The differential impact of the Ten Years War had much to do with this contrast. As in Brazil, however, where the staple prospered, slavery persisted. See Scott, Slave Emancipation, 87.

\footnote{17} Eltis, Economic Growth, part two. As late as 1830, Brazilians turned toward interior recruitment of Indian labor when British pressure seemed to threaten importations from Africa. See Conrad, “The Struggle for the Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade,” 216–217.
terms of changing technology, decreasing land-labor ratios, management techniques, lower profits from slave labor, or potential slave supply) were nowhere in sight at any point in the nineteenth century, many of the supposed contradictions and stresses observed within slave economies are primarily consequences of slave trade abolition, rather than contradictions between slavery and economic growth.  

**Economic Growth**

The degree of dependence of New World slave societies on external recruitment probably constitutes their most important socioeconomic characteristic from start to finish. As agricultural and extractive frontiers, they also tended to be more dependent for technological innovation and even for much of their cultural self-definition on the increasingly “free” metropolises. Only rarely was one or another of these slave societies able to imagine itself as an autonomous economic and political actor, and Brazil alone developed a domestically based slave trade with Africa well before the beginning of interventionist British abolitionist diplomacy. This stood Brazil’s slaveowners in good stead during the semiclandestine stage of the slave trade after Waterloo. However, before restriction of the African labor supply, almost all slave economies were probably expanding faster in population and wealth than the metropolitan societies which dominated them politically. Even the roughest statistical approximations would have led one to conclude that Brazil in particular was more than


19. Perhaps those who came closest to independence were the U.S. southern elites in 1776 and 1860, and the Brazilian planters at the time of national independence. Only the 1860 southerners, however, explicitly claimed that their peculiar institution might operate indefinitely against the free labor trend in the Western world.
matching Portugal in total population growth, growth of the value of exports, and with regard to other similar indicators during the period before independence.

By most of the usual criteria of economic development, Brazilians were unlikely to have been impressed by the “progress” of Portugal at the beginning of the nineteenth century. With a population of only 2,000,000 in 1700, between 300,000 and 500,000 Portuguese departed for Brazil over the course of the eighteenth century. On the eve of its own movement for independence, Brazilian agricultural growth contrasted markedly with relative Portuguese industrial and agricultural stagnation, and Brazilian reexports largely accounted for Portugal’s trade surplus with England.20

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Brazilians, especially those who traveled abroad, increasingly measured themselves against a broader West, in which the long-term weaknesses of their society became more manifest with each passing decade. In this respect, the significant comparisons were not those of the marketplace such as crop output, productivity, profits, the net worth of slaveholders, or the aggregate wealth of the nation. What was important was Brazil’s relative dearth of railroads, canals, towns, factories, schools, and books. The echoes of Alexis de Tocqueville’s contrast between the bustle of free societies and the stagnation of slave societies in the United States resonated among the Brazilian elite.21

Long before 1850, it was clear that Brazil’s demographic dependency on


Africa was the most critical ingredient in slavery’s viability as an economic system.

Brazil also contributes to the labor “flexibility” debate in slavery historiography. The argument has often been made that slaves were “immobilized” labor compared with wage laborers. Whether or not slaveowners in the South proved to be more market responsive than entrepreneurs using free labor in the North in the antebellum United States, Brazilian slavery seems to have been as flexible and fluid as that of the U.S. South in the redistribution of labor in the generation after slave trade abolition. Comparing the interregional slave migrations within the U.S. South and Brazil, Robert Slenes concludes that, in proportion to the populations of the respective exporting regions, “the two migration currents were about the same size.” In regional terms, it would appear that the “exporting” Brazilian slave areas were divesting at a faster rate than those in the upper South of the United States during the generation before their respective emancipations.

As can be seen in the cases of the British West Indies, the United States, Cuba, and Brazil, all of the dynamic plantation economies produced a variety of crops so long as the traffic with Africa remained unimpeded. In the British Caribbean and the U.S. South, that situation ended in 1808. Thereafter, the former moved toward a concentration on sugar and the latter toward cotton. In Cuba, the trend was toward expansion of all produce into the 1830s. With increasing constriction in the 1840s the slave labor force began to concentrate on sugar production and to increase its productivity. After full prohibition of the African labor supply and the beginning of gradual emancipation in 1870, the convergence of slavery and sugar became even more pronounced. In 1862, the major sugar zones of Cuba (Matanzas and Santa Clara) had 46 percent of Cuba’s slave population; by 1877 they had 57 percent. A “ruralization” of slavery, similar to that of the U.S. cotton zone and the Brazilian coffee zone, occurred in Cuba.

Of course, this demographic/economic flexibility came at the cost of regional political divergence. Contrary to convergence models of abolition, we confront the paradox that Brazilian economic and political variables operated against each other in some respects. Economic winners hastened their institution’s political decline, while the economic losers for

Table I: Distribution of Foreigners, United States and Brazil

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States 1860 % of all foreigners</th>
<th>% of total population</th>
<th>Brazil 1872 % of all foreigners</th>
<th>% of total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free states and western territories</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>Provinces with the lowest proportion of slaves (^a)</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slave states</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Provinces with the greatest proportion of slaves (^b)</td>
<td>86.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: On the eve of secession in 1860, there were four million foreigners in the United States. Indeed, there were more foreigners in the southern slave states in 1860 than in all of Brazil at the time of the Rio Branco law. However, insofar as attracting free European immigration was concerned, the northern United States already contained more than four times as many foreigners in 1860 as the South of 1860 and Brazil of 1872 combined. Whether measured by total migrations or in per capita terms, the flow of European free migration was clearly toward the free labor zone of North America.

\(^a\) Includes 11 provinces at, or below, the median proportion of slaves.

\(^b\) Includes 9 provinces and the Município Neutro (Rio de Janeiro) above the median.

a time futilely attempted to retard slave labor flexibility by warning of political divergence.\(^{25}\) Eventually Ceará, the most distressed province in preemancipation Brazil (where the only transferable capital left by 1880 was in slaves), became the pioneer province in emancipation. Moreover, the trend toward free labor in the Brazilian Northeast after 1850 was not associated with industrialization as in the U.S. Northeast: industry did not come first to Ceará or to Amazonas as it did to Massachusetts. After 1850, urbanization proceeded more swiftly in the cities located adjacent to the principal slave holding and slave-importing provinces of the South-Center than those in the slave-exporting Northeast. European immigration also flowed primarily to just those areas that were among the last to be converted to abolition in 1887–88. Many of the indicators of “progress” rhetorically used to demonstrate the greater dynamism of the northern United States in the analysis of antebellum slavery (industrialization, transporta-

\(^{25}\) Conrad, *Destruction*, 65–69. In the case of the United States, the movement of slaves toward the frontier initially strengthened the institution by providing for the entrance of new slave states to match the free labor settlement to the north. Later, the movement of slaves out of some border states aroused anxiety about a declining political commitment to slavery in those areas. I designate as convergence theories of abolition those which assume that all or most of the major economic variables (labor, credit, technology, productivity, profitability) combined with each other to induce the abolition process. For a recent elaboration of the general case against such a role for economic growth in slave zones of the nineteenth-century Americas, see Eltis, *Economic Growth*, passim.
tion, urbanization, immigration) seemed to favor the more dynamic slave regions of Brazil.26

The Brazilian case therefore suggests that the enterprises, urban areas, and provinces least involved in economic growth and modernization were the first to turn against slavery. This is consistent with Eltis's conclusion that the burgeoning of nineteenth-century European and North American capitalism fueled the general expansion of slavery in terms of investment, consumer demand, and technological innovation.27 However, there was no area of Brazil, before the mid-1800s, which could assume the role of a "free labor" abolitionist zone, as in the Anglo-American (i.e., British and United States) case. Until late in the emancipation process, "pressure from without" came predominantly from beyond the Brazilian polity.

Political Abolition

Comparative analysis of the politics of Brazilian emancipation might begin with any one of a number of salient criteria. One can distinguish between violence and nonviolence in the process,28 between abolitions which came from "above" (Russia, the Netherlands, etc.) and those which came from "below" (Haiti);29 between gradual and partial abolitions (Pennsylvania, Argentina, Venezuela) and simultaneous and total abolitions (France,

26. See Temperley, "Capitalism, Slavery, and Ideology," Past and Present, 75 (May 1977), 94–118. See Davis, Slavery and Human Progress, 110, for the classic Emersonian comparison of freedom and slavery. It should be noted that even the antebellum South compared favorably with Europe on a number of indexes of "progress." See Fogel and Engerman, Time on the Cross, I, 256 and II, 163–164.

Regional comparisons indicate that immigrant flows could hardly have played the same role in Brazil as they did in the United States after 1850. At the time that Brazil passed its gradual emancipation law, the overwhelming proportion of its foreigners resided in those provinces with the highest percentage of slaves—exactly the inverse of the situation in the United States on the eve of its Civil War (see Table I).

Regarding urban areas, a relatively high level of slave labor (either within urban areas or in the adjacent province) does not appear to have been a major deterrent to those foreigners who located themselves in Brazil. Four major cities with substantial foreign populations had substantial slave populations. They were also located in provinces with above median slave populations (see Table II).

27. Regarding manufacturing, slaves in Rio de Janeiro were beginning to be incorporated into nineteenth-century factory employment when the abolition of the slave trade and the coffee boom drained slaves from the cities to the plantation areas. See Eutália M. Lachmeyer Lobo, "A história do Rio de Janeiro" (Rio de Janeiro, 1975), mimeograph, as summarized in Merrick and Graham, Population, 51; see also Karasch, "From Porterage to Proprietorship: African Occupations in Rio de Janeiro 1808–1850," in Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies, Engerman and Genovese, eds. (Princeton, 1975), 369–393. This is consistent with Claudia Dale Goldin’s conclusion that slaves in the U.S. South were drawn out of urban areas by strong agricultural demand (Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820–1860: A Quantitative History [Chicago, 1976], conclusion).


29. Kolchin, Unfree Labor, 49–51.
TABLE II: Percentage of the Labor Force in Selected Urban Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>Foreigners</th>
<th>Slaves in province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rio de Janeiro</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>45.2 (Rio de Janeiro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porto Alegre</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>18.7 (Rio Grande do Sul)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sao Paulo</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>21.6 (Sao Paulo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recife</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>14.3 (Pernambuco)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>11.9 (provincial median)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: For the percentage of the labor force in the four largest cities, Merrick and Graham, *Population and Economic Development*, 73; for the median provincial percentages, Table I, above.

Massachusetts); or between compensated emancipations (Britain, France, Denmark) and uncompensated emancipations (the United States, Brazil). Some of these taxonomies seem designed to engender terminological disputes. For example, if we include all legislative acts, from minor restrictions on further recruitment to complete and immediate freedom of contract for all labor, all abolitions, including even the Haitian revolutionary case, were gradual. Similarly, there is simply no case in the plantation Americas in which slaveholders prostrated themselves before economic forces and consensually agreed to initiate abolition. From the historical point of view, all emancipations in the plantation Americas were initiated by exogenous pressures on the planter class.

In formal terms, Brazilian slavery was gradually brought to an end by parliamentary legislation. Abolition occurred in three major political stages: the effective prohibition of the African slave trade in 1851; the passage of the “free birth” (Rio Branco) law in 1871; and the passage of the “Golden Law” of emancipation in 1888. The first stage virtually terminated transatlantic recruitment of slaves. The second deprived the slave system of its means of endogenous reproduction. The third registered the accelerating impact of the extraparliamentary demolition of chattel slavery.

Considering all three stages as part of a single historical development, how can one best view this process in comparative terms? In a study of British and French antislavery in the period between 1780 and the end of the U.S. Civil War, I suggested a contrast between an Anglo-American

and a continental European model of abolitionism. The distinguishing characteristics of the Anglo-American variants were their relatively broad appeal and long duration. Citizens in Great Britain and the United States attempted to bring public pressure to bear on reluctant or hostile economic interests and hesitant agencies of the state. They used mass propaganda, petitions, newspapers, public meetings, lawsuits, and boycotts, presenting ever more radical antislavery action as a moral and political imperative. They achieved, at least occasionally, a reputation for fanaticism. Organizationally, this form of abolitionism tended to be decentralized in structure, and rooted in widely dispersed local communities. Anglo-Americans usually aimed at inclusiveness, welcoming participants who were otherwise excluded from the ordinary political process by reason of gender, religion, race, or class.

The “continental” variants usually had different tendencies. Their leaders were reluctant or unable to seek mass recruitment. They concentrated on plans of abolition (submitted to, or commissioned by, the central government) containing elaborate provisions for postemancipation labor control and planter compensation. They often attempted to act as brokers between external pressure groups (including British abolitionists) and their own slaveowners. Public discussion was restricted to the capital or the chief commercial center. Continental abolitionists, in other words, preferred to work quietly from within and from above. They almost never were considered as fanatics, even by their adversaries. Continental variants also tended to be limited in duration. A small movement would typically form in response to an external (usually British) stimulus. It would last only until the abolition of its nation’s own slave trade or slave system. Continental abolitionist societies remained satellites of their British counterpart, and failed to capture any mass following on their own soil.

French abolition was a partly anomalous case. During the Great French Revolution, the source of collective mobilization for emancipation was the slaves in the French Caribbean. Even so, during most of France’s age of abolition (1788–1848), the movement was a continental variant—a discontinuous series of elite groupings, unable and usually unwilling to stimulate mass appeals. French slave emancipation occurred in two surges (1793–94 and 1848), with an intervening restoration of slav-

---

ery under Napoleon wherever his military forces prevailed. Every major French abolitionist thrust (1794, 1815, 1831, and 1848) came in the wake of a revolution, with little abolitionist mobilization in the metropolis; France was a case of abolition without mass abolitionism.33

In the Spanish empire, abolition was generally contingent on the fate of colonial mobilizations for national independence. The process on the American continent extended over half a century until the 1860s. Some areas with relatively small slave systems enacted total emancipation in one legal step, in the immediate aftermath of political independence. Others, like Venezuela, Peru, and Argentina, began the process during the independence struggle but moved through slow stages with frequent retrenchments. Cuba, however, was Spain’s most important New World slave colony, and its nineteenth-century path to abolition clearly reveals the significance of the absence of strong metropolitan antislavery mobilization. Cuba’s dependency on Spain imposed few ideological or political constraints on its slave system for the first two-thirds of the century. On the contrary, Spain was the most extreme example of the “continental” variant of abolitionism; not even a nominal movement existed before the U.S. Civil War. Until southern secession, the United States also provided a formidable counterweight to British abolitionist diplomacy, and was undoubtedly decisive in permitting Africans to reach Cuba for more than a decade after the Brazilian slave trade crisis of 1850. Even after the northern victory in 1865 and the emergence of political abolitionism in Spain, much of the initiative for abolition within the Spanish empire came from foreign countries and the colonial periphery (Cuba and Puerto Rico).34

Brazil appears to have shared some characteristics of both major variants of abolitionism. Before the late 1860s, Brazil conformed pretty closely to the continental European model. During the final phase, in the 1880s,


it came to more closely resemble the Anglo-American variant, and developed its own original characteristics of popular mobilization.

For almost 60 years, from the Anglo-Portuguese treaty of 1810 to the end of the U.S. Civil War, Brazil conformed to the European pattern in the sense that exogenous forces played a far greater role than endogenous ones in the timing of moves toward abolition. Great Britain’s role was preponderant in linking the achievement of independence with formal abolition treaties. Britain also intervened in Brazilian domestic slavery over emancipado issues, i.e., over the treatment of ostensibly free Africans who had been rescued from illegal slaving ships. Even more blatantly than in the European context, moreover, the British government “colonized” abolitionism in Brazil through secret subsidies and covert agents.35

If slave trade abolition was the first and most important step in the destruction process, it is instructive to consider the Brazilian case in comparative political perspective. Throughout the tropical Americas, the abolition of the slave trade was opposed by expanding plantation areas before such legislation was passed, and was massively evaded afterward for as long as the enforcing polity was willing to connive at large-scale smuggling. A huge proportion of Brazil’s slave labor force in the second third of the nineteenth century entered the country after the first prohibition in 1831.36 Given the economic incentive for expansion, however, it is noteworthy that nowhere in the Americas did slaveowners attempt to resist slave trade abolition with military force. The U.S. South was clearly the most acquiescent, with a majority of southern legislators willing to abolish imports at the first constitutional opportunity, in 1807. (Indeed, even those states that originally made constitutional postponement of the abolition question a prerequisite of entry into the union did not make perpetuation a sine qua non of union). Even in secession, the Confederacy did not move to reopen the slave trade. Elsewhere (as in the British case) the majority of slaveowners engaged in protracted lobbying efforts against prohibition.37 Yet a minority of planters readily acquiesced, and in no case did ending of the trade cause a major internal upheaval in slave societies.

The Brazilian case is especially interesting in political terms. Brazil—along with Cuba—was one of the last two slave societies in the Americas to effectively prohibit African recruitment. Despite other similarities to the U.S. South, there had been relatively little endogenous political activity in Brazil against the illegal traffic during the generation before 1850,

certainly nothing comparable in scale to British agitation in favor of abolition. The major push for Brazilian abolition of the trade thus came from outside the nation—in a virtual casus belli, in June of 1850. When the British navy mounted an attack on slave ships within Brazilian territorial waters, a number of remarkable results ensued. Unlike the localized impact of naval interventions on the coast of Africa, the entire slave trade to Brazil was brought to a precipitous end. The only nominally independent slave society in the Americas acquiesced in the total elimination of what had been its major source of plantation labor recruitment for centuries. Since the Brazilian elite’s commitment to slavery was a primary source of common loyalty, such rapid enforcement and the inaction of the traders, slaveowners, and potential slaveowners are indeed striking, although not out of line with developments elsewhere.

From the perspective of established slaveowners, a general restriction on their long-run powers of expansion was an obvious setback, but its acceptance both spared them the short-term trade losses entailed in a British naval blockade and, as in the U.S. South, offered the medium-term gains of a rise in slave prices flowing from abolition. The immediate losers were outsiders on the verge of becoming slaveholders. The acquiescing planters were mortgaging their political future.

A second important observation concerns the absence of attempts to use public opinion or mass demonstrations, either against the British violators by prostlers or against the Portuguese slavers by supporters of the British demands. The political decision was made behind closed doors, in secret session. Popular opinion might have been welcome after the Chamber had acted, but it was not incorporated into the decision-making process itself either for resistance or for acquiescence.

**Sectoral Divisions**

Comparative analysis also seems to support those interpretations of Brazilian abolition which emphasize the significance of regional and sectoral differentiation without the need for recourse to sociopsychological divisions of the planter class along progressive-bourgeois and traditionalist-paternalist lines. The demographic decline of slaves produced by ter-

---

40. Bethell, *Abolition*, 335–341. Eisenberg, *Sugar Industry*, 152, speaks of the British action as an “unreturnable insult.” On the other hand, there was agitation in the late antebellum South to reopen the slave trade, in order to diffuse ownership and support for slavery.
41. See Toplin, *Abolition*, chap. 1; Genovese, *World*, 75–93; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese
mination of the slave trade, combined with the differential expansion of the slave-based economy, produced an accelerated emptying of certain economic sectors which had still been tied into slavery under the lower labor costs of the African slave trade. The same regional erosion occurred in the United States, but over a much longer period. Some of the southern calculations about the need for secession in 1860 were based on perceived trends of slavery’s decline in the border states.42

The British West Indian case offers an interesting exception to regional erosion that supports the general model. Despite the slave price gap which opened up between the developed and the frontier colonies between British slave trade abolition in 1807 and emancipation in 1833, none of the British slave colonies broke ranks before 1833 in the manner of Amazonas and Ceará in Brazil. The ability of British slaveowners to transfer slaves to high-price areas was legally curtailed. Consequently, the process of regional divestment could not occur.43 Redistribution of labor occurred only between crops or within separate island labor markets. One of the principal advantages of the use of slave labor over free workers was thus reversed in the British case during the interregnum between slave trade abolition and emancipation.44

As already mentioned, by the time the political consequences of the free market in slaves clearly outweighed the economic advantages to slaveowners in Brazil, it was far too late. The social consensus in favor of slavery at the time of independence had dissolved. The relationship between abolition and the increasing economic concentration of slavery seems as clear as in the case of geographical redistribution. It has been shown that for the U.S. South there was “a striking increase in the percentage of farm operations with no slaves,” from less than 40 percent in 1850 to approximately 50 percent in 1860. Not only was the percentage of southerners in the total U.S. population falling, but the percentage of southern families who owned slaves was also steadily dropping in the generation before

and Eugene D. Genovese, in *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), 47–48, reiterate their emphasis on the basically seigneurial labor relationships of northeastern Brazil, but their conclusion (pp. 394–395) places all slaveholders within the same antimodern category. For a discussion of alternative models of planter behavior, see Slenes, “Demography,” chap. 1.


1860. The rising proportion of slaveless white families was probably more significant politically than any distinction between large and small slaveholders, because a southerner who owned just two slaves and nothing else was as rich as the average antebellum northerner. The need to maintain the loyalty of the nonslaveholding backbone of the electorate was the major task of the dominant party in the South.\footnote{45}

In addition to the effects of regional redistribution, rising Brazilian slave prices after 1850 must have prevented more and more Brazilians from entering into slaveowning altogether. Aspirations to ownership and a stake in the future of the system receded, as the free population increased more rapidly than the slave. I have found no figures on the percentage growth of slavelessness in Brazil after 1850, but the available analyses of slave redistribution, price trends, and slave/free population ratios after 1850 all point in the direction of a parallel to the antebellum South. The short-term benefits to existing owners of capital may conceivably have weakened their resolve to oppose abolition of the slave trade in 1850, but thereafter the same factors weakened the potential appeal of slavery to nonowners, eroding the consensual base of slavery.

\textit{The Politics of the Planters}

The early historiographical focus on planters in Brazilian abolition appears to be quite reasonable, in view of their general dominance and cohesiveness in imperial Brazilian society. Since the abolitionist process was, from the slaveowners’ perspective, first initiated from without, the Brazilian case can perhaps be most fruitfully examined within the comparative context of responses to abolitionist threats.

There were certain similarities between the slaveowners’ situations in Brazil and the U.S. South on the eve of the external threats to their respective slaveries. Plantation profits were generally increasing in both economies during the first half of the nineteenth century, which should have encouraged counterabolitionist action. The same upward trend was true of long-term demand for their staples.\footnote{46}


\footnote{46} For the United States, see Fogel and Engerman, \textit{Time on the Cross}, 92–94; for Brazil, see Eltis, \textit{Economic Growth}, 186. Slave prices in Pernambuco almost doubled during the 1850s, and reached an all-time peak in 1879 (Eisenberg, \textit{Sugar Industry}, 153). “In coffee-producing Rio de Janeiro, moreover, nominal slave prices rose even higher, and reached a peak in the late 1870s at a level nearly four times that of the early 1850s. The coffee sector’s greater prosperity allowed the coffee planters to outbid the sugar planters for slaves, and after 1850 Pernambuco began shipping slaves south” (ibid., 156).
But there were divergences between the two economies which made for very different outlooks in contemplating courses of action. The coffee planters of the Brazilian South-Center would have been less buoyed by the nature of their market in 1850 or in 1871 than were their U.S. counterparts. The latter might rationally have anticipated that secession would succeed without violence. Their major premise was that the South, “safely entrenched behind her cotton bags . . . can defy the civilized world—for the civilized world depends on the cotton of the South.” Their optimism was supported by northern disarray and by the fears voiced in England about a cotton famine.47

The situation of the Brazilian planters in 1850 was quite different. They were presented at the outset with a military fait accompli which offered only the choice between preparation for war and acquiescence in the ending of the slave trade. No one was under the illusion that a British blockade of Brazilian coffee or sugar exports would quickly bring a major component of the English economy to its knees. The British public and government could always be tougher toward coffee- and sugar-producing areas than toward cotton-producing ones. Only a political regime able to dismiss short-term economic considerations could seriously have considered challenging the British navy. There is no indication that Brazilian society was remotely organized for a scorched trade policy in the mid-nineteenth century, and the Brazilian government seems to have played a continental-style mediating role between Britain and Brazil’s slaveowners.

After 1865, the timing of the initial movement toward gradual emancipation in Brazil also seems to have been dominated by external events, including emancipation in the United States and the Spanish Caribbean and the Paraguayan War. Early explorations of popular channels of abolitionism (extraparliamentary organization and newspaper appeals) were confined to a very small section of the elite until the national legislation was actually presented in the form of a “free womb” emancipation bill in 1871.48

By 1871, the model of emancipation by birth, as Robert Conrad notes, had been among the tested formulas for emancipation for almost a century. It had most recently been employed in the Spanish colonies the year before.49 One might, of course, emphasize the limitations of the Rio Branco Law in order to enhance the significance of the mass mobilization phase of the 1880s. It should be noted, however, that the law certainly cut down the projected duration of slavery from a multigenerational perspective to the lifespan of a slave. It definitively set the clock running on termination.

47. Wright, Political Economy, 146–147.
48. Conrad, Destruction, chap. 5.
49. Ibid., 87–90; Corwin, Spain, chap. 13.
Subsequent popular mobilization made a difference of perhaps 10 to 15 years in the duration of Brazilian slavery. Although abolitionists in the 1880s were quick to note that slaves born in 1870 could live for another 60 to 70 years, the active slave population would have been so small and so aging a proportion of the labor force by 1900 that it is difficult to imagine further resistance to accelerated, and even compensated, immediate emancipation. Compensation based on the European model would have become far more palatable as the pool of prime, able-bodied slaves evaporated. In some other areas where gradual legislation was passed (e.g., New York State, 1799) the tendency was for acceleration of the emancipation clock as the slave labor pool shrank and aged.

Brazil’s was the only plantation society to peacefully enact free womb emancipation entirely from within. In 1870, Brazil was operating under far less serious direct external and internal threats than Cuba. Why then did Brazil adopt a law which was so definitive about the outer time limit of its slave system, and one which did not offer a guarantee of compensation to planters against the eventuality of further accelerated emancipation?

Conrad’s study indicates that during the gradual emancipation debate an area within Brazil—the Northeast—began to play the role of mediating the transition to a free labor system. However, the social dynamics of realignment within the Northeast are still insufficiently clear. Were the northeastern deputies of still substantial slave areas responsive to slaveholders who already felt secure in their ability to make the transition to free labor over another generation? The willingness of slaveowners from Pernambuco or Bahia to support the law, when between 12 and 20 percent of their populations were still slaves, stands in stark contrast to Delaware’s refusal to consider a compensated emancipation proposal by Abraham Lincoln in 1861, when that state had fewer than 2,000 remaining slaves.

The opposition to the Rio Branco Law raises equally interesting questions. It was located primarily in the dynamic South and South-Center (although São Paulo divided evenly). Given the region’s expanding need for interprovincial labor recruitment, why was the resistance not far greater when the Rio Branco bill was introduced? Faced with the histori-
cal record, the planters could hardly have been in doubt that abolitionists, like Oliver Twist, always came back for more. Where was the cry of "no emancipation without compensation," which had unified British, French, Dutch, and Danish colonial planters before their respective emancipations, often postponing abolition for decades? The Rio Branco Law was obviously no more than a stop-gap measure for those Brazilians who wished to "catch up" with their century.

The behavior of the Brazilian slaveholders can be contrasted most dramatically with that of the southern United States after Lincoln’s election climax a decade of escalating sectional crisis. In Brazil, there was some sectional revitalization of federalism in response to the developing emancipationism of the late 1860s and a resurgence of republicanism in reaction to gradual emancipation demands in 1870–71. But there seems to have been no serious move in the Brazilian South to either overthrow the regime or withdraw from it. For the period 1865–71, the limits of political mobilization on both sides are again evident, but those on the part of Brazil’s dynamic southern slaveowners are more intriguing because it was their future which was being most compromised.

The historian of North Atlantic abolitions is therefore struck by the absence of a united front of the major slaveholding provinces against the gradual termination of the institution. Supporters of reform could argue their case before thousands in the theaters of Rio de Janeiro, a city whose hinterland was one of the three most “hard core” slave provinces, with a delegation in the Chamber of Deputies that voted by a ratio of three to one against the law.55 (The fact that the Munícipio Neutro deputies also voted 3 to 0 against the law indicates that as late as 1870 neither economic modernization, nor urbanization, nor slave disinvestment had yet converted the enfranchised notables of Rio.56) The proslavery forces did not even attempt to match the preemptive censorship against abolitionism which was so characteristic of the antebellum U.S. South. Could New Orleans have been, like Rio, the venue for the largest antislavery debates in the entire country during the Kansas-Nebraska controversy or the 1860 election?

The disunity of slaveowners at the national level circa 1870 and the weakness of civil threats at the regional level stand in contrast not only to the southern states of the United States in the late 1850s but even to Jamaica. In 1830–31, the first mass petition for immediate emancipation in Great Britain, combined with new ministerial restrictions on the planters’ disciplinary powers, triggered the most vigorous proslavery

55. Ibid., 93.
56. Ibid., 301, table 21. As late as 1870, more than one-fifth of Rio’s population was still slave. Karasch, Slave Life, 61, table 3.1.
countermobilization in Jamaican history. Public assemblies throughout the island threatened secession. As a result, the last round of imperial restrictions was virtually suspended. (On the other hand, planter mobilization also helped to stimulate the most widespread slave revolt in British Caribbean history a few months later. 57) By contrast, Brazilian elite suspicion of popular mobilization, revealed in the crisis of 1850, may again have kept planter action to a low level of nonviolent opposition in 1870. A detailed consideration of the slaveowners’ perceptions and actions in 1870–72 would make an important addition to the historiography of Brazilian abolition and of the demise of New World slavery.

*Popular Abolitionism*

In the final phase of emancipation (1880–88), Brazil became the only non-English-speaking country to develop a full-blown, Anglo-American-style variant of antislavery. Brazilian mass abolitionism was largely confined to the years just before the Golden Law of 1888. 58 As in the British case, Brazilian emancipation was enacted by the regular legislative process, and, as in the British case, the legislature lagged behind popular action.

The early phase of the Brazilian popular movement drew on Anglo-American recipes for mobilization: newspaper publicity, mass rallies, autonomous abolitionist local organizations, and the underground railroad. 59 In the final phase, however, Brazilian abolitionism was distinctive and inventive. The first public rallies in Brazil were held in theaters and concert halls rather than in the town halls, courts, churches, and chapels which formed the centers of British and U.S. abolitionist rallies. Anglo-American antislavery mobilized in the image of familiar political structures: through town meetings, formal petitions, and deputations to the legislature. Abolitionist meetings followed the rules and discourse of parliamentary procedures. At critical moments, Anglo-American electoral campaigns had to address slavery as a central national issue. Candidates were forced to take explicit positions on slavery-related questions before aroused, and ultimately decision-making, audiences. 60 Brazilian popular mobilization apparently flowed more easily from the familiar modes of public entertainment than political organization. The proportion of programs devoted


60. Drescher, *Capitalism*, chap. 4.
to music and poetry at rallies would probably have surprised a veteran of the British antislavery lecture campaigns. Petitioning in particular seems to have played less of a role in Brazil than in Anglo-American abolitionism. Although petitioning was permissible in both imperial Brazil and monarchical France, in neither country was it central to the antislavery movement.  

Yet the inventiveness of Brazilian popular abolitionism extended far beyond the public concert and the victory carnival. Perhaps because of the inertia of its political system, Brazilian abolitionism’s distinguishing characteristic was to be seen in decentralized direct action. Brazil created two new patterns of direct and nonviolent action which enabled much of the nation to dismantle its slave system without any special enabling legislation, province by province, municipality by municipality, and even city block by city block.

There are few more dramatic stories in the history of abolition than the collective liberations of Ceará, Goiás, and Paraná in the mid-1880s. For the first time in Brazilian history, “free” labor zones, analogous to the European metropolis or the U.S. North, were established in whole provinces, as well as in urban areas of all major regions in Brazil. Popular liberations were enacted entirely outside the formal political and bureaucratic channels of the central government. When local ordinances were involved, they were likely to be ratifying what had already taken place.  

Never before in the history of Brazil had mass political agitation simultaneously extended over the whole territory of the nation or involved so many Brazilians. As with Anglo-American abolitionism, Brazilian mobilization afforded an entrée for large numbers of people who had not previously participated in the national political process. From accounts of participation in the victory celebrations, it would also appear that far more people identified with abolition in 1888 than with the establishment of the republic in 1889.

A second Brazilian form of direct action was equally original in style, scale, and effectiveness. Once de facto zones of freedom were established in provincial and urban areas, the Brazilian “underground railroad” came into its own. By any measure it was the largest such network in the history

61. Ibid. For recourse to the theaters see, inter alia, Carolina Nabuco, The Life of Joaquim Nabuco, 74. The Spanish abolitionist society, like that of Brazil, initially tended to favor artistic appeals rather than conventional political rallies (Maluquer, “Abolicionismo,” 324). Spanish and Cuban abolitionism also adopted petitioning as a tactic in the early 1880s. See Corwin, Spain, 309.

62. Conrad, Destruction, chap. 11.

63. Toplin, Abolition, 256; June E. Hahner, Poverty and Politics: The Urban Poor in Brazil, 1870–1920 (Albuquerque, 1986), 72.
of New World slavery. The very term “underground railroad” is something of a misnomer. It defers too much to its U.S. predecessor. Fleeing slaves often used the Brazilian overground railway itself. More often than in the United States, flight was undertaken collectively, with whole plantations being simultaneously abandoned. Abolitionist initiatives were indeed so open and so numerous that the policing system simply broke down in entire provinces.\(^{64}\) In contrast to most emancipations, Brazilian planters seem to have had to conduct their counterattacks without access to either the full panoply of official coercion or the active cooperation of the free masses.\(^{65}\) At critical moments in the spread of collective flight, the cities and the armed forces proved unreliable and indeed hostile to enforcers of the law.

Although a nonviolent termination of slavery by the refusal of slaves to continue working without wages had been unsuccessfully attempted at a late stage in the British emancipation process, the inability of Brazilian officials to mobilize the coercive forces of the state was decisive in the accelerating success of the Brazilian movement. Therefore, in the late nineteenth century, Brazil came as close to demonstrating a “withering away of the estate,” despite planter opposition, as any slave system in the Americas except Haiti’s.

Violence was not absent from Brazilian abolition. However, given the size of its slave population and the scale of its movement, Brazilian emancipation lies at the nonviolent end of the spectrum. In recounting the bloodiest incidents, historians indicate implicitly that violence and brutality were regarded as exceptional, not normative. Bloodshed shocked the public, rather than polarizing it. The fact that one of the worst incidents of vigilante violence involved two U.S. veterans of the Confederate Army, who taunted Brazilian slaveowners for their lack of manhood and honor, is certainly illustrative. In this instance the government of one of the major slave provinces of Brazil was forced, by public opinion, to indict the participants, although the charges were not pursued to a conclusion.\(^{66}\)

---

64. Toplin, Abolition, chap. 8; Conrad, Destruction, chap. 16.
65. Toplin, Abolition, 213. Planter organization against abolitionism in the northeastern provinces seems to have come very late, in reaction to the Ceará abolition of 1883–84, and the planters themselves were deeply divided over the question of gradualism vs. immediatism (Eisenberg, Sugar Industry, 166–170). The Cuban path to abolition followed the earlier Spanish American pattern. Until after the U.S. Civil War the Spanish military presence and political repression made open proslavery and nonviolent antislavery mobilization impossible. See Robert L. Paquette, The Conspiracy of La Escalera (forthcoming). The Ten Years War for national independence in 1868–78 opened the door to selective manumissions for military purposes and partial abolition in areas under rebel control. But if insurrection accelerated gradual abolition in the 1870s, the settlement of the conflict inhibited popular agitation in favor of the final emancipation legislation of the 1880s.
66. Toplin, Abolition, 212–213; Conrad, Destruction, 256–257. The most violent series
When the slaves engaged in violence, they seem to have directed their attacks toward overseers, and only occasionally toward masters. The fact that many surrendered themselves to the authorities immediately after such incidents indicates a substantial level of trust, at least in the non-brutality of the authorities. Virtually absent are accounts reminiscent of the horrors of St. Domingue, with slaves burning their plantations and eventually extending the repertoire of vengeance to the women and children of their owners. (Also entirely absent are the scenes of calculated terrorism as carried out by planters and public authorities both before and after the St. Domingue uprising, including all the refinements of torture.) Even the British West Indies had experienced the largest slave uprising in their history less than two years before emancipation. The Brazilian slaves, by contrast, appear to have concluded that neither bloody insurrections nor guerrilla warfare were necessary or productive.\footnote{Compare James, \textit{Black Jacobins}, with the accounts in da Costa, Toplin, and Conrad. On the Jamaica uprising in 1831–32, see Michael Craton, \textit{Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies} (Ithaca, 1982), chap. 22.}

Most significant, in comparative terms, was a fourth class of participants in the abolition process, the free masses, who seem to have played their major role in Brazilian abolition less as laborers than as political actors. It is not elite attitudes toward the laboring masses but attitudes of the nonslave masses toward slavery and abolition that most need further articulation by historians.\footnote{Relations between the elite and the free poor in the countryside are analyzed for one locality in Hebe Maria Mattos de Castro, \textit{Ao sul da história} (São Paulo, 1987). But the link between those relationships and the national political process of abolition has not yet been systematically investigated.} Slavery as an institution was ultimately dependent on those who were neither masters nor slaves. Masters required more than just passive acquiescence to support their system of domination. During the eighteenth century, British West Indians began to lose control over the slaves they brought to England when the London populace failed to cooperate in returning runaways.\footnote{Drescher, \textit{Capitalism}, chap. 2.}

But the free population in Brazil did more than refuse to condone planter violence and to tolerate the formation of free towns at the edges of the cities. Nonslaveholders participated as emissaries to the countryside, encouraging large-scale flight. They made it impossible for slave-owners and their employees to deal with resistance by ordinary policing and patrol methods. The phenomenon of abolitionists fanning out into the
countryside with relative impunity was novel in plantation slave societies: elsewhere, abolitionists and slaves were usually separated by thousands of miles of water or (as in the United States) by the solidarity of a very hostile free local population. How to account both for Brazilian permeability to abolitionism and for the failure of the slaveowners to sufficiently mobilize against the British ultimatum in 1850, gradual abolition in 1871, or popular abolition in the mid-1880s remains the most intriguing political question about Brazil in comparative perspective.

**Racial Ideology and Abolition**

The ideological mobilization of Brazilian masters was in one respect more analogous to that found in the British, French, and Russian empires than to that of the United States. The pro-slavery “positive good” argument of the U.S. South, so highly articulated in both religious and racial terms, played a relatively minor role in Brazilian political discourse. As in the Caribbean and in Russia, Brazilian planters invoked arguments based more on economic necessity, social order, and the advantages of gradual change than on slavery as a superior form of economic, racial, and social organization.70 This occurred despite the fact that theories of innate racial superiority and social Darwinism were attaining ever-increasing respectability in Europe and the United States during the decades just before Brazilian emancipation.

In his comparative study of U.S. and Russian slavery, Peter Kolchin concludes that the extent to which bondsmen were considered to be outsiders affected the nature and vigor of the defense of servitude. Slaves in the U.S. South were regarded as alien in origin and nature. They belonged to a racial minority of “outsiders,” and most members of that minority were slaves. Hence, the equation of slaves as both black and alien could be more existentially sustained. In Russia, the peasants, perceived as “natives,” were the overwhelming majority of the population.71 The formulation of a racially based mobilization of proslavery ideology was thus dependent on the degree of overlap between racial and juridical divisions. In this respect, Brazil conceived of itself as intrinsically multiracial long after whites in the United States were determined to think of theirs as a country of white people. There was no major movement in Brazil to re-


export free blacks to Africa, although some abolitionists called for racial removal in the 1830s.\textsuperscript{72} At the very time that a movement to deport free blacks was being launched in the United States, serious proposals were still being made in Brazil to replace the threatened supply of slaves by recruiting free Africans. In Brazil, the importation of Chinese workers also continued to be seriously debated when the United States was moving to prohibit their immigration. (The unresponsiveness to Chinese immigration projects seems to have come as much from the Chinese as from the Brazilian side.\textsuperscript{73})

In terms of race, the crucial difference between Brazil and the U.S. South as it affected the political process was not potential sources of labor recruitment but the relative proportions of slaves and free blacks. For the politics of abolition, the “degrees of freedom” were more important than the degrees of constriction. At the time of independence, the Brazilian free colored population was already almost a third as great as the slave population. A communally based mobilization in defense of unfree labor would presumably have required (among other things) a free majority racially distinguished from the slave population. In the Brazilian situation, slaveholders could not, at any point during the crisis of their system, mobilize either a credible political-military defense against external pressure or a sectional defense against internal pressures. In this they resembled Caribbean slave societies rather than the U.S. South. Caribbean planters did not have the option of mobilizing free masses in the colonial areas. The Russian situation was analogous. There were no nonserf “masses” to mobilize in defense of the existing social structure, only peasants who identified more closely with the serfs than with the lords.\textsuperscript{74}

In Brazil and Cuba, a mass mobilization of all free people in defense of slavery would have required risking a social revolution, appealing to a racially mixed, disenfranchised rural population. The Iberian slave polities were distinctive in having developed a free sector which was racially more mixed and socially more hierarchical than that of the United States. Politically speaking, the “free” masses of Brazil and Cuba were the functional equivalents of the free masses of continental Europe, useless or worse to the planters in a long-term struggle against external abolitionism.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{72} Repatriationist ideologies based on racism were not absent in Brazil. Early abolitionists in particular argued for the removal of former slaves from Brazilian society. See Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Negros, estrangeiros: Os escravos libertos e sua volta à África (São Paulo, 1985), 84–86. Once again, it is the lower level of collective action for these ends in Brazil compared with the United States that is striking.

\textsuperscript{73} Conrad, \textit{Destruction}, 33–36, 133.

\textsuperscript{74} Kolchin, \textit{Unfree Labor}, 177–183.

\textsuperscript{75} The role of the Spanish “Volunteers” as defenders of the imperial connection and
other hand, the free colored urban masses of Brazil, equally uninvolved in the national political process, were also not generally accessible to the abolitionists. Emília Viotti da Costa and June Hahner note the failure of abolitionism to attract large numbers of former slaves and free colored workers. Brazilian abolitionists were aware of this problem as late as the very eve of emancipation.76

Comparative analysis therefore seems to highlight the significance of political organization and demography in accounting for Brazil’s path toward abolition. The planters of the U.S. South, accustomed to sharing decision making with the vast number of individuals owning few or no slaves, had forged a regional identity resting on economic and racial solidarity which Brazilian planters had never, and probably could never have, replicated in their hierarchical regime of “notables.”77 Lacking both the political and racial building blocks for a slaveowner herrenvolk democracy, the planters tacked cautiously within the narrow boundaries of their political system against the combined pressures of a shrinking demographic base, an expanding national economy, and a contemptuous free world. In 1830, Brazil was still one of many unenfranchised, illiterate, unindustrialized nations with a large, permanently bound labor force. Two generations later, it stood virtually alone.

---

76. Da Costa, Du senzala, 438. Hahner emphasizes that color-class divisions within Brazil’s cities contributed to the fact that “most dark-skinned Brazilians did not participate in the formal abolitionist movement,” and class divisions were evident within the movement as well (Poverty and Politics, 67–68).

77. A majority of Brazil’s population in the early nineteenth century was deemed “marginal,” both to the economy and to the polity. See Caio Prado, Jr., The Colonial Background of Modern Brazil, Suzette Macedo, trans. (Berkeley, 1967), 328–332; and Michael C. McBeth, “The Brazilian Recruit during the First Empire: Slave or Soldier?” in Essays Concerning the Socioeconomic History of Brazil and Portuguese India, Alden and Dean, eds. (Gainesville, 1977), 71–86. There appears to have been considerable ideological, as well as social, continuity of attitudes toward the desclassificados in the colonial period. See, e.g., Laura de Mello C. Souza, Desclassificados do ouro: A pobreza mineira no século XVIII (Rio de Janeiro, 1982) and Andrews, “Race and the State in Colonial Brazil,” Latin American Research Review, 19:3 (1984), 203–216. Compare this configuration of class relations with Fletcher M. Green, Democracy in the Old South, and Other Essays (Nashville, 1969), chap. 3; Steven Hahn, The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890 (New York, 1983), 99; Fox-Genovese and Genovese, Fruits, chap. 9; and John McCaffell, The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830–1860 (New York, 1979), 319–335.
Regional divestment, urban-rural and crop redistributions, concentration of slave ownership, and above all Brazil's increasing divergence from the Western model of civil liberty weighed against the status quo. As conflicts of interest and outlook grew wider the consensus of slaveholders eroded. As their numbers dwindled, demoralized slaveowners faced an increasingly popular abolitionism without the potential for a racially grounded antiabolitionism.  

It is important to note that not all Brazilian planters subscribed to the European model of civil progress implied in the antislavery ideology. Moreover, the high price of slaves until the final wave of abolitionist mobilization indicates that Brazilian slaveowners, like their counterparts in Cuba, conducted their slave enterprises within relatively short-term time horizons, even after the implementation of gradual emancipation legislation. But three final observations about Brazilian ideology and self-identification are worth making. First, as in much of Latin America, a Europeanized social future, including the demise of slave labor, remained the dominant forecast of Brazil's destiny. Second, some of those who most vigorously rejected the model of Europeanization in other respects (for example, Sílvio Romero's História da literatura brasileira in 1888), emphatically supported an egalitarian and fusionistic racial destiny for Brazil. And third, the "patriarchal" vision of Brazil did not fade away without many nostalgic literary evocations. However, no school arose in Brazil during the nineteenth century which successfully crystallized that diffuse counteregalitarian mentality into a cultural identification with the perpetuation of slavery. Brazilian planters remained closer to the ideological norm of the Americas than to that of the antebellum U.S. South.

Conclusion

Brazilian abolition seems to offer some intriguing contrasts with abolition in other slave societies. There was no profound revolutionary crisis in Brazil before 1888 to stimulate the extension of abolitionist appeals to broader social sectors, and not until the Paraguayan War of the 1860s did Brazil experience military problems even slightly analogous to those which accelerated moves toward abolition in much of Spanish America. At the same time, a distinctive political characteristic of the process in Brazil was the inability of planters to rally the country around the principle of slavery, and to use exogenous threats as a catalyst for effective countermobilization. The midnineteenth century was a moment when nationalism

78. On late divisions among the planters, see Toplin, Abolition, chap. 9 and Conrad, Destruction, chap. 16.
was emerging throughout the West as a rallying point for intensive state-building. The U.S. South linked its bid for national independence to its “peculiar” institution. The southerners failed to achieve nationhood, but only after a massive military and political mobilization of resources. Brazil, however, never developed an interregional nationalism against the British in 1830–50, or a regional nationalism against gradual abolition in 1865–72 and immediate abolition in 1880–88. Brazilian slaveowners lacked the tradition of, or the means for, orderly popular mobilization, and they clearly hesitated to construct such mechanisms before 1850, when slavery was still a consensual institution. Even a planter-led popular mobilization entailed the risk of losing control over the political process at a time when abolitionist attacks were as yet cautious and sporadic. Much like the French pays légal of the 1830s and 1840s, Brazilian planters clung to a regime of notables.

Concentrating on the planters and the cities, students of Brazilian abolition have paid less attention to the rural free population. Only recently has there been a historiographical focus on small-scale cultivators which would allow historians to speculate why the free poor were never asked to defend their traditional community on a scale or intensity equal to what occurred in the southern United States. Did planters never even imagine appealing to the rural free masses in favor of slavery because of their distrust of their neighbors? Was the relationship between slaves and free people in the rural areas different in Brazil because of the cumulative effect of manumissions and the consequent existence of bonds which did not exist in the racially more polarized U.S. South? Or did southern U.S. planters play a role that had no parallel in Brazil—shielding nonslaveholders from low wages and the risks of the world market, and guaranteeing the free masses considerable comfort by contemporary world standards? Although historians duly note tensions which existed between yeomen and slaveowners of the antebellum United States, the relative strength of the southern commitment to slavery remains a critical benchmark for comparisons with Brazil. The South had become politically democratic for the white male population in the half-century before the secession crisis, and the abolition of slavery was not on the southern political agenda because no substantial group of southern nonslaveholders elected men to state office who fundamentally challenged that institution. To secessionist leaders, nonslaveholders may still have posed political

problems, but in the struggle that followed far more was asked of them and
given by them than the planters of Brazil requested even of themselves.

Equally significant in Brazil was the dearth of nonelectoral alterna-
tives through which to popularize antislavery. The Catholic church, like
established churches everywhere, proved very reluctant to mount any
challenge to the status quo in general, and to Brazilian slavery in particu-
lar. There was no counterpart in Brazil to the dissenting denominations
of early nineteenth-century Anglo-American society that facilitated local
and regional abolitionist organization. As the French case also showed, a
highly centralized religious authority was not easily accessible to aboli-
tonist penetration.

Newspapers and other means of mass communication were alternative
sources of mobilization. Here one could note the limitations of Brazilian
literacy and a weaker national communications network compared with
Anglo-America. In general, Brazil lacked the national network of volun-
tary associations which so impressed de Tocqueville in the nineteenth-
century United States. Brazilian abolitionists therefore had to improvise
along different lines. The result was to add some startling pages to the
history of slavery. In the last phase, it was an extraparliamentary aboli-
tonism, forcing a reluctant legislature and a demoralized planter elite to
verify a fait accompli.

In the end, two major characteristics force themselves on our atten-
tion. Brazil presents us with an example of a planter class which, though
it successfully resisted termination of the slave trade for two generations,
could not after that successfully mobilize against abolitionism, even with a
constitution made to order for its domination of society. Secondly, Brazil
offers us the case of an urban abolitionist movement which had to effect
emancipation primarily through ingenious ad hoc agitation and temporary
coalitions of diverse groups largely outside the political framework. Aboli-
tonists could dismantle slavery but could not dictate any of the terms of
social change beyond that. The Golden Law, like the first French emanci-
pation decree in 1794, was a tersely worded death warrant for a collapsing
structure. The very brevity of the law revealed the limits of Brazilian abo-
lationism—no compensation for the slaveholders, no welfare for the slaves,
no planned transition to a new order.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that the major monographs on Bra-
zilian abolition discuss postabolition Brazil almost exclusively in terms of
the fate of former masters and former slaves, and are virtually silent on
the continuity and impact of antislavery. The abolitionist movement ap-
ppears to have dissolved even more quickly than it had formed. There was
no concerted movement to aid the freed slaves, and neither was Brazilian
abolitionism an ideological and organizational exemplar for a multitude of other reform mobilizations as in Anglo-America, although it did have echoes in the *jacobinos*’ agitation of the 1890s.81 Brazil offered its slaveholders little leverage to resist external pressures for liberation, but it provided the abolitionists with little leverage to follow through after slave emancipation. Brazilian abolition seems to have lacked the means of political reproduction.

81. Brian Harrison, “A Genealogy of Reform in Modern Britain,” in *Anti-Slavery*, 119–148 and *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1982), chap. 8. In isolated instances, the Brazilian abolitionist mobilization did have an organizational and ideological spillover effect analogous to that of the English mass mobilizations a half century earlier. Rio typographers sought to transfer the abolitionist momentum into “a new abolition for the *free* slaves,” and their intensive participation in the abolitionist victory celebration played a role in stimulating a more militant labor organization. See Hahner, *Poverty and Politics*, 86–87. Indeed, the rarity of successful social movements in Brazil may have contributed to the psychological impact of abolition among skilled workers (ibid., 87).